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The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

The Dream and Reality of Carousel Mountain

By Rob Sligh

The big news around Holland, Michigan, in 1963 was the opening of a new ski area in the hills between Macatawa and Castle Park. I was nine years old and looked forward to learning how to ski. Dad said the person opening the new resort was a man named Norm Archer, and that he'd named his resort Carousel Mountain.

Carousel Mountain operated for ten years. For many of us, Carousel played a central role in our lives as we went skiing several days a week, at night after school and on the weekends. There are no books or reports about Carousel and surprisingly only a couple dozen news articles. Much of this article comes from oral interviews and township records.

Norm Archer was a man with lots of ideas; an entrepreneur who started many businesses, some which could be considered failures by any financial measure. Who among us hasn't wondered, "What impact did we or will we make after we leave our professional enterprise? Is anything enduring? What does it all mean?" Carousel's business model was probably flawed from the beginning. But the kids who grew up skiing those slopes didn't care about the business model. If not for Carousel, maybe I wouldn't

have expanded my horizons by going to the University of Denver for my undergraduate degree. Holland area businesses, like Reliable Sports and Main Auto, were helped along by Carousel and continued to benefit long after it disappeared. Norm Archer's vision of a housing

development in the dunes between Macatawa and Castle Park was ultimately realized albeit in a different form and led by different people. Well then, let's think about what it all means as I share what I learned about the man behind the mountain—Norm Archer.

Norm grew up in the Detroit area. He was a Michigan state champion in roller derby skating. During high school, Norm and two friends skated on wooden wheels all the way from Detroit to the New York World's Fair. They put on skating demonstrations

in the towns along the way to help fund their trip. Farmers offered them meals and a place to sleep in their barns. In New York, they met Jimmy Dorsey, and he treated them to a meal in his restaurant.

Norm was an entertaining guy. He loved music. Prior to WWII he formed Norm Archer's Orchestra, a big band



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From the Director



In this issue, we present an article by local businessman and writer, Robert Sligh, about the history of Carousel Mountain, and his experiences while skiing there. While the 1960s does not seem like history to us, it was over 50 years ago when this local ski resort was created. Holland could use such a place, this winter, as the snow continues to fall. Stay warm, wherever you reside!

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Carousel Mountain (continued from page 1)



Norm Archer, ca. 1964

that played all over the state of Michigan and cut a record in Chicago. When the United States entered the war, the band broke up. Norm went off to Hollywood to find fame and fortune as a comedian. In those days, Danny Kaye was a big name actor, singer, and comedian in Hollywood. Norm said, "I looked a lot like Danny Kaye and unfortunately there was only room for one Danny Kaye. So I came back to Michigan."

In 1945 Norm married Violet, a Holland native who moved to Detroit after graduating from Holland High School. Norm and Violet's only child, Cyd, was born in 1954 and was named after Norm's favorite brother Syd. Cyd learned to snow ski when she was three years old and that started a lifelong love of the sport.

In the 1950s, Norm started a sporting goods business in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. Originally a large Kroger store, the building was divided into two spaces. One side was Norm's sporting goods and on the other was a Vic Tanny gym. One night the gym caught fire, and the whole building burned down.

Norm saw that national chains were squeezing out large format independent retailers like Norm's old store. So after the fire, he decided to create a smaller specialty store focusing on high-end ski clothing, ski equipment, bicycles and archery equipment. Norm and Violet travelled to Europe to buy Bogner ski wear and other luxury brands, and to South America to buy high-end leather goods. Norm's store was the first in Michigan to sell the new metal skis made by Head.

Norm designed ski slope layouts for Mt. Christie, Grampian and Alpine Valley in the Southeast Michigan area. His dream was to own his own ski resort. Don Martin, a wealthy businessman from the Detroit area, agreed to be his silent partner. They purchased 50 acres from Harrington Fuel Company and 10 adjacent acres from Macatawa Park.

Norm's vision was for a \$1 million year-round resort that would include skiing in the winter and par-three golf, tennis and a swimming pool in the summer. The resort would offer fine dining and 25 home sites throughout the resort property. The resort's name came from Norm's vision of a carousel-like restaurant at the top of the chair lift hill. The idea came from a revolving restaurant on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, on top of what used to be the Holiday Inn.

It's worth noting that the idea of a ski resort in the dunes west of Holland was probably doomed from the start. Whatever the other merits of Norm's plan, it wasn't cold enough for long enough in the Macatawa dunes to support a ski area. In the decade leading up to 1963, average temperatures during December through March were below freezing only 63% of the time. We wonder, "What was Norm thinking?" As it happens though, he'd have some good luck. The ten years that followed were unusually cold. In that sense, Carousel existed for the duration of my childhood in a state of suspended grace.



Carousel Mountain lodge interior, ca. 1963

But back to the beginning. In the summer of 1963, Norm's first priority was to clear the ski slopes and build the lodge. Designed by Norm himself, the Carousel Mountain lodge was made of white painted cinder blocks and wood from twelve old barns. Soaring floor-to-ceiling windows offered dramatic views of the slopes.

Bright red carpeting, red and blue stained glass accents and red ceiling beams accented the rustic barn wood. The lodge featured a dramatic reverse canted roof. In the center of the fine dining area in the south wing was a stepped-down lounge area and two fireplaces with tall, tapering stacks. There were two similar fireplaces in the center lobby of the lodge.

Carousel Mountain featured a double chair lift, T-Bar, J-Bar and four rope tows, with a combined capacity of 3,000 skiers per hour. The slopes were lighted for night skiing. Artificial snow-making equipment was supported by over two miles of aluminum piping. The runs varied from 1,500 to 2,700 feet long, and the ski area had a vertical drop of 300 feet. By comparison, Boyne Mountain's vertical drop is 500 feet and Crystal Mountain's is 375 feet. Just to give an additional perspective, the vertical drop at Snowmass in Aspen is over 4,000 feet.

On December 7, 1963, Norm and his partner Don Martin, along with lodge manager Jim Webster, hosted a sold-out, invitation-only dinner at the Carousel Mountain lodge. Jim Webster managed the Macatawa Bay Yacht Club before joining Carousel Mountain. The ski pro shop in the lodge was open, and the chair lift gave guests a stunning view over the dunes out to Lake Michigan. Snow from the week before had melted. That December Saturday was sunny with temperatures in the high 40s and low 50s.

Around Christmas 1963, my brother, sister and I were very excited when mom and dad told us we were going to Reliable Ski Haus on River Avenue in Holland to get outfitted for snow skiing. I was 9 years old, my sister Barbie was 8, and Johnny was 4. The first order of business was ski boots.

Virtually all the boots back then were black, and for that matter, so were most of the skis. Mom and dad picked out leather ski boots with laces. Newly-introduced buckle boots were great for kids. Johnny's had three buckles; Barbie's and mine had five. Head was the market leader for skis, typically in elegant black metal. Reliable Ski Haus owner Ken Vos told dad that fiberglass skis were the latest innovation and less expensive. We were outfitted with a pair of fiberglass skis. As it turned out, fiberglass skis were the wave of the future.

The mountain was open for skiing, but Norm Archer's vision for fine dining was unfulfilled. Fine dining required a beer, wine and liquor license. A mile away in Park Township, Macatawa's Point West restaurant had licenses allowing them to serve hard liquor seven days a week, and beer and wine every day but Sunday. As

events unfolded, that mile between Point West in Park Township and Carousel in Laketown would make all the difference.

In summer 1963, Norm paid for a special meeting of the Laketown Township board. Board members represented the conservative religious views of most people living in the township at the time. The board informed Norm that they would not issue a license to sell intoxicating beverages, and they were not in agreement with Carousel's plan to operate on Sunday. Carousel was free to operate on Sunday in spite of the board's opposition, but to serve alcoholic beverages, Carousel needed the township's approval. Norm felt disappointed but still hopeful.



Motel built at the entrance of Carousel Mountain, ca. 1964

During an October 1963 Laketown Township board meeting, Norm proposed to build a motel and a cider mill and the board was amenable. Norm also asked for consideration of a pared-down proposal for a beer and wine license only, but got no encouragement.

In February 1964, Carousel Mountain lawyer Rex Orton informed the township board that a Laketown Improvement Association had formed to help the board with long-range planning on schools, roads, law enforcement and securing permits for the sale of intoxicating beverages. Mr. Orton emphasized Carousel Mountain's request for a beer and wine license, stating that to be competitive, at least beer and wine must be offered.

The Reverend Don Houseman spoke emphatically against Carousel's proposal. He reminded the township board that the Carousel people had come in uninvited and were then playing on people's sympathies. Rev. Houseman said the Sunday sale of intoxicants was a moral issue and added that alcoholism was a great danger.

Several other citizens also weighed-in. From the applause that followed speakers on both sides, it appeared that public sentiment at the meeting was divided.

But skiing continued. On February 15 and 16, 1964, Carousel held its first annual Winter Carnival. It included professional slalom racing and stunt skiing. There were dog team races, and the Fifth Army Sky Divers from Detroit made an appearance. For those who didn't ski, Carousel hosted an ice skating show. Holland Chamber of Commerce secretary Bill Vandewater acted as the Carousel Mountain Winter Carnival director. The weather turned mild shortly thereafter and Carousel's first season concluded.

In March, two letters were read aloud by the Laketown Township clerk; one from the elders of Central Park Reformed Church, and the other from the consistory of Overisel Reformed Church. The letters praised the board for their stand against the sale of alcohol in the township and urged them to maintain that position.

Decades later, Cyd Archer remembered, "Back in those days, nothing in the Holland area but Point West was open on Sunday. Many people of Dutch descent interpreted the Bible to say you were not supposed to do anything on Sunday. They were not supposed to wash their car or mow their lawn on Sunday. Some of the kids from very strict Dutch families were not even allowed to go to movies or dances."

In April 1964, the Laketown board accepted a petition for an advisory election on the issue of beer and wine permits in the township. The petition bore 275 valid signatures of qualified, registered electors. The advisory election was held that May, and the 76% voter turnout was the highest on record. Of 825 registered voters, 624 cast a ballot. Almost two-thirds said no to beer and wine in the township. That was the end of Norm Archer's fine dining concept, and at that point, the writing was probably on the wall for the resort.

During the spring and summer of 1964, Norm Archer doubled-down on Carousel Mountain. He moved his family to Holland, sold his business interests in Grosse Pointe, purchased Don Martin's share and became sole owner of Carousel Mountain.

Cyd Archer remembered, "After finishing 3rd grade in Grosse Point in June 1964, Mom and I joined Dad in the new house he designed and built on Park Avenue, a mile from Carousel Mountain. The house was a beautiful, architecturally significant home. It had many levels. There was a crow's nest next to a peaked area which hung over the living room that included a bar and had a view across Lake Macatawa and out the Holland Channel. The creek side of the house had two-story, floor-to-ceiling windows looking out across the creek towards the Macatawa Bay Yacht Club and Lake Macatawa. There was nothing like it in its day."

Cyd continued, "Dad was a very hard worker but he was always home for dinner. Most times he would go back to work after dinner, but he was always there for me."



Cider mill press and patio, ca. 1964

Norm Archer threw himself into the work of making Carousel successful in its second season. By widening ski runs, removing trees and tapering slopes, skiing capacity increased from three to five thousand. Norm broke ground on a 28-unit motel at the entrance to Carousel on the southwest corner of 147th Avenue and 66th Street. An historic oak water wheel, twelve feet in diameter, was installed in the creek next to a barn that was built to house a cider mill press. Carousel made and marketed cider produced from apples grown in the area. The barn included a patio dining area serving fresh apple cider and donuts.

The 1964-1965 season featured weekday lift tickets for \$3.50, evening \$2.50 and weekends \$4.50. Ski rentals were \$4.50. Double occupancy motel rates were \$12-\$14 weekdays and \$30-\$35 on weekends. Ski lessons were \$2 in a group and \$7.50 individually. Carousel's certified ski instructors taught the latest techniques including Wedeln, a German style that means tracing the fall-line with short, quick parallel turns. The ski shop moved from the lodge to the barn that also housed the cider mill.

Beginning in Carousel Mountain's first season, Cliff Onthank formed a volunteer ski patrol and was the first director. It consisted of local ski patrollers, Jr. National ski patrollers ages 15-17, and National ski patrollers who were at least 18 years old. A compensating benefit was free lift tickets. Requirements included Red Cross first aid and advanced first aid, on-the-hill training and refresher courses.

Ski patrollers from throughout Michigan participated annually in a refresher course. The daylong session consisted of films and lectures on fractures, shock, splinting, burns and bandaging. In the afternoon, a first

aid competition included the treatment of mock victims positioned on the slopes. The Carousel Mountain ski patrol teams were typically top ranked.

I joined the Jr. National Ski Patrol at Carousel in 1969 and graduated to the National Ski Patrol in 1972. Part of our training included chair lift evacuation, in case it stopped working. Evacuation from most of the chairs involved shooting a line over the carrying cable and coaching occupants into a seat that was lowered to the ground. But Carousel's chair lift also went over a gulch, 140 foot deep. Riding over the gulch was scary, especially at night. The trees in the gulch swayed back and forth in the wind. Looking down at night was like staring into an endless dark pit. The evacuation method was to back the chairs down across the gulch and evacuate each chair as it reached a spot closer to the ground.

By 1965 Carousel Mountain was in financial stress and couldn't make ends meet following its third season. In September 1966 Circuit Court judge Raymond Smith ordered foreclosure of the mortgages on Carousel Mountain, and a receiver was appointed to protect the property that was seized for back payment of taxes. The creditors decided that re-opening the resort was the best way to preserve the value of their loans. United Insurance Company of America took over Carousel in October 1966. Larry Phillips became the general manager and represented the interests of the insurance company.

Cyd Archer remembers, "Losing Carousel Mountain was devastating for our family. Dad lost his dream and it was a big struggle for Mom and Dad financially."

In January 1967, the circuit judge determined Carousel owed \$297,000 on a mortgage held by United Insurance and \$62,296 on a chattel mortgage for the ski lifts held by CIT Corporation. The court ordered the properties to be sold for at least \$260,000. Mild winters and light snowfall were cited as the chief cause of Carousel Mountain's demise.

In late summer 1967, Larry Phillips appeared before the Laketown Township board. He represented the receivers who then controlled Carousel Mountain. Larry said they were thinking seriously of re-opening the resort for its fifth ski season and wanted to get the board's opinion. Township trustee Bill Ash said the board was still opposed to the sale of alcoholic beverages in Laketown Township. He also said the board was opposed to the operation of a business on Sunday, because it constituted a misuse of the Christian Sabbath.

During a Holland community meeting in the fall of 1967, Larry Phillips presented plans for re-opening Carousel Mountain. The gathering was pulled together by Bill Vande Water, who was executive secretary of the Holland Chamber of Commerce. Trees were removed on the beginner hills for safety and slopes were graded for better skiing. Two rope tows were added for a total of six. New snow-making equipment was installed.

Though lacking snow on December 20, 1967, Carousel Mountain general manager, Larry Phillips, had an open house to show off resort upgrades. Parking expanded to accommodate another 200 cars near the main lodge and the cider mill was converted for ski rentals, repairs, ski patrol and first aid. Don Kuipers managed the main lodge and Adelaide Brondyke managed the motel.

By 8th grade, I'd become a good skier and was really looking forward to the 1967-1968 season. Two years earlier, I'd gotten a pair of plastic buckle boots invented by the Lange Company. They offered unparalleled rigidity, support and durability. But the linings were stiff, and the Lange boots in those days were very uncomfortable, even with the padded socks, boot liners and add-on calf supports that Reliable often sold with those early Lange boots. By 1968, Lange invented Lange Flow, a new liner that molded to your foot. Happily, I had outgrown my old Lange boots and the new ones were much more comfortable.

The mild weather during Christmas break that year was disappointing. But January brought lots of snow. On January 19, 1968, a snowstorm dumped a foot of snow on Holland. My friends and I went skiing almost every day and Carousel kept the slopes open until 10 p.m. Kids in school were proud to wear strings of stapled Carousel Mountain tickets on their winter coats.

In February 1968, Carousel reported an 18-22 inch base, 4 inches of powder and excellent skiing. In early March,



Young skiers frequented Carousel Mountain and hoped to become as good as Olympic skiers

Carousel launched its first annual open ski race. Rick VanTongeren won first place for the boys division.

Meanwhile, we were all following closely the 1968 winter Olympics in Grenoble, France, where Jean Claude Killy won gold medals in slalom, giant slalom and downhill skiing. Killy introduced a new style of fast, open-stance skiing that we all tried to emulate.

That fall, Carousel was purchased by Chicago industrialist Norbert Smith. Smith was president of Lennor Engineering and Dimco, both based in Chicago. Larry Phillips became general manager and vice president of the ski resort, working for Smith. According to the *Holland Evening Sentinel*, Smith and his family flew to Holland in their private plane to review Phillips' plans for the 1968-1969 season. The slopes were reworked and a new expert hill was added. Plans included a ladies afternoon of skiing and a family dinner buffet on Thursdays. There were also plans for cookouts on Saturday nights and Sunday brunch.

In late February 1969, the second annual Carousel Mountain open ski race included 143 participants. Rudy Vedovell came in second in the boys open. John Sligh won the boys 9 and under division. John reminisced, "I went skiing all the time. Many of us would go directly from school to Carousel. It was the place to be for kids to hang out and be outside doing their thing on the slopes. Inside the lodge was a cafeteria where you could get burgers and fries. Downstairs were pinball machines. It was the end of an era when it closed. But for a short time in Holland's history, it was a magical place for kids."

I graduated from Holland High School in 1972. Cyd Archer graduated in 1973, and her parents moved to Saugatuck. After ten seasons, 1973 was also the year that Carousel Mountain closed for good. Some said the lack of a liquor license hurt Carousel's chance of succeeding. Almost everyone admitted the weather wasn't cold for long enough in the Holland dunes to support a ski area, even with plenty of artificial snow-making equipment. Average temperatures for December through March were below freezing only 75% of the time during the decade Carousel was open, and even that was a cold decade for the Holland-area dunes. That compares to 60% below freezing for the most recent decade. In other words, Carousel operated during what was probably the only time in recent history that a ski resort in Holland could have made it for as long as it did.

Cyd Archer reflected:

Dad was one of those guys who said, you take a licking and keep on ticking. He'd be down, then he'd come up with some other business idea. He was a serial entrepreneur. He sold homes for a while and developed projects in Saugatuck including the East Shore condominiums. Eventually Dad got into creating sculptures, which he pursued for many years. He did some huge commissions, including one for a petroleum company in Traverse City, one for a convention center in Appleton, Wisconsin, and one for the

Amway Grand Plaza Hotel, as well as hundreds of sculptures and fountains for private homes.

Mom died in 2004 and Dad passed away in 2011. We were in Vail in 2011, actually the day Dad died. My friend was riding up the lift, where she met Mitch Grissen from Holland. Mitch said, "I know Cyd and I know her Dad. We skied at Carousel all the time. Norm Archer is a rock star. I still have my ski bibs and trophies from the races."

The owner of Performance Sports in Vail learned to ski at Carousel Mountain. He told me if it wasn't for Carousel Mountain, he would never have learned to ski.

It's interesting, I went to my 40th high school reunion and ran into Tim Harrington and his wife. Tim grew up skiing at Carousel Mountain. Now they live out in Colorado and are big skiers and mountain climbers. Their daughter is the poster child for North Face. She's an expert mountain climber, and they use her in their photo shoots. I'm sure skiing at Carousel in the early years had a bit to do with it. Carousel Mountain had a huge impact on my life and on many others.

Cyd's right. For the kids in Holland of skiing age from 1963 to 1973, Carousel Mountain had a huge impact. It broadened our horizons and got us thinking about new possibilities. The development of Carousel Mountain helped spur local businesses, including Reliable Sport Ski Haus on River Avenue and Main Auto's ski department on 8th Street. And it paved the way for the Scenic Shores housing development led by Ed Havlik and his partners.

As Ed recounted:

The Carousel Mountain property was developed beginning in 1978. After finishing roads and infrastructure, the first houses were completed in 1980. Ultimately, 55 low-density single family lots were sold and houses were built. Today Scenic Shores is a community filled with people who love it, who gather on Thursdays to share time and experiences and a sunset. I am happy to have lived the experience and live in the results of that experience.

Something tells me if Norm Archer were alive today, he'd feel proud.

About the author: Rob Sligh married Jorie in 1982 and they have four children, all snow skiers. Some of their most memorable family vacations were spent skiing in northern Michigan and in the western United States.



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Skiers enjoying the slopes at Carousel Mountain, ca. 1964