

CHAPTER 5

**Midway to Respectability:
Carnivals at the Calgary Stampede**

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Beckoning the crowds to enter the grounds of the Calgary Stampede, the carnival midway rides act as highly visible markers of the presence and the promise of excitement for Stampede participants. Curiously, however, despite this visibility, carnivals at the Stampede have been largely neglected in historical records and sociological analysis. For example, in James H. Gray's comprehensive history of the Calgary Stampede, *A Brand of Its Own: The 100 Year History of the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede*,¹ various wider cultural and economic influences are expertly interwoven with historical facts to demonstrate the remarkable evolution of the Stampede from a relatively small agricultural exposition to the multi-faceted and internationally renowned event that is seen today. However, interspersed among Gray's historical facts are only a few tantalizing but rather brief references to the carnivals that have played at the Stampede over the past century. One might be left with the erroneous impression that this component of the Stampede is, indeed, marginal and only incidental in the grander scope of the annual Calgary spectacle.



A strong case could be made that the midway at the Stampede is, in many ways, peripheral to the central themes of the Stampede. The midway has rarely reflected the same contradictory, albeit highly successful, guiding principles as those of the Stampede: the vision of a retrospective (and historically

inaccurate) glorification of the myth of the Wild West, combined with contemporary notions of what constitutes social and technological progress. Despite its ideologically segregated status at the Stampede, however, the history of the midway and its many carnival occupants is an equally evolving phenomenon, one that reflects broader cultural beliefs and practices that largely focus on issues of morality and respectability. Like the Calgary Stampede, which has evolved over the decades in response to economic and political dynamics and the perceived need to maintain a vibrant balance between nostalgia for the past and celebration of the economic and ideological promise of the future, carnivals have also responded to changing beliefs and public demands that centre mostly around issues of decency and general social acceptability.

As a component of the Stampede that has always been considered a necessary yet fundamentally separate entity, the midway at the Stampede has never felt the same need to share in the overall Stampede vision and its outward manifestations of emphasized themes of celebratory Prairie West traditions (with the exception of some of the earlier Wild West shows). As a strictly profit-oriented entity, the carnival at the Stampede has always had only one goal – to generate money by offering affordable and irresistible entertainment to fairgoers. This vision, a reflection of the tenets behind all carnival companies in North America, was the impetus behind the earliest travelling carnival companies, and continues to this day. What has changed, however, are two central features: the types of entertainment offered by carnivals and, even more profoundly, the social influences relative to morality, deviance, and overall respectability. This examination of carnivals at the Calgary Stampede demonstrates the gradual evolution of an entertainment activity that began as tantalizingly deviant and, over time, has moved from the cultural margins to a place of relative public respectability, while continuing to retain an aura of mystery, excitement, and diversion.²

Definitions and Brief History of Carnivals and Midways

Before exploring the various carnivals that have played at the Stampede, it is important to clarify what is meant by the term “carnival”³: “a traveling collection of amusements which include games of chance, sideshows, and thrilling rides”⁴ or (less formally) “a lusty busty bawdy bitch...who has kicked up her frolicsome heels and masqueraded under many guises and names.”⁵ The constituent parts of carnivals have changed significantly over the past century – changes that have, for the most part, been in response to a

variety of technological advances and, more significantly, fluctuating beliefs about morality and decency. Fundamentally, however, the term “carnival” refers to the actual physical entities that have occupied midways since the late nineteenth century.⁶

It is also salient to contextualize the carnivals at the Stampede in a brief historical discussion of carnivals in North America, the genesis of which is located in the 1893 World Exposition in Chicago. Although small travelling circuses were common from the mid-nineteenth century onward, carnivals per se were non-existent until after the Chicago World’s Fair. The central purpose of the 1893 World’s Fair was to educate and impress the masses with contemporary technological innovations. However, a segment of the World’s Fair named the “Midway Plaisance” was devoted to many free entertainment attractions and side shows.⁷ This first midway, one and a half miles long and “a block wide,”⁸ comprised a Ferris wheel, merry-go-round, and other attractions such as “fat ladies,” fortune tellers, and games of chance.⁹ Thus, although the terms “carnival” and “midway” are often used interchangeably, there is a distinction: “midway” is the actual geographical location, while “carnival” refers to the entities that occupy the midway. Although the midway proved to be highly attractive to fairgoers and generated significant revenue for the World’s Fair, it was also seen as vulgar and somewhat immoral. It was, therefore, geographically segregated from “the serene and aristocratic Court of Honor,”¹⁰ despite being wrapped in a cloak of respectability through the use of an idyllic name for the assemblage itself and attempts to display many of the rides, sideshows, and attractions “in the romantic style of the fancy waistcoat era.”¹¹

The financial success of the midway at the Chicago World’s Fair led to a proliferation of smaller travelling carnival companies in the ensuing years that continued to use the name “midway” to refer to their entertainment offerings. Most of these early carnivals did not survive for long, as their dependence on guaranteed crowds and money was significantly challenged by the sparse population outside urban centres in North America. Many of the smaller carnival groups joined together, thereby creating a single carnival company, which made them far more attractive to the general public and guaranteed them more bookings over the carnival season.

The Midway on the Margins: The First Half of the Twentieth Century

By 1902 twenty-four carnival companies were operating in the United States. Many of these companies also travelled to western Canada as part of their

route. The growth of railway lines, threading their way across both Canada and the United States, facilitated the movement of the carnivals. The companies offered a motley collection of rides and “freak” and “girlie” shows, games, and other concessions. The ride component tended to be quite small, mainly due to the expense of travel. The largest segment of most travelling carnivals was the tented sideshows. Vaudeville stage shows comprising comedians, musicians, and variety acts were common features of early twentieth-century carnivals, as were gambling booths and other games of chance.¹²



The partnership between agricultural fairs and carnivals was formed during the early part of the twentieth century and continues to this day. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, carnival companies realized that by negotiating contracts with larger agricultural fairs, they would be guaranteed a more secure income. The carnival season was May through to October, but most agricultural fairs took place from August to October, a practice that continues today. Carnival companies often struggled financially from May to August as they attempted to find “still dates,” smaller venues of short duration. Lucrative still dates were difficult to find. This sometimes led to debt acquisition or even bankruptcy for many smaller carnival companies before the official agricultural fair season had even begun.¹³

The alliance of agricultural fairs and carnival companies throughout most of the first half of the twentieth century was rarely harmonious. Each entity needed the other to survive financially. Carnivals were usually considered by agricultural fair boards to be “a necessary evil,”¹⁴ essential for the financial success of a fair, but ideologically contrary to the fundamental principles of the agricultural fairs, which were to educate the mainly rural fairgoers and provide a venue in which farmers could show their stock. The midway presence was seen as a distraction from these lofty ideals, and from the early 1900s onwards there were ongoing conflicts between moral entrepreneurs (in the form of agricultural purists, churches, and fair reformers) and agricultural fair boards and the general public, which supported the carnival presence, the former for financial reasons and the latter for entertainment purposes. A manifestation of these contradictory dynamics was the location of carnivals at the agricultural fairs. They were often positioned just inside the main entrance to agricultural fairgrounds in order to be the first to take advantage of the money brought onto the grounds. In the case of the Calgary Stampede, for example, most of the carnival games and sideshows were located at the northern end of the Stampede grounds, so that people entering at the main gates (northwest on the grounds) would have to pass by the carnival tents and games en route to the more “wholesome” agricultural activities and displays.¹⁵

Most opposition to carnivals centred on fears that the midways were dominated by con men (known as “grifters” or “fakirs”).¹⁶ There were concerns that female fair-goers would be lured into white slavery and men would be morally debased by the sight of the semi-clad women in the girlie shows.¹⁷ In contrast, little moral indignation was demonstrated towards the freak shows, no doubt a reflection of cultural beliefs dominant in the early twentieth century, which sanctioned the display of so-called human oddities with no concerns about exploitation.

The freak shows that comprised a significant portion of carnivals for the first half of the twentieth century consisted of both animals and people with abnormal physical features, such as “fat people, dwarfs, half men-half women, two-headed creatures, Siamese twins, and just about anything the mind could imagine.”¹⁸ Animals and people from “exotic” locales were very popular because most fair attendees (largely from the farming communities) did not travel much beyond their immediate regions and were duly entranced by live attractions ostensibly from foreign lands.¹⁹ Many of the people and animals were, indeed, imported by carnival promoters from around the world. However, a significant number of these live exhibits were quite bogus;

for example, it was not uncommon for Aboriginal peoples to be presented as people from Africa or India, costumed in suitable clothing and makeup; as Scott claims, “historical [and geographic] accuracy [were] not always a strong point in the sideshow business.”²⁰ Gambling was another source of contradiction and consternation.²¹ All the prairie provinces had legislation that discouraged gambling, but most exhibitions ignored the statutes, as they needed the revenue from gambling (in the form of midway games, as well as horse racing) to survive economically.²²

Carnivals at the Calgary Stampede

Although it would be fair to speculate that many of the travelling carnivals described above frequented the smaller agricultural fairs in the western provinces during the late nineteenth century, the earliest account of a carnival-like presence on the midway at the Stampede is found in Gray, who states that, in an attempt to attract larger crowds to the Exhibition in 1901,

The freelancing merry-go-round and ferris wheel operators, snake-oil pitchmen, and other itinerant merchants were gradually brought into the operation. But not always with favorable results. Public grumbling developed over the crookedness of some of the gambling games and it was universally resolved that greater emphasis had to be placed on elevating the moral standard of all the attractions at the fair.²³

Typical of most carnivals, then, the midway occupants at the Stampede tended to be viewed with varying degrees of suspicion²⁴ as lurid repositories of sin, sexuality, and moral degradation. An illustration of the outrage expressed by the agricultural purists is the following from the *Farm and Ranch Review*, published in Calgary in 1915:

One of the most repugnant experiences which can befall the average man or woman is afforded by a tour of the midway at any of our Western agricultural fairs. Raucous-voiced vendors megaphone the merits of their show. From weather-beaten tents emerge girls in misery, who, at a word from the official orator, force their faces into smiles and dance on a crazy platform ... All this is done, and linked up

with the name of progressive agriculture. Is it that our exhibition boards consider this banal form of entertainment in keeping with the standards of rural people? Or is it that the financial success of the exhibition is made precarious without the presence of the midway?... The matter of abolishing the unquestionably immoral effect of the midway should commend itself to our social reform leagues.²⁵

Although moral entrepreneurs made ongoing attempts to “clean up” the midway, they rarely had much success, as fair organizers became increasingly dependent on the revenue from the carnivals.

From its earliest days, the Stampede locale was visited by various forms of small travelling entertainment entrepreneurs, specific details of whom were rarely recorded. Most were independent, transient sideshow operators who disappeared as quickly as they appeared on the midway, making their way to the next potentially lucrative location. The practice of bringing diverse entertainment groups to the Calgary Exhibition existed for many years prior to 1920. Examples include the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Wild West Show in 1908, a “three-girl motorcycle act in which the girls raced each other around the inside of gigantic wire cage,...acrobats, and Howard’s Dogs and Ponies” in 1909.²⁶ In the same year (1909), the Exhibition also included what appears to be the first formal carnival operation, the C.W. Parker Carnival Shows,²⁷ as well as Al G. Barnes’s wild animal circus.²⁸

According to historical records, the main carnival companies that played at the Calgary Stampede in the twentieth century are as follows:

1920	Johnny J. Jones Exposition
1921	C.A. Wortham’s No. 1 Show
1922–1924	Johnny J. Jones Exposition
1925	Rubin & Cherry Shows
1926–1929	Johnny J. Jones Exposition
1930	Morris & Castle Shows
1931	Johnny J. Jones Exposition
1932–1933	Castle-Ehrlick-Hirsch Shows (reorganization of Morris & Castle Shows)
1934 ²⁹ –1940	Royal American Shows
1941–1945	Conklin Shows
1946–1975	Royal American Shows

1976–present Conklin Shows (which became part of North American Midway Entertainment in 2005)³⁰

The carnival companies listed above were augmented by many independent carnival acts, a practice that continues today. Most travelling carnivals subcontracted a variety of rides and concessions. However, there is very little extant evidence of precisely who the early “independents” were. The informality of historical record-keeping reflects the quite loose arrangements made between a carnival owner and the independents that he employed.³¹ The independents themselves also tended to move from one carnival company to another in their ever-present search for the most viable spots at which to set up their tents.

A significant turning point for the carnival companies that subsequently played at the Calgary Stampede was the formation of the western summer fair circuit.³² According to Gray, the Calgary Exhibition suggested a need for a set route for carnivals, which became established in 1911. The “A Circuit” (or route) comprised Calgary, Edmonton, Prince Albert, Saskatoon, and Regina.³³ The establishment of the route system that endures, albeit in modified form, today was beneficial to both carnival companies and the exhibitions. Benefits to carnival companies included the right to bid on the circuit and to acquire contracts that guaranteed them at least five weeks of work for a set number of years.³⁴ For exhibitions, the advantage of the circuit system was that they were able to attract larger carnival companies rather than often having to accept smaller companies with fewer attractions and a higher likelihood of illicit business practices. The circuit system, therefore, set the stage for moving the travelling amusement companies from the cultural margins (out of which grew the image of carnivals as inherently evil and criminal) towards the centre of legitimacy, crucial to the financial success of both the carnivals and the exhibitions that hired them.³⁵

As the largest of the western exhibitions, Calgary was considered the ideal starting point for the western Canadian route, as it could include both Dominion Day (July 1) and the Fourth of July (the latter date attesting to the large American presence at the Calgary Exhibition). The Edmonton Exhibition, however, challenged this on the grounds that it was equally entitled to be the Dominion Day location for the carnival. The parties reached a compromise, which was “to alternate the first weeks of July between Calgary and Edmonton.”³⁶

Most of the carnival companies that worked the Canadian circuits from 1914 onwards were American. A typical carnival route for the American

shows was to cross the border at Emerson, Manitoba, in June, travel west through the southern prairies to the Rocky Mountains, and then travel east as far as Ontario before returning to Minnesota.³⁷ Some small Canadian carnival companies operated in the prairies, an example of which is the Moyer Amusement Company from Assiniboia, Saskatchewan, which provided four rides in the 1928 season and was no doubt attached as an independent to the larger American companies.³⁸

Between 1918 and 1932 there appears to have been intense competition for the entire A Circuit. The competition is reflected in the fact that, occasionally, the successful A Circuit bidder also achieved the highly-sought-after Canadian National Exhibition (CNE). In other years, the carnival company that successfully outbid its predecessor for the A Circuit had played at the CNE in the previous year. Performance at the CNE provided a potent source of revenue that enabled companies to build ride inventories and thus assured a stronger presence in subsequent contract bids. Some unsuccessful A Circuit bidders were awarded the B Circuit (smaller agricultural fairs) instead, before acquiring the A Circuit. Gregg Korek, vice-president of The Canadian Midway Company,³⁹ adds a further explanation for the number of carnival companies that played the A Circuit, a pattern that eventually gave way to the dominance of Royal American Shows:

Jones [Johnny J. Jones Exposition] had the circuit for the most number of years, seemingly being given a break every few years while the circuit tried out a new show. They must not have been satisfied because they kept going back to Jones until Johnny Jones died in 1930. The Jones show quickly went downhill after that. Morris and Castle Shows I think bought out Wortham early in the 1920's and eventually changed the name. Castle-Ehrlich-Hirsch Shows is the successor to Morris and Castle. The carnival companies that then serviced the Calgary Stampede were certainly no match for the powerhouse Royal American and lost their contracts for Western Canada. To my knowledge, there was not a bidding process. Royal at that time had a far superior product and won the opportunity to play the lucrative Western fair route. Royal had a fantastic Stampede in 1934. The new show proved to be very popular with Calgarians and, for that matter, Western Canadians.⁴⁰

Carnivals changed rapidly in the 1930s in a profoundly Darwinian fashion, as the economic effects of the Great Depression resonated throughout the entertainment industry. The smaller shows simply could not survive without sufficient revenue from the public. Technology was also salient to the changing form of carnivals: a component of carnivals that began to decline in the 1930s was the collection of variety acts that showcased singing, dancing, and humour, victims of the invention of the radio and the growing film industry.

During the 1950s the freak shows began to disappear from carnivals, in reaction to mounting public opinion that the display of “abnormal” human beings was fundamentally immoral. Another key component of carnivals that diminished significantly from the 1950s onwards was the girlie shows. Carnival operators were being pressured to present more wholesome entertainment. As well, televisions and movie theatres presented images of women that largely rendered the burlesque-type revues obsolete and no longer titillating to the heterosexual male population. A further factor that influenced changes on the midways was the growing competition from amusement and theme parks, particularly in the United States and eastern Canada, the consequence of which was that carnival companies focused strongly on expanding the number and variety of rides, which were far less expensive to transport and operate than the live bands, vaudeville acts, and water shows, all of which required large numbers of people and which were becoming increasingly less profitable to carnival companies. Only the larger carnival companies could afford this necessary expansion in carnival rides and games, which spelt the demise of many of the smaller travelling shows and ushered in a new era of carnivals.⁴¹

Moving from the Margins of the Calgary Stampede: The Second Phase (1950–1975)

The presence of Royal American Shows at the Calgary Stampede was another critical turning point in the evolution of carnivals not only at the Stampede, but throughout Canada. Gregg Korek provides the background of Royal American Shows’ acquisition of the Calgary Stampede contract:

In late 1931, Carl Sedlmayr [owner of Royal American Shows] and a contingent of his people came to Western Canada to visit the fairs in Brandon, Calgary, Edmonton and Regina, although not Winnipeg, as the date in Winnipeg

was not a fair yet but a Kinsmen fundraiser. Carl presented a midway to these fairs that was unmatched anywhere in North America. The fairs in Western Canada, including the Stampede, of course, were impressed with Royal's lineup of rides, sideshows and games. Also, Carl was a very good salesman and a very likeable guy. In the late summer of 1932, representatives from Calgary, Edmonton and Regina exhibitions attended the State Fair of Minnesota, while the fair was in operation, to see the show and again visit with Carl. During the Minnesota visit, Carl cemented a deal that would bring his show to Canada for the 1934 season to Brandon, Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina and I think Saskatoon.⁴²

Founded by Carl J. Sedlmayr, who was born in Nebraska in 1886, Royal American Shows was one of the largest American carnivals throughout most of the twentieth century.⁴³ Although Royal American's first contract with the Calgary Stampede was in 1934, the company was unable to travel to Canada from 1942 to 1945, during the Second World War, as it relied on a large train (up to 90 rail cars) for transportation.⁴⁴ During the war, use of the rail system was restricted by the United States government to the movement of military personnel and equipment.⁴⁵

In 1967 Royal American Shows was at its pinnacle in terms of size, "over 800 people along with livestock and equipment and over 80 railroad cars," and by 1971, "Royal American Shows carried the greatest number of flatcars ever carried by any traveling amusement organization in the world."⁴⁶ The show travelled with a full complement of "carpenters, canvas men, electricians, painters, full working machine shops with mills, lathes, drills, welders, mechanics, cookhouse, portable showers, [and] mail department."⁴⁷ A somewhat sentimental history of Royal American Shows takes a sad turn as the author describes how the changing economy in the latter 1970s led to a loss of revenue for Royal American Shows, "due to longer distances involved in the carnival's season, culminating in the loss of its Canadian route in 1977 [sic] during a tax evasion scandal that led to Carl Sedlmayr's arrest. Although Carl Jr. was fully exonerated, Royal American was now locked out of Canada."⁴⁸

In fact, the "tax evasion scandal" proved to be far more than an anomalous incident in the history of Royal American Shows. The alleged tax evasion

not only resulted in numerous charges being laid, but also launched a Royal Commission⁴⁹ (known informally as the Laycraft Inquiry, named after the Commissioner, Justice James H. Laycraft) inquiring into the affairs and practices of Royal American Shows in Alberta.⁵⁰ The results of the inquiry led to the formation of the Alberta Gaming Commission (the first of its kind in Canada) and permanently changed many of the historical practices of carnivals in Canada.

The following quotation from the introduction in the report of the public inquiry demonstrates the magnitude of the investigation and its findings:

On July 24, 1975, at 2:00 A.M., a force of more than 130 police officers of the Edmonton City Police and Royal Canadian Mounted Police converged on the carnival midway of Royal American Shows Inc. then situated at the grounds of the Edmonton Exhibition Association Ltd. Acting under a Search Warrant issued in Alberta Provincial Court late on the previous day, the officers seized from R.A.S. and from a number of independent midway concessionaires operating on the midway under arrangement with R.A.S. several thousand documents and large sums of money. For the most part, the documents consisted of accounting records. Using evidence derived from this seizure, some 87 charges under the Criminal Code of Canada and under The Income Tax Act were subsequently laid against individuals and R.A.S.⁵¹

The seizure and arrests were the culmination of many years of suspicion and surveillance spanning British Columbia east to Manitoba and conducted by various policing bodies (RCMP and several city police departments) as well as the federal Department of National Revenue. Suspicions of illegal accounting practices heightened in 1974 when, on several occasions, RCMP officers at the Vancouver airport recorded the transportation in suitcases of large sums of cash by persons associated with Royal American Shows.⁵² Carrying significant amounts of money was not illegal. However, the source of the cash was sufficient to raise strong suspicions in various government bodies. The primarily cash-only basis⁵³ of carnivals had long confounded law enforcement agencies as well as the Department of National Revenue.⁵⁴ As Laycraft states,

The traveling carnivals from the United States had always presented the D.N.R. [Department of National Revenue] with a difficult audit problem. Not only were carnivals a business about which little was known, but the duration of their stay in Canada afforded little opportunity for examination. R.A.S. was a typical example. It visited four cities in three provinces over a period of six weeks, dealing almost entirely in cash. A tax audit involved not only R.A.S. itself but also each of the independent concessionaires. When the fair closed in Regina, the whole carnival operation moved overnight into the United States.⁵⁵

After a lengthy and highly complex set of meetings that involved RCMP in Ottawa, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta, as well as various Department of National Revenue agencies, the decision was made to single out Royal American Shows for intense investigation, as it was the largest in western Canada (although all carnival companies were considered equally suspect). A Task Force was formed to investigate three main areas: income tax fraud, fraud against exhibition boards (in the form of not paying them the amount designated in contracts), and the presence of illegal games.⁵⁶ One of the main intentions of the Task Force was “to set up surveillance to detect the ‘skimming’ of money from carnival operations or from the casinos” in each of the main exhibitions.⁵⁷

Winnipeg was the first operation to be watched, followed by Calgary. The Task Force arrived in Calgary on June 26, 1975, to set up its surveillance for the beginning of the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede on July 3, 1975.⁵⁸ Its main objective at the Stampede was to watch the movement of tickets from the rides and shows. Calgary Exhibition and Stampede officials were aware of this and gave their full co-operation. Nothing illegal was observed, reflected in Laycraft’s finding that “careful monitoring of the rides and shows over several days disclosed that the accounting made by R.A.S. [Royal American Shows] to C.X.S. [Calgary Exhibition and Stampede] for rides and shows was accurate and that C.X.S. was obtaining its proper share of the gross revenue derived from them.”⁵⁹

As well as the lack of sufficient evidence of illegal activities, another reason why the eventual “take-down” of Royal American Shows did not take place in Calgary was due to inferior telecommunications technology. During their surveillance in Winnipeg, the Task Force had strong suspicions that it was

being monitored by Royal American Shows, which appeared to have better equipment than the Task Force members.⁶⁰ In Calgary, the Task Force attempted to monitor communications among the various carnival employees, using “better equipment obtained from Ottawa together with two civilian radio technicians to operate it.”⁶¹ Despite the improved telecommunications technology, the monitoring project was further hampered by local citizens’ band (CB) radio transmissions, which resulted in Royal American Shows changing frequencies several times, thereby creating even more difficulties for the Task Force, which decided to abandon radio surveillance in Calgary and resume it in Edmonton. However, some arrests were made at the Stampede that year due to the presence of the Task Force. Calgary City Police shut down two of the midway games that were considered illegal under the Criminal Code, and four people running the games were prosecuted.⁶²

The Task Force’s investigation in Edmonton resulted in Royal American Shows being charged with six counts of defrauding the Edmonton Exhibition of a total of \$52,164.63, along with many other Criminal Code charges.⁶³ Royal American Shows never returned to its Canadian route after 1975.⁶⁴ Following their release on bail, the people who were charged returned to the United States. Had the carnival come back to Canada, the individuals would most certainly have been arrested and detained at the border. The carnival equipment seized from the 1975 raids at Edmonton and Regina was held in storage until the mid-1990s, at which time the assets were sold at auction and the proceeds were used to pay the outstanding fines.⁶⁵ Royal American Shows continued to operate in the United States for the next twenty years, diminishing in size over time; its last show was in Lubbock, Texas, in October 1997.⁶⁶

Royal American Shows played at the Calgary Stampede from 1934 to 1975, except during most of the Second World War, when Conklin Shows replaced it at the western Canadian exhibitions. The disappearance of Royal American Shows after a total of thirty-five years of playing at the Stampede opened the way for Conklin Shows to take on the A Circuit, which it continues to hold to the present day.

The Modernized Midway at the Calgary Stampede: 1976 to the Present

Conklin Shows’ acquisition of the A Circuit was the result of complex negotiations, as the spectre of Royal American Shows’ illegal activities had garnered much negative publicity for carnivals and created the need for a more cautionary approach by exhibition boards. In order to understand fully

how Conklin Shows was able to acquire and retain the profitable A Circuit, however, it is necessary to place its success in a historical and economic context. Conklin Shows' ability to stay well ahead of its competition is unique in many ways, but perhaps the most singular characteristic is its consistently astute business acumen combined with a keen awareness of the need to present an image of respectability to the public as well as its business partners.

The originator of Conklin Shows was James Wesley "Patty" Conklin, born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1892.⁶⁷ He was born Joe Renker and, like Carl Sedlmayr Sr. of Royal American Shows, began working in the carnival industry as a sideshow talker in New York and, later, a gambling game operator in carnivals in Texas and Oklahoma. He formed a partnership with carnival show-owner J.W. Conklin in 1916, but the carnival company did not survive economically, ending in 1920. Patty, however, was treated like a family member, which is why he changed his name to Conklin, and when Conklin Sr. died in the fall of 1920, Patty continued working with the Conklin family.

With Conklin's widow and her son Frank (eleven years younger than Patty), Patty ran the small carnival operation for the next year. After a plan to join Wortham Shows (which had the western Canada A Circuit) at the Winnipeg Exhibition did not materialize, the trio unexpectedly encountered and joined a small carnival show named the International Amusement Company,⁶⁸ which was playing at St. Boniface, near Winnipeg, and remained with it through the rest of its Canadian route that year.

Shortly thereafter, Patty Conklin partnered with Speed Garrett from Seattle to form Conklin & Garrett Shows; from 1924 to 1930 the carnival grew from two railway cars to fifteen. During the Depression, the show travelled to the Maritimes. Although it did not fare well economically,⁶⁹ it was able to take advantage of plentiful cheap labour. In 1932 Patty moved the carnival to Ontario, eventually making the show's headquarters in Brantford.

Despite occasional setbacks, the company continued to grow over the next forty years, expanding throughout both Canada and the United States. By the 1980s, Frank Conklin (Patty's grandson) had reconfigured the American route to the point that the Canadian and American Conklin operations had become autonomous business entities. The Canadian operation continues to be headquartered in Brantford, Ontario, while the American company, under the leadership of Frank Conklin,⁷⁰ is based in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Another factor contributing to Conklin Shows' procurement of the A Circuit (which included the Calgary Stampede) was that two years prior to the 1975 takedown of Royal American Shows a group of Canadian carnival operators headed by Heinz Oldeck lobbied the western Canadian fairs and

exhibitions to contract Canadian, rather than American, carnival companies. Their argument was that the significant financial revenue should remain in Canada, rather than go south to the United States. During the 1975 Stampede, newspapers in Calgary reported that the 1976 Calgary Stampede would be the first fair in the West to include a Canadian midway company, in conjunction with the larger Royal American Shows.⁷¹ Korek states that “this decision rocked the ranks of management of Royal American for they had a lock on midways in the west for over forty years.”⁷²

After the raid on Royal American Shows in Edmonton in July 1975, the pro-Canadian carnival contingent realized that the western Canadian fairs were going to have to find a replacement for Royal American Shows.⁷³ The Canadian midway lobbyists’ attempts escalated, leading to a meeting in Calgary in mid-September 1975 headed by George Hughes, general manager of the Edmonton Exhibition, and Bill Pratt, general manager of the Calgary Stampede. Decisions were made to attempt to book a Canadian carnival company by inviting submissions from Canadians and to book an American company only if a Canadian carnival could not supply the same level of equipment. Although the original intent was to keep the A Circuit intact, by November 1975 it was “every man for himself,”⁷⁴ as the Western Fairs Association realized it would be highly unlikely that it could provide midways for all the A Circuit fairs. Pratt and Hughes, as a result, sought carnival companies for the midways at Calgary and Edmonton, hoping that the other cities involved (Brandon, Winnipeg, Regina, and Saskatoon) would follow suit.⁷⁵

In late November and December 1975, the International Association of Fairs and Exhibitions held its annual meeting in Las Vegas, during which Pratt and Hughes engaged in discussions with various Canadian carnival companies, including Conklin Shows, that eventually resulted in compact between Conklin Shows and the Calgary and Edmonton boards. In mid-December 1975 the Calgary Stampede invited Conklin Shows to a final meeting in Calgary, at which Jim Conklin, Sheila McKinnon, Alfie Phillips, and Colin Forbes came to a final agreement. Almost immediately, Jim Conklin held a meeting in Ontario with senior Conklin Shows management to develop a show for the West in 1976; within a week, Conklin Shows had acquired agreements with fairs in Brandon, Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton, and Regina.⁷⁶

From January to March 1976, Colin Forbes, Joe Piggott (Conklin Shows’ legal counsel), and Alfie Phillips organized the contract. This was particularly significant because public exposure of the illegal practices of Royal American Shows had cast a wide shadow over all carnivals in Canada and “authorities



Alfie Phillips

of every description wanted to make sure that Conklin Shows was not going to be a repeat performance of 1975.”⁷⁷ Evidence of the reluctance of the fair boards (both Calgary and Edmonton) to commit to a long-term contract is that by early April 1976, Piggott and Forbes emerged from negotiations with only one-year contracts for each of the fairs, to ensure that there was at least a carnival company in place for the fast-approaching 1976 Calgary Stampede and Edmonton Klondike Days.⁷⁸

Further evidence of the intensified suspicion of carnivals following the Royal American Shows investigation was the fact that, even two years later, in 1978, the RCMP and auditors from Revenue Canada followed Conklin Shows for the entire summer. Phillips states,

There was forty of them [police and auditors]. They came in 1978 to investigate our show. There wasn't any serious offences [noted]. What they did was try to follow the money, from the game, to the office, to the bank, and they also tried to monitor all our cash operations so they could estimate how much revenue was coming in. So they'd send out two auditors and they'd spend the whole time at one game. And they'd also audit our ticket operations, too, and our game operations. We had an interesting summer. They followed us right to Winnipeg, and then they followed us right through to Toronto. It must have cost them a fortune: forty people, staying in hotels.⁷⁹

A central reason that Conklin Shows emerged unscathed from the close scrutiny of authorities in 1978 was that an important aspect of the contract negotiations in 1976 had been the inclusion of much more transparency with regard to the financial arrangements between Conklin Shows and the fair boards.⁸⁰ Conklin Shows offered the fair boards a percentage of the revenue taken from the games and the rides.⁸¹ Further incentives offered by Conklin Shows were considered extremely progressive: the midway Guest Relations Booth and colour-coded canvas on all the rides and the games were features that remain today.⁸²

As the aforementioned negotiations attest, the success of Conklin Shows was, and is, a direct consequence of its ability to recognize cultural and economic changes in wider society and respond to them well by continually modifying and adapting the carnival company to meet societal needs and demands. In fact, the smaller carnivals' inability to react and adapt to wider cultural conditions is the primary reason why only the largest carnivals continue to exist today.

The evolution of Conklin Shows into a more corporatized entity reflects its adaptation to the difficulties all contemporary carnivals face.⁸³ Alfie Phillips outlines the many factors involved in the increasingly expensive costs of running a carnival: the long distances that the carnival equipment has to be moved,⁸⁴ the rising costs of gasoline, premiums for liability insurance, and the costs involved in meeting required standards of operation.⁸⁵ The larger carnival companies, such as Conklin Shows, are scrutinized more closely by authorities because of their high visibility, as well as pressure by the various agricultural boards that standards meet the overall criteria for the large exhibitions. One advantage for Canadian companies of the higher costs of running carnivals is that the large American shows are reluctant to come to Canada, as the costs are even more prohibitive due to the devalued American dollar plus the Canadian goods and services tax (GST). This is in addition to the problems often encountered at the border relative to carnival workers who may not meet the requirements of Immigration Canada.⁸⁶

Another difficulty that Conklin Shows has encountered concerns the labour force needed to run such a large operation. Historically, carnivals have relied heavily on a small but relatively stable core group of workers who tend to stay with the carnival for its entire season and a more transient group of workers who are often hired locally at each carnival spot. Hiring local workers as a reserve army of labour has been a common practice at most seasonal exhibitions, fairs, and carnivals for many years. Gray refers to "a small army of unemployed single men [being] rounded up and put to work"⁸⁷ in

1931 at the Calgary Stampede, which was “the start of a continuing role for the Calgary Industrial Exhibition Company: acting as an unemployment relief agency.”⁸⁸ Contemporary carnival companies also rely heavily on local workers, especially for the labour-intensive teardown of the carnival before it moves on to its next location.

A critical factor in the availability of casual workers is economic conditions, which presents a somewhat ironic situation for carnivals: a buoyant economy usually means a large turnout of people and, consequently, larger revenues. However, it also often means a shortage of available local workers. This has been the case for many years for Conklin Shows with regard to the Calgary Stampede, especially as the agricultural basis of the Alberta economy gradually gave way to the emerging oil industries. As Phillips states, “we have always had problems with the workforce here [in Calgary]; nobody wants to work here because the economy is too good.”⁸⁹ Conklin Shows holds job fairs in Calgary and Edmonton to hire local workers for positions such as ticket sellers, office staff, food concessions staff, and game and ride operators. Approximately 600 or 700 local workers are hired for Conklin Shows at the Calgary Stampede, including 100 ticket sellers and approximately 100 people working in Kiddy Land (children’s rides).⁹⁰

The shortage of local workers for temporary employment is not the only impediment encountered by Conklin Shows. It has also had difficulty finding sufficient full-time workers because “young people today don’t want to do this kind of work.”⁹¹ Conklin Shows now looks beyond North American borders for its workforce, and for the past several years has brought in workers (mainly young white males) from South Africa.⁹² Despite some difficulties in finding both temporary and full-time workers, Conklin Shows remains nonetheless a dominant carnival company in western Canada and the United States.⁹³

Conclusion

In 1939 H.W. Waters, an American carnival historian, argued that carnivals would eventually become bland and boring when neutralized of their more deviant components to meet legal and societal standards. Waters predicted that moral entrepreneurs would eventually succeed in their quest to rid midways of their sinful temptations. Positing also that “younger people lose interest [in carnivals] at a certain age,” Waters states,

Attempts have been made to refine and dignify the midway. It has here and there been dressed up in a more sedate coat and it has been given a new name, and such an air of respectability that it has lost its carnival or festival spirit which in the past has been the secret of its success. Long experience has shown that the more successful the carnival owner is in creating the carnival atmosphere at the fair the more successful he will be financially.⁹⁴

Waters did not entertain the possibility that carnivals would prove to be one of the most durable and flexible of human social creations. It can be strongly argued that carnivals in North America have never become sufficiently sanitized in either image or substantive content that the public has lost interest. Certainly, many of the early smaller carnivals did not survive, but it was not due to public disinterest. Inefficient or overtly illegal business practices were the main reasons for their disappearance, rather than any significant successes by agricultural purists in ridding the midway of its “slippery vermin.”⁹⁵

This examination of the carnival companies that have played at the Calgary Stampede has demonstrated that the successful carnivals have adapted to changes in technology, public morality, and the ebb and flow of the economy. Indeed, as the largest agricultural fair and exhibition in the western provinces, the Calgary Stampede has attracted the largest carnival companies in North America, thereby opening up what quickly became an extremely lucrative carnival route with mutual advantages for the carnivals and the various fair boards.

Once the mainstay of early twentieth-century carnivals, the tented side-shows displaying “freaks” and girlie shows have disappeared, with carnival rides and games of chance now dominating the midway at the Stampede. For most Stampede attendees, however, the midway continues to emanate an aura of decadence, particularly at night, with the overwhelming noise, bright lights, and nostalgic smells of popcorn and candy floss. One might conclude, therefore, that the ambience is rooted in the same confluence of myth and nostalgia that envelops the Stampede in its entirety, and that the midway has indeed reached the centre of respectability and legality. Most of the illegal activities have been purged from carnivals due to closer scrutiny by authorities and the general public’s refusal to either tolerate or sustain interest in some of the more dubious attractions and practices. However, an issue that has remained problematic, although largely invisible to the general

public, is what could be characterized as exploitation of a largely powerless carnival workforce. As stated earlier, carnivals have relied on a small core of permanent workers, augmented by temporary employees at the larger exhibitions and fairs. With no protection from unions, carnival employees tend to work between twelve and sixteen hours a day, for a fixed weekly wage, seven days a week, and with little time off.⁹⁶ Historically, the workers have tended to accept these conditions as normal and natural, as many of them are used to working in marginal unskilled labour. However, in 2005 some of these conditions came to the attention of the general public when a large number of the South African workers at Conklin Shows spoke to the press and, eventually, left the carnival in Edmonton.⁹⁷ The consequence was an investigation by Alberta Human Resources and Employment, which showed that “the company failed to maintain proper payroll records, record employees’ breaks or limit individuals’ work to twelve hours.”⁹⁸ Conklin Shows was issued a warning. In 2006 Alberta Human Resources and Employment continued to monitor working conditions at the Calgary Stampede and Edmonton’s Capital EX (formerly Klondike Days).⁹⁹

The fact that the wages and working conditions of carnival workers are largely ignored by the general public (and the media, until the issues are brought to their attention) is a consequence of the enduring belief that carnival workers occupy a very low social class location and continue to be seen, and portrayed, as a quasi-criminal element of carnivals. North American Midway claims that “the workers are hired from abroad [South Africa] because they are energetic and dedicated, and an important aspect to changing the image of the dirtier, grumpier ‘carnie’ that people associate with midways.”¹⁰⁰ The people hired by the carnival, therefore, are yet another projection of the image that carnivals attempt to attain, along with the bright lights, music, and family-oriented ambience. Carnivals, including all the shows that have played at the Calgary Stampede over the past century, have always been an illusory social phenomenon. From their earliest manifestations as sinful and decadent through their gradual evolution towards more mainstream entertainment, the carnivals at the Calgary Stampede will, no doubt, continue to simultaneously repel and entice fairgoers with their paradoxical nature, appealing to our desire to be entertained within the margins of respectability.

Notes

1. James H. Gray, *A Brand of Its Own: The 100 Year History of the Calgary Stampede and Exhibition* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985).
2. It is salient to point out that the evolution of a phenomenon that defies societal definitions of respectability towards legitimacy may, in fact, be the consequence of more sophisticated *illusions* of proper conduct: what the general public is meant to perceive. It is also important to point out that, although the focus of this chapter is the Calgary Stampede, the history of carnivals at the Stampede is representative of and, indeed, embedded in a broader Albertan and western Canadian sociocultural context. Therefore, the Stampede's carnival history cannot be singled out as unique or extraordinary. Rather, the dynamics that have shaped the evolution of the midway or carnival component of the Stampede are those that informed the entire carnival and agricultural fair industry in the West over the past century.
3. It is difficult to define a carnival precisely because carnivals vary tremendously in size and components and have altered in meaning over time. The word "carnival" originates in fifteenth-century celebrations of pre-Lenten meat-eating, but developed a broader meaning in "the commonplace American sense of gaudy and somewhat disreputable pleasure." See Samuel Kinser, *Carnival, American Style: Mardi Gras at New Orleans and Mobile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 3–4.
4. Kinser, *Carnival*, 3.
5. Joe McKennon, *A Pictorial History of the American Carnival* (Sarasota: Carnival Publishers of Sarasota, vol. 1, 1972), 11.
6. It is important to point out that carnivals have existed in many forms for hundreds of years in other countries and societies. While most European carnivals have roots in religious ceremonies, most North American carnivals have had one purpose: the procurement of revenue through the provision of entertainment.
7. David C. Jones, *Midways, Judges, and Smooth-Tongued Fakirs: The Illustrated Story of Country Fairs in the Prairie West* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1983), 52. See also Judith Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 28; and H.W. Waters, *History of Fairs and Expositions: Their Classifications, Functions and Values* (London, ON: Reid Bros., 1939), 128. Waters spells the term "The Midway Pleasaunce."
8. Jones, *Midways, Judges*, 52.
9. Waters, *History of Fairs*, 128.
10. Adams, *American Amusement Park Industry*, 28.
11. Waters, *History of Fairs*, 128.

12. Guy Scott, *Country Fairs in Canada* (Markham, ON: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 2006), 65. Scott states that the musicians frequently wandered around the fairgrounds, playing between the performances on stage, as well as during inclement weather in order to sooth the nerves of agitated livestock.
13. *Ibid.*, 62.
14. *Ibid.*, 127.
15. Gregg Korek, vice-president, Canadian Midway Company, personal communication with author, July 2006. In the earlier years, the carnival shows and sideshows set up rather arbitrarily on the Stampede and Exhibition grounds. There is little historical record of where the earlier carnivals were located. However, Gray refers to the midway in a photograph taken in 1912, describing it as “a ramshackle affair in which the carnival games and ‘grease joints’ [food concessions] were located in the middle of Indian Village by the main entrance,” which supports Korek’s statement (Gray, *Brand of Its Own*, 39). As carnival companies grew, much more planning was needed to find the right location and adequate space for the rides and games. Currently, the arrangement is that the Stampede asks Conklin Shows to submit a preliminary lot layout for the rides before April 1. The Stampede may suggest changes or sanction the initial submission, so, in essence, the Stampede and Conklin Shows negotiate to come to a mutual agreement on the placement of the carnival rides and games. Alfie Phillips, interview with author, 13 July 2005.
16. Scott, *Country Fairs*, 77. The term “fakir” comes from the Arabic meaning “beggar” and refers to a religious mendicant; “how this term was transferred to a carnival con man defies explanation.” See also Jones, who refers to “bean-in-the-nutshell operators, known collectively as fakirs or fakers” in *Midways, Judges*, 4.
17. *Ibid.*, 81–82.
18. *Ibid.*, 72.
19. *Ibid.*, 74.
20. *ibid.*, 74.
21. For example, in 1905, there was enormous opposition to gambling on the midway at the Calgary Exhibition, although the same carnival company had provided gambling games in Edmonton. The carnival company paid the Calgary Exhibition Association \$500 for the “privilege” of setting up the games for three days. After some young boys were observed near the gambling games, a citizens’ group headed by Reverend G.W. Kerby complained. Rev. Kerby enlisted the help of the mayor and other citizens. They told the chief of police that they would charge the mayor with impeachment unless the game operators were arrested and punished. However, the usual outcome of such moral outrage was that judges

told the offenders to leave town, and the situation would then repeat itself the following year. See Faye Reinberg Holt, *Awed, Amused, and Alarmed* (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 2003), 179–80.

22. Jones, *Midways, Judges*, 54.
23. Gray, *Brand of Its Own*, 19.
24. Gray states that, in 1920, “one of the continuing problems of the Calgary Exhibition” was with the midways. “The rides were a super attraction, and along with the rides were the so-called games of chance. All were capable of being rigged to ensure that the ‘marks’ left their money with the operators.... Floating along the midways from town to town were a motley gang of sneak thieves, pickpockets, and hustlers.” Gray, *Brand of Its Own*, 100.
25. “In the Name of Agriculture,” *Review* (6 September 1915): 499, in Jones, *Midways, Judges*, 51–52.
26. Gray, *Brand of Its Own*, 31.
27. The C.W. Parker Carnival was typical of the travelling carnivals of the early twentieth century that played in both the U.S. and Canada. Charles W. Parker, the carnival owner, entered the carnival business initially by manufacturing amusement devices, including making improvements on existing models such as merry-go-rounds. He is also the originator of the “High Striker,” still found in most carnivals. He formed a carnival company in Kansas in 1902 under the name of C.W. Parker Amusement Company, which grew into the Great (and later, “Greater”) Parker Shows. A website covering the history of Charles W. Parker reproduces the following item from William E. Connelley, *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1918): “At the present time Mr. Parker is the largest private owner of amusement cars in the United States, His factory at Leavenworth is the largest in the world devoted exclusively to the manufacture of amusement devices.” <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/1918ks/biop/parkercw.html> (accessed 28 January, 2006).
28. Gray, *Brand of Its Own*, 31.
29. Gray, *Brand of Its Own*, 100. The date of 1934 for Royal American Shows conflicts with that given by Gray, who states that “over the years, Calgary and the other western fairs tried several midways before settling in 1936 for the Royal American Shows which seemed, at that time, to be a cut above most of its competition.”
30. Jim Conklin via e-mail message from Ron Getty to author, 4 February 2005.
31. The writer uses the male pronoun deliberately. Almost all carnival owners over the past one hundred years have been male.
32. The original circuit system consisted of three circuits: A, B, and C. The A Circuit was considered to be the largest and most profitable carnival route, consisting mostly of large annual exhibitions. The B Circuit comprised

smaller exhibitions and agricultural fairs, often in relatively remote small towns. Little is known about the C Circuit, but one can assume that this route included even smaller towns and fairs with less profitable opportunities. The A Circuit still exists today in western Canada (the Calgary Stampede being considered the largest spot). The B Circuit also still exists, albeit on a much smaller level than in the twentieth century. The C Circuit no longer exists. The evolution of the various circuits can be explained by the evolving demographic changes in western Canada, as the populations in cities grew, often at the expense of the near-depletion of many of the once-thriving smaller rural towns that formed the basis of the B Circuit. Interestingly, the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE) held in Toronto was often part of a package acquired by the successful A Circuit bidder. Ontario has always had far more carnival companies, as it has had the population base to support companies that often did not have to travel out of the province in order to survive economically. However, it is probably the case that none of these carnivals were large enough to play at the CNE, which is probably why the CNE contracts were seen as an entity separate from the other Ontario locations for carnivals.

33. Gray, *Brand of Its Own*, 33. Changes over the years with regard to cities in the A Circuit reflect changes in these cities' exhibitions. For example, by 1918 Winnipeg and Brandon were added to the A Circuit, and Prince Albert was excluded (Jim Conklin via e-mail message from Ron Getty to author, 4 February 2005). The same cities remained in the circuit for the next few years. However, of note is the absence of Calgary in the 1922 A Circuit (Jim Conklin via e-mail message from Ron Getty to author, 4 February 2005), for which there is no extant explanation. In 1923 the Western Canada Association of Exhibitions was formed, with the A Circuit consisting of the same cities, including Calgary.
34. The process of bidding by carnival companies for contracts has varied over time. In western Canada, there does not seem to have been a bidding process per se until about the middle of the twentieth century. Agricultural fairs did not have much from which to select and tended to choose the largest, most spectacular carnival company available, which was usually American until Conklin Shows grew in size and scope. Although bidding itself was virtually non-existent until relatively recently, contracts were drawn up with the selected carnival. There appears to be no historical record of the contracts between some of the earlier carnivals, such as the Johnny J. Jones Exposition, with the Calgary Stampede (Ron Getty, Stampede Archives, e-mail correspondence 3 February 2006). However, Gregg Korek recalls that in 1946, Royal American Shows returned to the Calgary Stampede and the other

western fairs with agreements based on five-year terms with a two-year extension (Gregg Korek, e-mail message to author, 2 February 2006). According to Jim Hobart, midway and exhibits manager at the Calgary Stampede, the standard term length for Stampede contracts currently is three to five years. Hobart, e-mail message to author, 26 January 2006.

35. It is important to point out that much of the alleged legitimacy was merely a camouflage for continued illegal activities.
36. Gray, *Brand of Its Own*, 33.
37. Jones, *Midways, Judges*, 52. See also Donald G. Wetherell and Irene Kmet, *Useful Pleasures: The Shaping of Leisure in Alberta, 1896–1945* (Edmonton: Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism, 1990), 321.
38. Wetherell and Kmet, *Useful Pleasures*, 321.
39. This is the corporate name of Conklin Shows' Canadian operations.
40. Gregg "Scooter" Korek, e-mail message to author, 2 February 2006.
41. McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, www.lib.usm.edu/~archives/m329.htm (accessed 14 January 2006).
42. Korek, e-mail message to author, 2 February 2006.
43. There is very little recorded history of the show, and most of the information on it is found on a website created by a former employee of the show, Carl LeMay, who cites as his source Joe McKennon's *A Pictorial History of the American Carnival* (Sarasota: Carnival Publishers of Sarasota, vol. 1, 1972; vol. 2, 1972; vol. 3, 1981). See LeMay, *Royal American Shows: The Worlds [sic] Largest and Most Brilliantly Illuminated Midway*, accessible at <http://home.tampabay.rr.com/lemay/royal.htm> (accessed 7 September 2005).

As a young man, Sedlmayr obtained a job as a sideshow talker at an amusement park in Chicago. To repay a debt owed to him, the owner of Siegrist-Silbon Shows (a circus) granted Sedlmayr ownership of the circus in 1921. Sedlmayr chose a new name for his show, Royal American Shows, in order to appeal to both Canadians and Americans. In 1923 he sold brothers Elmer and Curtis Velare an interest in a partnership that continued until the early 1940s. By the 1930s Sedlmayr and the Velare brothers had created an impressive carnival "dedicated to the principle of carrying clean, high-class entertainment to the public." Sedlmayr then took on a new partner named Sam Soloman, and Sedlmayr and Soloman bought and ran the Rubin & Cherry Show for two years. (This conflicts somewhat with LeMay's historical account implying that Royal American Shows remained in its original format as a travelling carnival throughout its tenure.) However, it was very common for carnivals throughout most of the twentieth century to change names or to change ownership while retaining the same name. It could very well be the case, consequently, that the Rubin & Cherry show carried the Royal

American banner during that time period. It was not until after the Second World War that Sedlmayr ran Royal American Shows as the sole owner. Circus, Minstrel and Travelling Show Collection, M329, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, www.lib.usm.edu/archives/m329.htm (accessed 14 January 2006).

44. This was typical of larger carnivals in North America, which travelled long distances with massive amounts of equipment and a large number of workers.
45. Korek, e-mail message to author, 2 February 2006.
46. LeMay (accessed 7 September 2005).
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Alberta, Royal Commission of Inquiry into Royal American Shows, *Royal American Shows Inc. and Its Activities in Alberta: Report of A Public Inquiry / James H. Laycraft, Commissioner* (Edmonton, 1978) (hereafter cited as Laycraft, *Royal American Shows*).
50. Evidence of the length of the inquiry can be seen in the following comments from Laycraft: "I spent one year of my life on this Royal Commission. On days that were otherwise somewhat dull it made the front pages of all Alberta newspapers" (Laycraft, e-mail message to author, 24 January 2006).
51. Laycraft, *Royal American Shows*, A-1.
52. For example, in 1974 James Breen flew out of Saskatoon "carrying a satchel containing \$25,000.00, Benjamin Mayers of Vancouver traveled from Winnipeg to Vancouver carrying approximately \$100,000.00, [and] on another occasion, Mayers and Breen left Edmonton carrying approximately \$200,000.00." Laycraft, *Royal American Shows*, B-2.
53. It is also important to point out it was not unusual for senior carnival employees to be carrying large amounts of cash. Carnival companies rarely used banks through much of the twentieth century. Based on a cash economy, carnivals traditionally paid their employees directly with cash, and made purchases in a similar fashion. Travelling from location to location in a semi-autonomous fashion also created a practical need to have ready cash on hand, rather than conducting transactions or making deposits at banking institutions. Carnival owners were also very well aware that banks did not particularly trust them and, given the often tumultuous and unpredictable economics of the carnival business, banks were usually loathe to extend loans to carnivals. This practice of avoiding banks continued until well into the 1980s for many of the smaller carnivals in Canada (and, one can speculate, in the United States). Fiona Angus, "Key to the Midway: Masculinity at Work in a Western Canadian Carnival" (Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, 2000), 111.

54. Police had always been highly suspicious of all carnivals since the turn of the century. However, they often turned a blind eye to the illegal activities, safe in the knowledge that the “grifters” would soon be leaving town. It was only when carnival companies grew larger and their presence far more visible that provincial and federal authorities became more vigilant.
55. Laycraft, *Royal American Shows*, B-5.
56. *Ibid.*, B-7.
57. *Ibid.*, B-11.
58. *Ibid.*, B-11.
59. *Ibid.*, B-11–12. In a telephone conversation with the author in February 2006, Gregg Korek said that he had been told anecdotally that the Edmonton Exhibition had been selected for the raid because the Calgary Stampede area was considered too close to the U.S. border for any potential escapees, and that Edmonton’s relative isolation was seen as being less likely to provide an easy exit for alleged carnival criminals. The overall impression given in Laycraft’s report is that the surveillance in Winnipeg and Calgary was motivated by the need for concrete evidence of illegal practices by Royal American Shows. For example, the report states that after the Task Force left Winnipeg for Calgary on June 26, 1975, a “confidential source [supplied]... the location of the R.A.S. records.” One can surmise, therefore, that had sufficient evidence been collected prior to their arrival in Calgary, the Task Force might have decided to conduct its raid of Royal American Shows at the Calgary Stampede, rather than at the Edmonton Exhibition.
60. Laycraft, *Royal American Shows*, B-11.
61. *Ibid.*, B-12.
62. *Ibid.*, B-13–14. Another event that occurred in Calgary during the Stampede also resulted in charges being laid later: “On July 11 [1975], two persons, William Goggin and James Breen, who had been described in criminal intelligence reports of the previous year as ‘bagmen’, arrived from Saskatoon. On July 12, they went to the Calgary Airport with \$70,000.00. They presented this money to the R.C.M.P. Airport Detachment for a private inspection for flight clearance. The Airport Detachment noted the license number of a rented car being used by the two men and passed the information on to the Task Force.” This incident became very significant in the subsequent raid at Klondike Days in Edmonton, as the rented vehicle was tracked and found in the parking lot of the Edmonton Plaza Hotel, leading the Task Force towards the eventual uncovering of a highly complex set of transactions involving several individuals connected with moving the money from the various exhibitions to points south of the border, and out of the jurisdiction of Canada’s Department of National Revenue.

63. The entire endeavour, however, was not without numerous and complex problems. Even before the Task Force began its work of monitoring Royal American Shows, it was beset by internal conflicts and disagreements among the various Task Force members with regard to jurisdictional issues and other legal aspects. After the Task Force exposed the alleged illegalities in Royal American Shows in Edmonton, ongoing difficulties arose with regard to loss of continuity of documentation, largely because of the aforementioned tension among the Task Force parties. Further evidence of the distrust that appears to have existed among the various Task Force members (particularly between the RCMP and local police departments) is “The Northstar Incident,” in which the RCMP was accused by Edmonton City police officers of spying on their activities at the Northstar Inn in Edmonton in December 1975, during the ongoing legal proceedings following the July 1975 investigation of Royal American Shows’ activities at Klondike Days. This was not an insignificant issue, as it led directly to the alleged tainting of documentation and information that effectively ruled out court admissibility. In fact, the issue of court admissibility in the form of both “loss of continuity” and “non-disclosure of documentation” is cited in Laycraft’s report as the reason why charges stemming from evidence of criminal activities against Albert Anderson, the general manager of the Edmonton Exhibition, were stayed. Charges against Anderson arose after the Task Force’s seizure of the “black book” containing information written by Peter D. Andrews, Royal American Shows concessions manager, between 1973 and 1975. In essence, the book contained records of bribes in the form of money and gifts given to various people of significance, some of whom were named, while others were indicated by an office only. Laycraft states the following in his report: “In the case of some cities in the United States substantial sums of money were shown as having been given to various named or designated individuals. In Canada, the book showed sums of money ranging from \$50.00 to \$300.00 as having been given to a number of named Calgary policemen. Three other Canadians are shown as having received money. Two are not identified by name. The other person named was Albert J. Anderson, then General Manager of the E.X.A. [Edmonton Exhibition Association].” *Ibid.*, B-22–67. Anderson was charged with “unlawfully and corruptly accepting awards, advantages, or benefits of goods and money from Sedlmayr, Andrews, and Demay as a consideration for showing favour to Royal American Shows Inc.,” charges which, as mentioned above, were stayed due to allegations of improprieties with regard to the continuity of documentation. *Ibid.*, B-24.
64. The raids by the Task Force on Royal American Shows continued in Regina after Royal American left Edmonton.

65. Korek, e-mail message to author, 2 February 2006.
66. Minstrel and Travelling Show Collection, M329, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi.
67. Unless otherwise noted, most of the historical data on Conklin Shows is derived from the extensive history of the show compiled by Gregg Korek, Jim Conklin, and John Thurston (www.conklinshows.com/history.htm). Korek states that Thurston, from Ottawa, is currently writing a book on the history of the Conklin Shows. Korek, e-mail message to author, 23 February 2006.
68. The writer was unable to locate any information on this particular show, but its name reflects the tendency of carnival owners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to select grandiose names for quite small carnival operations.
69. Economic downturns are particularly difficult periods for carnivals, and many carnival companies disappeared during the Great Depression. Carnival companies, then as now, depend on an often unpredictable number of customers to survive. Poor economic conditions as well as inclement weather have a significant impact on any carnival's seasonal revenue and, often, its chances of survival.
70. Jim Conklin retired in 1996, which is when Frank took over the American operations. However, Jim remains actively involved in the Ontario operations of Conklin Shows, which are known as The World's Finest Shows (Phillips, interview with author, 13 July 2005).
71. Korek, e-mail message to author, 2 February 2006.
72. Ibid.
73. After the raids in Edmonton and Regina, the western fairs assumed that Royal American Shows would return (albeit in a sanitized form) for the upcoming season.
74. Korek, e-mail message to author, 2 February 2006.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. Korek stated that there were proposals from other midway companies in the fall of 1975. One proposal was from Jerry Murphy's United States Shows, which appear to have attempted to meet the Canadian carnival criterion by creating a Canadian midway called "Canadian Carnivals." There were also proposals from Heinz Oldeck's company and Bingo Hauser's West Coast Amusements. Korek states, "I believe in total that there were twelve submissions that were presented by carnival operators." Korek, e-mail message to author, 2 February 2006.
79. Alfie Phillips, interview with author, 13 July 2005.

80. A stark example of the alleged “skimming” by Royal American Shows is found in Gray’s statement that in 1975 the midway revenue was \$208,933 (the amount declared by Royal American Shows) yet, one year later, in 1976 (when Conklin Shows had the midway contract), the midway revenue was \$502,000, “an indication surely that something more than mere tax juggling had been taking place in the Royal American Shows’ counting house.” Gray, *Brand of Its Own*, 169.
81. Phillips, interview with author, 13 July 2005. Historically, carnival companies have used a variety of ways to pay fair boards their portion of the revenue. Often the agreements were very informal, with somewhat arbitrary percentage commissions being placed on the carnival ride components and the games (the general “rule of thumb” was that the more lucrative the carnival component, the larger the commission demanded by the fair board). Alfie Phillips states that one arrangement is for carnival companies to deposit the ride money (money from ride tickets) into the fair board’s bank account, and then the carnival company keeps the concession (games) money. Under this arrangement, payment is not made on a percentage (commission) basis, but on a flat basis where “you rent 100 feet and you pay so much money to the office for 100 feet.”
- “Sullivan Amusements” (pseudonym), the carnival I researched in 1996, used a percentage system between the carnival company and the fair boards, and also between the independent carnival operators and the show itself. During the research, I asked how a financial figure was arrived at in order to compute the agreed-upon percentage at the end of each spot, given that Sullivan Amusements was a strictly cash-run operation. The office employee at Sullivan Amusements told me that, in both sets of circumstances, a check with the previous year’s figures provided the carnival with a kind of benchmark figure to go by, while also considering any mitigating factors such as weather that might affect the revenue. The employee advised me that there was an unspoken acknowledgment between the carnival and its contractees that the figure was never completely accurate, but close enough to the previous year so that disputes could not develop. The arrangements for the more itinerant independents were even more loose and informal: handshake agreements with the owner of Sullivan Amusements to give a percentage (known as “points”) of their day’s take, called “the nut.” (The word “nut” has an interesting derivation. The Sullivan Amusements worker told me that “years ago, when circuses came into town, the mayor of the town would get upset when circuses would head out without paying, so he would take one nut off of every wheel of every trailer and when the circus trainer brought his money in, his rent, the mayor would give him his nuts back.”) Percentages/

points varied tremendously from 20 percent to 45 percent depending on how well-known and well-liked the independent contractors were by the carnival owner. Angus, "Key to the Midway," 95.

82. In the past ten years, Conklin Shows has added other features, such as machines that dispense hand lotion and the sale of bottled water. Alfie Phillips commented, "Patty Conklin would roll over in his grave if he knew we were selling bottled water! Roll over in his grave! Three dollars for a bottle of water!" Phillips, interview with author, 13 July 2005.
83. The carnival business, in general, has struggled over the past fifty years to survive, with so many other entities competing for entertainment dollars (e.g., television and other electronic technological advancements and, increasingly, casinos and gaming in general). Jeff Blomsness, chair of the Outdoor Amusement Business Association, stated in 2000 that the Cypress Group carnival company merger was a very positive step towards the survival of the carnivals involved. Blomsness said, "We're hurting. Two-thirds of the ride manufacturers are out of business, and some that did 60% or 90% of their business with carnivals are now doing 10%, or even less. The whole industry is hurting, and it will trickle down to fairs." Tom Powell, "Farrow, Conklin, Thebault-Blomsness to consolidate," *Amusement Business*, 15 October 2004, www.amusementbusiness.com/amusementbusiness/industrynews/article_display.jsp (accessed 22 January 2006).
84. The Conklin Shows website states that "the cost of moving rides, from fair to fair, even before the increase in gas has become almost prohibitive. Last year [2003], to move the show the 20,000 miles from Florida to the Calgary Stampede and back cost in excess of \$5,000,000." Conklin Shows, www.conklinshows.com/rides_secrets.htm (accessed January 12, 2005).
85. Alfie Phillips characterized this as "government interference," stating that "in some provinces, it's excessive. For example, in Manitoba, they come and visit our office, about seventeen regulatory bodies, and in Toronto, it's twenty-two, such a wide span...that we touch on all these different areas of government regulations [such as] the fire marshall, health department, police department, health and safety people, people auditing us. It's just a myriad of regulatory bodies that descend upon us." Phillips, interview with author, 13 July 2005.
86. Ibid.
87. Gray makes frequent references to the reliance of the Stampede over the years on both casual and volunteer workers.
88. Gray, *Brand of Its Own*, 90.
89. Phillips, interview with author, 13 July 2005.
90. Ibid.
91. Ibid.

92. The company used by Conklin Shows is “Away 2 Xplore,” which offers “international staffing solutions” and recruits “a large portion of [its] candidates from South Africa’s middle class working families” (www.away2xplore.org, accessed 5 August 2005). The South African workers fly into the southern U.S. initially, usually in January, work on ride maintenance and restoration for Conklin Shows at West Palm Beach, and then begin the carnival company’s season by working in spots in Miami, eventually making their way north to the Calgary Stampede in July and continuing on the show’s route for the remainder of the season. The South African workers then fly back to South Africa in November. The workers are brought in under employer-sponsored seasonal worker visas (known as H-2Bs), which are given to workers employed by companies that claim they are unable to find suitable or available workers domestically.
93. Another sign of the evolution of Conklin Shows into a more corporatized entity is its merger with North American Midway Entertainment in January 2005. North American Midway Entertainment comprises Conklin Holdings, Farrow Amusement Company (of Jackson, Mississippi), and Thebault-Blomsness Inc. (of Crystal Lake, Illinois), and is a wholly owned subsidiary of Stone Canyon Entertainment Corp., a company formed by former Ticketmaster Group chairperson and CEO Fred Rosen and The Cypress Group, a New York-based equity firm. North American Midway held contracts, as of October 15, 2004, for 142 annual fairs and exhibitions in seventeen U.S. states and four Canadian provinces. Powell, “Farrow, Conklin.”

Jim Hobart, midway and exhibits manager for the Calgary Stampede, states that “Conklin Shows’ last contract with the Stampede was for five years (2000–2004). With Conklin Shows being an integral part of the merger brought together by North American Midway Entertainment, the Calgary Stampede entered into a one-year contract for the 2005 Stampede with The Canadian Midway Company (Conklin Shows) and North American Midway Company to bridge the gap. The Calgary Stampede and [The Canadian Midway Company] are currently in negotiations to go forward with a new contract. The length of the contract is one of the terms to be determined.” Jim Hobart, e-mail message to author, 24 February 2006.

In a press release dated October 15, 2004, The Cypress Group states, “Conklin is the largest midway operator in North America with a large presence on the East Coast and throughout Canada, operating rides and concessions at 17 shows with attendance of approximately 8.4 million.” The Cypress Group/Private Equity Investing, www.cypressgp.com/pr_2004_10_15.htm (accessed 22 January 2006).

Conklin Shows played for the first time as The Canadian Midway Company, the northern unit of North American Midway Entertainment, in the summer of 2005, although its public banner continues to be Conklin Shows.

94. Waters, *History of Fairs*, 129.
95. Jones, *Midways, Judges*, 54.
96. Angus, "Key to the Midway."
97. William Lin, "Carnival Staff Walk Out Over Poor Conditions," *Edmonton Journal*, 31 July 2005.
98. Trish Audette, "Midway Operator's Violations 'Minor,'" *Edmonton Journal*, 3 August 2005.
99. Elise Stolte, "Long Hours Leave Midway Workers Barking," *Edmonton Journal*, 15 August 2006. Stolte states, "Employment Standards officers started working with the company earlier this month when they set up at the Calgary Stampede. When provincial officials looked at records ending July 14 [2006], they found midway employees had not been paid Alberta's \$7-per-hour minimum wage or overtime pay, a minimum one and a half times the regular pay. On July 21, that was corrected and employees got back pay for their time in Alberta ... Officials will prosecute if the travelling company does not limit a worker's day top twelve hours." Interestingly, the *Calgary Herald* had no coverage of this issue from 2005 to 2007.
100. Brad Linn, "Overseas Workers Perk Up the Midway," *Calgary Herald*, 16 July 2006.

Special thanks from the author to Gregg "Scooter" Korek, Alfie Phillips, and the Honourable James H. Laycraft, Q.C., LL.D, for their valuable information and contributions to this chapter.

