

The Happiest Music On Earth Joins The Oatka Festival

by Lynne Belluscio

Something very special is scheduled for the 25th Oatka Festival on July 13 and 14. The Carousel Organ Association of America is hosting a rally in LeRoy. Nine huge band wagons will be stationed at various places on the Festival site. Three of them will be in the parade. And if nine large band wagons aren't enough, there's many more small band organs that will be in and about the festival site. This is something no one should miss.

Band wagons are special musical machines that were made to create the sound of a live orchestra or band. The large ones include snare drums, bass drums, triangles, cymbals, horns, flutes, and anything else that makes music. They were made for fairs and carrouseles. In some ways they are related to a player piano, because some of them play from perforated paper rolls. Others play from a "barrel" with pins.

The earliest ones were hand cranked and were the smaller monkey organs. They gained a bad reputation in cities, because men would play them on street corners and beg for money. In some places they were outlawed.

The large carousel band wagons were designed to replace a live band. They could be pulled from town to town with the circus or the fair. And what carrousel would be fun to ride without the band organ music. These large band wagons should not be confused with the calliope which operated with a steam engine. It might be pulled by horses in a circus parade, but what made the music, was steam going through the pipes. It was like an orchestra of steam whistles - - and just as loud. It also had to be played. It wasn't mechanically played.

In 1892, the United States imposed high tariffs on the importation of street and fairground organs. Wurlitzer, known for manufacturing theater organs - - some of the largest in the world - began making band organs in a factory in nearby North Tonawanda near Buffalo. It wasn't coincidence that the Hirschell Carrousel factory was nearby.



Most of the early barrel organs were imported from Europe. But in 1892, the United States imposed high tariffs on street and fairground organs. Small companies imported parts from Europe and started making street and band organs.

Wurlitzer, who is known for manufacturing theater organs, started making band organs in a factory in North Tonawanda near Buffalo in 1901, after investing in the North Tonawanda Barrel Organ Factory. The name was changed to the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company in 1908.

It was also about this time that band wagons were adapted to use electricity, which meant they could be built bigger and bigger. (Some of the biggest band wagons, now are housed in tractor trailers.) The last organ to leave Wurlitzer was in 1942. The Great Depression made it difficult to stay in business. The company's patents and trademarks were eventually acquired by the Baldwin Piano Company in 1988.

Not all band wagons were made by Wurlitzer. Today there are craftsmen who simply enjoy building one of these machines from scratch. Other organs have been restored, having escaped being destroyed by fire or sent to the scrap heap. Many are famous and have exotic names. The large ones are so ornate and fancy, that they require not only a mechanic, but the skillful hand of a painting conservator.

So as you stroll through the Festival site, admiring these beautiful musical machines, learn about them. Who made them, who restored them, and where they came from. The folks that are bringing them to town, love to tell you about them - - and of course they love to play them.

