

# Mike Saltzstein, 60, Coney Island's Carousel Man, Dies

By DOUGLAS MARTIN

Mike Saltzstein, who for more than a quarter-century kept Coney Island's last historic carousel spinning through sunlit summers, ice-cold winters and lurching changes in the famed amusement area, died on July 4 in his Brooklyn apartment. He was 60.

He apparently died of a heart attack, said his friend and partner in the carousel, James McCullough. Mr. McCullough went to Mr. Saltzstein's apartment in Flatbush after he failed to show up by 10 a.m. for one of Coney Island's busiest days of the year.

For 27 years, Mr. Saltzstein maintained and operated the merry-go-round, while his partner took care of a nearby Coney Island kiddie park which he owned by himself. (Unlike Disney World and other modern megaparks, Coney Island has always been a collection of individual rides and large and small amusement parks.)

"The carousel was his life," said Charles Denson, who grew up in Coney Island and is writing a book about its history. "I don't think he's ever done anything else."

Each year, Mr. Saltzstein would repaint the banner sign over the ride's entrance with what appeared to be the same misspelling: "B & B Carousel." That was the spelling favored by the legendary carousel manufacturer William F. Mangels, who made the B & B's frame at his factory several blocks away.

Operating at Surf Avenue and West 12th Street, the B & B is the only ride remaining north of Surf, an area that once had four full-size wooden carousels. In Coney Island over all, there have been as many as a dozen at one time, and at least twice that many have operated over the years.

"They went one at a time," said Mr. McCullough, a descendant of George C. Tilyou, founder of Coney Island's legendary Steeplechase Park.

The carousels vanished because people stopped coming. Some feared rising crime as the neighborhood declined. Some preferred television. The America that gave birth to Coney Island had changed.

The B & B's 36 jumping horses, 14 "standers" and two chariots were carved by the great artists of the Brooklyn school of carousel carving.

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Mike Saltzstein at his carousel, which was built in 1919.

Charles Denson

## For 25 years, the guardian of the merry-go-round.

Their fanciful, vivid representations contrast with the larger, stronger figures of the competing Philadelphia school. The master craftsmen Charles Carmel, M. C. Illions and Charles Looft all contributed figures.

The 66-key Gebruder organ still cranks out classic carousel tunes. Riders on the outside can still grab for stainless steel rings. The single brass ring — good for a free ride — was long ago removed for transparently pecuniary considerations.

The International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions says fewer than 20 carousels still have operating brass-ring machines.

The association estimates that the B & B is one of fewer than 175 carousels still operating that were produced in the golden age of carousels, from the early 1880's to the early 1930's, when 2,000 to 3,000 were produced.

A Web site, Amusement Park History (<http://history.amusement-parks.com>), calls the B & B the third gem of remaining Coney Island amusements, along with the Cyclone roller coaster and the giant Wonder Wheel.

The Web site's author, Adam Sandy, said the B & B "harkens back to the age-old tradition of owner-operators at Coney," and Mr. Saltzstein was that owner-operator.

He approached his duties professionally, dressed in the sort of khaki or olive-green attire that mechanics favor. He arrived as early as 10 a.m. each day to do repairs and cleaning, and he would crank up the merry-go-round for anybody who wanted a ride. Even in the slow season, from November to April, he stayed open on weekends.

"If there was a snowstorm, he'd just shovel the walk," said Stanley Fox, who grew up working on carousels and other rides with Mr. Saltzstein and now operates booths that let people take their own pictures.

Under Mr. Saltzstein, the B & B came to play a vital role in the daily life of Coney Island. Ride operators, sideshow performers and the usual hangers-on made it a habit to drop by to sip coffee and listen to him complain about the lousy business on his side of Surf Avenue.

He complained with a sense of humor. One standing joke involved his pulling out a card on which he had written down the number of days to Easter, when a new and unimaginably more lucrative season would surely dawn. Each day, he changed the number on the count.

Dick Zigun, who runs Coney Island U.S.A., a hip version of an old-fash-

ioned sideshow across Surf Avenue from the B & B, said Mr. Saltzstein "had the sand in his shoes," meaning he had become as much a part of Coney Island as cotton candy.

"Whether or not that makes you rich, it can sometimes make you happy," Mr. Zigun said of the Coney Island life.

Those who knew Mr. Saltzstein suspect he was happy, although his gruff manner and well-advertised sore feet might have argued against it.

"If you're too friendly, people want to take advantage of you and hit you up for loans or whatever," Mr. Fox explained yesterday. "He gave lots of kids free rides."

Mr. Saltzstein's first job was working as a "ring boy" at a carousel on the boardwalk when he was 15 or 16, Mr. McCullough said. He then worked at other Coney Island carousels. Winters, he worked at the carousel in Prospect Park and the indoor one at what was then the A & S department store in downtown Brooklyn.

In 1973, the B & B was offered for sale by the two men for whom it was named, Mr. Bishoff and Mr. Brientein. It had been built in 1919 at Mr. Mangels's factory and sold to a park in northern New Jersey. In the 1930's, it was brought to Coney Island. Rides then cost a nickel.

Mr. McCullough said that by the time the two decided to buy it, rides were a quarter. "The understanding was that he would operate it and work for a salary and I would run my business here," he said. "The years go by and here we are now."

Mr. McCullough said he thought his friend liked the work, though his bad foot wasn't making it any easier to jump on and off the spinning ride. "It's just something you do all the time and it keeps you occupied," he said.

Other friends recall the little things about Mr. Saltzstein, like his love of country music.

At first no survivors were identified, but it now appears that there may be a living aunt, Mr. McCullough said. More than 100 people came to the funeral. For days, people left bouquets and candles at the carousel.

Yesterday a worker was polishing the brass. Callopie music bled through the salty air. The B & B was open, for \$2.50 a ride.