

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*

Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic Lander Parker Carousel (1928-59)

and or common Dickinson County Parker Carousel; Riverton Parker Carousel (1959-76)

2. Location

street & number 412 S. Campbell Street not for publication

city, town Abilene vicinity of

state Kansas code county Dickinson code

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial <input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational <input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment <input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government <input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial <input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other: carousel

4. Owner of Property

name Dickinson County Historical Society

street & number 412 S. Campbell Street

city, town Abilene vicinity of state Kansas

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Not applicable

street & number

city, town state

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title None has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date federal state county local

depository for survey records

city, town state

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input type="checkbox"/> original site
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Summary

The Abilene carousel is a 2-abreast, track-type machine. It has 24 Parker horses and 4 Parker chariots (2 with large yellow sunflowers on the sides) on a platform 40' in diameter, one of the largest made by the Charles W. Parker Amusement Company. The paired horses, though mostly unrestored, are in generally excellent condition. When the carousel is in operation, they are mounted on flexible metal frames, or rocking mechanisms, that produce a ride much more realistic than the up-and-down motion of later carousels with horses mounted on poles. There is no top to the carousel, as it was intended to be set up under a tent.

Alterations and Other Equipment

The platform rests on wheels running on a track on the ground. Some of the wooden planks mounted on the frame have required replacement; otherwise the platform is in good condition. The military band organ designed to accompany the carousel is no longer with it.

The carousel has traditionally been powered by a 2-cylinder, 2-horsepower steam engine, which is set up a short distance away and connected to the carousel drive wheels by a cable. The boiler on the original steam engine has been replaced to accommodate current safety regulations so that the carousel can again be operated by the steam engine.

A new building to house the carousel is under construction behind the Dickinson County Historical Museum, just east of the Eisenhower Library and Memorial in Abilene. The 3,600 square-foot carousel building will be octagonal, with portions of five of the walls capable of being raised as viewing windows. An extension of the octagon will house the steam engine and serve as a workshop. An electric motor will power the carousel in its day-to-day operation, but the steam engine will be on display and will operate the carousel on special occasions.¹

Footnote

¹Bob Guenther, "The Abilene Parker" (Abilene, Kansas: Dickinson County Historical Society, 1984), unpaginated leaflet, provided the bulk of the data on which this description is based.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
prehistoric	archeology-prehistoric	community planning	landscape architecture	religion
1400-1499	archeology-historic	conservation	law	science
1500-1599	agriculture	economics	literature	sculpture
1600-1699	architecture	education	military	social
1700-1799	art	engineering	music	humanitarian
1800-1899	commerce	exploration settlement	philosophy	theater
X 1900-	communications	industry	politics government	transportation
		invention		X other (specify)
				Recreation
Specific dates	ca. 1898-1901	Builder Architect	Charles W. Parker Amusement Company (carousel)	

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Summary

Of some 68 carousels built by the Parker firm in Abilene between 1896 and 1910,¹ the Abilene carousel is one of only three that survive essentially intact. It is the earliest of the three, dating sometime from 1898 to 1901.² This rare and wandering survivor has returned to the community in which it was built; it is the only tangible evidence of the company's presence in the city.

Parker's early hand-carved wooden horses have been described as

in a class by themselves. They were long sinewy creatures with long leg muscles carved in interesting shapes. Their heads were thin, long, and sensitive; their manes rolled back in gentle "s" curves and forelocks flowed back under the ears, following the contours of the head.³

History

Charles W. Parker, an Abilene native, began making carousels in Abilene in 1898. He manufactured many other amusements and carnival accessories, including mechanical shooting galleries, portable electric lighting plants, concessions, show fronts, hand-painted banners, tents, and band organs. Parker employed the best skilled carvers and artists for the carving and painting of his merry-go-rounds. He brought craftsmen from Switzerland, Germany, and Austria to hand-carve the horses and is generally credited with inventing the mechanism that makes his horses rear up and down. His carousels became particularly well known in the Midwest and West.

Parker also at one time owned four complete carnivals. In addition, he operated an amusement center, "The Midway," or "Parker's Playhouse," in Abilene. (Neither the carousel factory nor "The Midway" is extant.)

He continued manufacturing the equipment in Abilene until 1910, when he moved his plant to Leavenworth, Kansas. In Leavenworth, he began using carving machines that gave the carousels a standardized mass-produced appearance. They are not, for that reason, as attractive to carousel connoisseurs as his earlier work. The Parker Company quit making carousels in the late 1930s, after Charles' death in 1932.⁴

The "Abilene" Carousel

A mechanic in Lander, Wyoming, James Weisner, purchased this carousel from one of Parker's traveling carnivals in 1928. Thereafter he annually put it up for the town's 4th of July celebration. He sold it in 1959, shortly before his death, to

9. Major Bibliographical References

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property less than 1

Quadrangle name Abilene, Kansas

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

A

1	4	6	5	5	3	2	0	4	3	0	8	2	6	0
Zone		Easting					Northing							

B

Zone		Easting					Northing							

C

Zone		Easting					Northing							

D

Zone		Easting					Northing							

E

Zone		Easting					Northing							

F

Zone		Easting					Northing							

G

Zone		Easting					Northing							

H

Zone		Easting					Northing							

Verbal boundary description and justification

The area embraced by the carousel shelter building. (The nomination, however, covers only the carousel itself.)

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	code	county	code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title James H. Charleton, Historian

organization History Division, National Park Service date November 1985

street & number 1100 L Street, NW telephone (202) 343-8165

city or town Washington state DC 20013-7127

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title _____ date _____

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date _____

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date _____

Chief of Registration

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Tom Knight, of Riverton, Wyoming, who operated it at a drive-in theater he owned in the community. Following Knight's death, his widow, desiring to dispose of the carousel to a party who would keep it intact, contacted the Smithsonian Institution in 1975. The Smithsonian in turn contacted the Dickinson County Historical Society in Abilene.

By mid-1976, the historical society and the associated Abilene Carousel Committee had raised enough money to purchase the carousel from Mrs. Knight. The carousel was brought back to Abilene and placed in storage.⁵ The need for funds to build a secure shelter and to restore the carousel has caused work to proceed slowly.

Construction at last began on the shelter building in June 1984. The society expects to complete it and begin operation of the carousel on a regular basis in the summer of 1986.

Footnotes

¹Arthur McClure, "C.W. Parker: Kansas Amusement King," Amusement Park Journal, 5, 3 (Fall 1983), p. 26.

²Based on review of data in National Carousel Association, National Carousel Association Census (Los Angeles, 1983).

³Frederick Fried, cited in McClure, op. cit., p. 25.

⁴McClure, op. cit., pp. 20-27; and Jeanne Von Essen, "Small part of Abilene Heritage reclaimed in Wyoming," Star-Tribune [Casper, Wyoming], March 17, 1976, p. 3.

⁵Bob Guenther, "The Abilene Parker" (Abilene, Kansas: Dickinson County Historical Society, 1984), unpaginated leaflet.

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