

The Midway & Smokey's Greater Shows

Our popular midway, Smokey's Greater Shows, evolved from a Belgium horse! That sounds like quite a stretch, and it is, but it's a fascinating story. Bud Gilmore, the show's owner, explained that when Bud was four or five, his father Ronald had the "largest mare in the world" named Gene which weighed 3200 pounds. They lived on a farm in Bolyston, Massachusetts, and showed the mare around rural New England and into Canada.



"Then shortly thereafter we built a hotdog and hamburger stand, and we traveled with that quite a few years. We had an old truck, and we carried the stand in that. We'd set it up, then my mother and father slept in the truck, and my brother and I slept on the ground. We did that until school started. Then we'd get boarded out, and they'd finish up fair season. Somewhere in the 1950s we built a french-fry stand to go with it, a couple of games, and bingo later on."

About 1965 the Gilmores loaned some money to a fellow with a fair route, and when he couldn't pay it back, they took over the route. They didn't own any rides at the time; they took care of the bookings, sold tickets, and collected the rents. Then they started buying rides. Their first one in 1965 was a tilt-a-whirl; a brand new one; which cost \$22,000. "Now a tilt-a-whirl; of course they've improved somewhat, basically the same ride, just a little easier to set up; is around \$250,000," he said. "My father died in 1970 when I was finishing college. We had seven rides then, and I just went out and started running the show and buying more and more rides. Until now I'm at the point I've got too many rides. Don't need them all, but we've got about 50 rides now I guess."

What was it like being a young boy working the fair circuit? Gilmore made it sound like an adventure with story after story, but he worked hard, too. He helped in the family's hotdog stand, hustled soda or popcorn in the grandstand, helped with his father's games, and found other moneymaking jobs for neighboring concessionaires.

"There were a lot of crooked games in those days, you know. They're pretty well cleared out now. The good thing about crooked games is they'd have all these prizes. Nobody ever won them, but they'd all be pretty expensive prizes, so they'd pay you \$2 or \$3 to sleep in the tent. So I'd sleep in their tents to protect their prizes. I don't know if I was much protection! I slept pretty good, anyway. But you'd get \$2 or \$3, or sometimes \$5 to sleep in those big shots' tents. I had to sleep on the ground anyway, so it didn't make much difference where I slept, right?"

"When we started, we two boys and my father and mother kind of shared the work. There wasn't much equipment. ***We shared it pretty good. She did about half, and my brother and father and I did the other half.*** She was an awful hard worker all her life, and in those early years, it was the just the four of us. My father'd be doing the thinking, mostly. Now, like then, my wife does a lot of work. That's pretty much the way it is in the carnival business. It's always the woman who is doing most of the work in any successful carnival it seems like."

In 1984 Smokey's Greater Shows came to Fryeburg, taking over from Billy Burr's Fun-o-Rama which had been here for a long time. Billy Burr also grew up in the carnival business. His father, Ed Burr, is remembered as a very interesting man. "I can see him now," said George Weston, "sitting there in his slouch hat, running the beano games, and how would we ever know or realize that he had a beautiful summer resort in Boothbay Harbor, Maine that looks right out on the ocean. "Burr got into the "carnie" business when he financed a merry-go-round in the '20s. "My pal went off with the moneybag and left the merry-go-round behind," he said. "So I quit being agent for the Nantasket Steamship Company, and that was the start of Burr's Fun-o-Rama."

"I've got a family here of 135 people; generations born and raised here. Babies born with me now run the rides, with kids of their own learning the ropes. My own son Billie was born to it. He married a girl whose father ran the pony rides. She and Billie are in charge now." (from "Country Fair Still A Thrill" by Bill Caldwell, 9/1/1976) Fred Knox added, "I can remember when the beano, instead of having the machine roll the balls up, had a dart board running on a little railroad track. If it was your turn, you would get a dart and throw it at the board (the board was marked off what was under B, etc.), and then the next number was called. That sure was different. They only had that, I think, one or two years and that was it, and then the machines came out."

Gilmore said, "Well, there's no doubt that the Fryeburg Fair being on the route has been a great help to Smokey's Greater Shows. That's pretty obvious to anybody who pays attention, because it's the biggest fair we play. The Fair has grown tremendously in those 15 or so years. Of course, I was familiar somewhat with Fryeburg for about 30 years because we used to play Topsham Fair after Fryeburg. Some of the concessions and even a few rides would come from Fryeburg overnight to Topsham. So I'd come up here to see who was coming and if they had made arrangements, because when it's an overnight move, they'd have to get things done pretty fast. They don't have a lot of time to waste.

"In the midway part, I like to think we've cleaned up a lot in the last 15 years. The whole carnival industry has cleaned up a lot. In fact it used to be who's got the biggest carnival, and now anybody can have a big carnival. If you've got a big fair, you've got a big carnival. Now you start thinking about who does the best job. A lot of it is just the landscaping. And I like to think I helped start that too at Fryeburg."

Roy Andrews agreed with that. He said, "You have people at your show who have done great jobs. It shows up a lot in the midway, and we are carrying that throughout the Fair. We have many favorable comments about it. It certainly makes a difference."

Gilmore replied, "I think so. I think so do a lot of the people that come to the Fair now. That's kind of the 'taste of Fryeburg'. It's the whole decoration, and it fits in so well, because a lot of them are up here for foliage anyway. It's just a natural. They come up and see more decoration. It's a great part of Fryeburg."



Smokey's Greater Shows puts up about 50 rides at the Fryeburg Fair. It depends on the size of the rides. The more rides they put up, the less room is left for their concessions. Of the 185 or so food concessions at the Fair, 100 of them are on

Smokey's midway, and they have even more games than that. "At Fryeburg, there is the matter of just so much space. You utilize it the best you can and try to offer something for each age group to keep people happy. Each year we try to bring different rides so it doesn't get stale, but we have to bring back the old favorites. The advantage of Fryeburg is that it's at the end of the season, and there is a lot of equipment and help available to take them down."

Andrews reminisced, "Some of the things that interested me when I was a kid were, of course, the carnival shows. We had one show inside of a tent where a man was buried alive for the whole duration of the Fair, which was several less days than we have now. They had a little square box, tube, that you could look down through and see the man buried alive about four feet underground, and I always looked to see if I could see the ground disturbed anywhere. Each day I would go in there and look at him and talk with him. You could talk with him down the hole; that always gave me the willies. They buried him in a box, and they had a little tube, which was about 8" square that they ran down to him. He was lying on his back in this box, and he would look up and talk with you. He was a real man all right. It appeared that they didn't dig him out every night. They left him right in there for four or five days. That was kind of scary.

"And they had an Indian show with a couple of families involved in it, Indian skills, such as the bullwhip, tomahawk throwing, and knife throwing. The chief, he called himself the chief anyway, stood his wife up against a board and threw knives around her; never hit her, not here. And he would show his skills with the bullwhip in which he would snap a cigarette out of his twelve-year-old son's mouth, and that type of thing. Then he would get somebody out of the audience, some young fellow, to stick a straw in his mouth, and he would snap it out of his mouth with a 12-15 foot bullwhip. I stood back away from the front row just so I wouldn't get chosen to do that."

There was this fella who brought his whole family to the Fair and he only intended to spend two dollars. They were walking down the midway, and there was a monstrous poster stuck up, "Largest Bull in the World". Well, they all wanted to see him, but he had thirteen kids, and he got to thinking that it would cost him \$1.50. So he went over to the attendant, and he says, "I brought my whole family here, and we all would like to see that bull, but it's going to cost me a dollar and a half. Now is there any way that we could see that bull cheaper?" And the attendant looked up and he says, "You've got thirteen kids?!" "Yep." So he reached in his pocket and handed him a dime. And he says, "Fella," he says, "you stay right there, and I'll bring the bull out to see you!" (Fred Knox)

"Also they had the Wild Man from Borneo here. They had him in a tent with a big solid fence around him, and he was in there, wild-haired critter, and there'd be fifty snakes in there with him. He would pick those snakes up and hold them in his mouth and pretend he was going to throw them at you. We don't have those kinds of things anymore."



Another thing that you won't see at the Fair anymore is a girlie show. "Girlie Shows were quite an attraction," said Phil Andrews. "They had them when I was a teenager, and the year before I went

on the Finance Committee, which was in the later part of the '40s they had five Girlie Shows. The only thing worse than the Girlie Shows was the mud wrestling! We finally got rid of them all. But other than the Girlie Shows the Fair was reasonably a good clean family affair." For those who might not know what a Girlie Show was, Roy Andrews was asked to explain: "Well, they basically did a little dance on stage, kind of scantily dressed, and once you got your ticket to go inside, they had even less on!"

"I remember the first girlie shows that came! I can remember one guy standing with his lady there, and he says, "Ladies and gentlemen," he says, "the costume that this lady wears in there is \$300 a yard, and I'm going to tell you boys, she's only got ten cents worth on!" (Fred Knox) "Usually there were about three girls of various dimensions if you know what I mean. There'd be one that would weigh about 115, and one about 130, and one about 145 or 150. A variety, you know." (John Fox) Fox also mentioned that there used to be wrestling matches down by the pulling ring up until about the '50s he figured, and he used to referee. At 92 he said, "You know it's hard to remember back too far, but it was before the War. Now don't get mixed up with the wars!"

1983 was the first year without Girlie Shows due to the trouble that they had in a previous Maine fair. In order not to embarrass anyone in the State Association or the Fryeburg Fair, they were cancelled two weeks prior to the Fair date. The Mud Wrestling was still held, however, and Bub Osgood, Midway Superintendent, reported 6,899 paid admissions for a total of \$5,585.00 for the Fair's share. But this was considerably less revenue than in previous years, a fact that he greatly lamented.

Changing the subject, Roy Andrews asked Gilmore, "How many people would you say it takes to run your carnival at Fryeburg."

"Well, never enough! The way labor is these last few years, no matter where we go, we don't have enough. It has been a crisis situation for carnivals and a lot of businesses. With 50 rides it would take at least 100 to 110 people to run and oversee them, supervisors and electricians. And of course the concessions; I myself own only about 20 concessions, mostly food; will take another 60 people at least. Then the other concessions are booked in and they bring or hire their own help. On our midway alone I would guess we need about 400 or more to operate just our part of it."

Then Andrews asked him what he saw as the future of carnivals overall. Gilmore replied, "Well, I was thinking about that the other day. The problems that carnivals are running up against, and I think it is getting worse and worse, are the regulations, the bureaucracy, the paperwork, everything involved. Every business has paperwork and stuff, but the carnival has to deal with all the health departments, not only in one town, but also in every town, and in every state and the D.O.T. because you are in the trucking business also. Then you have all of your ride inspections and insurance inspections and human services. You have to take money out for child support, and all states have different laws. It is kind of hard for a small business, and I think most carnivals are mom and pop operations.

Andrews said, "It appears to me that the rides are an awful lot safer than they used to be when I was a kid, partly because of the inspections, partly because some of the rides are gone

that had trouble. Do you see this?" Gilmore said, "That's exactly right. There were several rides that shouldn't have been built. There was no engineering behind them, no product liability. All you had to do was build something and get someone to buy it and whoever bought it was at fault if it hurt somebody. The inspections have been pretty good, but over the years the most accidents with rides have been caused by human error, not much to do with mechanical error. I think it's 10% mechanical failure and 90% human error, and about 80% of that was rider's error, standing up on a ferris wheel seat or doing other foolish things."

Arthur Hill at 92 is the Fair's oldest trustee. He recalls getting up very early as a kid to come to the Fair before they started selling tickets. There wasn't too much going on that early, but he said, "We went down to the ferris wheel and told the guy running it that we wanted a long ride. We didn't want to just go around once. He started it up and went off and got his breakfast. He was gone half to three quarters of an hour. We almost froze to death!"

The oldest ride, which continues to be popular, is the pony ride. That predated the merry-go-round. In fact, a horse whose job it was to walk round and round in circles pulled the early merry-go-rounds. Later they were run by a steam engine in the middle.

Ed Jones said his first memory of the Fair was the pony rides. That was the only thing he was interested in. He wanted to take one home. His father said it cost him \$14 to keep him occupied all day riding ponies. "Funny thing about the fair business is that it makes good neighbors out of bad sometimes. The carnival people don't care much for rides next to them, and the ride guys don't know why you have to worry about the sheep. The cattle people never like the motorcycles and the drums." (Bud Gilmore)



"The motorcycle drome was about 15 to 20 feet in diameter, and they'd go around inside that; a man and a girl; and that thing was slippery on the inside, and they'd go around right up to the top. Must have been 20 feet high anyway, and they'd have steps where you could get up to it, lean over and look down in. They'd go right up to the rim, yank it, slide down, go back around again and go back up. Sometimes they would drive with their arms stuck out so that they didn't have any on the steering wheel. They really moved around there!" (Fred Knox)

"The problem with cleaning up the games area, which we've done also, is you don't have the barkers you used to. You take the sideshows, even the girl shows, off the midway, and you don't have all that noise and action. And if you don't keep the music on the rides operating, it can be quiet. ***The midway's not supposed to be quiet!*** People come there to be carried away to another world with lights and noise and all kinds of different things." (Bud Gilmore)