

CarnyLand (an ethnography):
a study of contemporary carnivals and carnival workers
(carnies) in British Columbia.

by

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Statement of Co-Authorship

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Abstract

This study is an ethnography of contemporary carnivals and carnival workers (carnies) in British Columbia, conducted over 5 years (1997 – 2002). Informing the ethnography are three key theoretical frameworks: the carnivalesque, with which I analysis the carnival events as a public celebration; nomadism, as a means to understand the carnies identity as travellers; and transgression, to determine the real and symbolic interaction between the carnies and the locals. This text has two main parts: Chapter 2 is about the organisation of the carnival as seen through the filter of its economics. I discuss the macroeconomics of the carnival organisations and how they run their businesses, their relations with outside institutions, and the relations between the companies and their employees, as well as the relations between the employees. In chapter 3, I discuss the nature of life on the road. Here, I am principally interested in three themes that emerged from my ethnography: the themes of home, illegality and adventure, and the interplay between the three. I conclude that, although the carnival is a controversial and ambiguous lifestyle, it provides a positive influence in the carnies' lives. It is a lifestyle from which individual carnies derive self-respect, economic independence, and personal autonomy.

There is a supporting video documentary, CarnyLand co-directed by Elisha Burrows, which takes the view into the *backlot*, behind the public sphere into the private lives of the working carnies. The text and documentary were constructed so as to stand-alone.

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Chapter 1 : The Pitch

What the hell am I doing here? I am lying in a wet tent set up in the parking lot of the Zellers in Westbank, near Kelowna, BC. My sleeping bag is damp, nay – dripping wet in one bottom corner. My bank account has hit rock bottom and I am living off cash advances from my VISA card. I've been eating bland hamburgers and drinking stale coffee from the *Lost in the Fifties* Zellers' cafeteria. This is like some bad latter-day Rimbaud flashback, or – am I the living ghost of Walter Benjamin's *poseur*, nothing but an actor in a B movie?

June 5th, 2000

At about 11pm tonight, Ringo died of a heart attack. Went off for dessert w/ Bingo (chocolate cake, hot chocolate, & a coffee), came home, chatted with a few people, walked over to his trailer and fell down as he was stepping through the door. (field research notes)

The names of the people ring through my head: Ringo, Bingo, Bones, Whitey, Frenchy (there were several over the years), Valentino, Weaner, Junior, Bubbles, Happy (he quit), Spinks, Moss, Jackson, English, and Buzz.

The names of the rides spin faster: Gravitron, Zipper, Tilt-a-Whirl, Raiders, Tip-Top, Zamphereli, Gliders, Scrambler, Sizzler, Spider, Bulgy, Berries, Hampton...

The Talker: June 2000

On the drive up to Williams Lake Stampede, I wondered what the next two weeks would bring. I was stepping into territory that I have been dancing around the edge for years. Maybe even thirty years, if I want to go back that far. I don't –

not yet at least. I was stepping into “the twilight world of the Carnival Midway” (Brouws 2001). I conceived of this study, in part, to weave together several theoretical concepts with which I had been playing in the last two years of my BA: nomadism, carnivalesque, and transgression. My intention has been, not so much to analyse these concepts, but to do an ethnography of these concepts as a lived or embodied experience. This study discusses the concept of nomadism as a rejection of an identity that is rooted in fixed territorial geography but is, rather, found in mobility – both social and physical. It is about the carnivalesque as a means to invert and even overthrow institutional control through the inversion of culture in the public sphere. And then it is a study of the actual transgression that occurs during or because of this event (i.e., the carnival) by the carnies or the paying public participants (*patrons*). In short, I have wanted to articulate how and why the carnival is an important cultural phenomena within contemporary North American society; to show how the carnival is a site in which social mobility is available for people to whom the traditional mode of social mobility is denied; and to show how the carnival is a cultural transgression of the status quo.

My actual exploration of contemporary carnivals and carnies has challenged many of the preconceived concepts that I held before I began my research. I was challenged because I was naive. I was burdened by my own nostalgia: of a carnival that was an amalgam of the carnival of my childhood (so much larger than life), and the carnival of movies, books, and popular culture. All of this was a carnival of hustlers, shysters, and moral ambiguity: in essence, a carnival that wrote its own rules. I also approach the carnival through a personal history of having been raised, physically and culturally, in a travelling theatre

company that toured across Canada and the western states of America. The Caravan Stage Company is a theatre company committed to producing original, political theatre that appeals to popular and largely rural audiences. Founded in 1970 by my parents, Paul Kirby and Adriana Kelder, the company travelled from town to town in hand-made gypsy/circus wagons drawn by Clydesdale horses. I do know first hand the physical and social environment of the travelling entertainer; albeit the similarity only extends to the general not to the specific – the Caravan Stage Company was many things that the carnival will never be and vice versa¹. So, I realised that I will always observe the carnival through a set of lenses: academic, nostalgic, coloured by my desires to become a filmmaker (of more later) and achieve my master's degree, and most importantly by the fact that I know that I will never *become*² a carny. Carnival is a life before it is a job. In my conversations and observations of carnies, it was when they distinguished themselves *vis a vis* their lifestyle choice as *carny* that they were able to discuss the rewards of the carnival as a job. This is in contrast to the people who tried to find the rewards within the job itself. In part, this distinction acknowledges and accepts the real disadvantages (including financial insecurity, social stigmatism, little material well being, and poor physical health) that comes with the job. As I may never look beyond these disadvantages to see carnies other than as friends,

¹ Simply put, the Caravan is non-profit company committed to producing a political and artistic mandate and are supported by arts council and government money whereas the carnival companies are for-profit companies whose business is entertainment yet both have a similar lifestyle.

² I use this term in the Deleuzian sense where there is a dualism to the concept of becoming: in one sense, the word has definite limits, fixed qualities in time and space; and then there is the becoming of which there is no end; "a pure becoming without measure, a veritable becoming-mad, which never rests. It moves in both directions at once" (Deleuze 1993). I can become and probably was seen to be a carny in the first definition, but I recognise that my *carnyesque* had determined perimeters that the others, the *lifers* did not have.

and carnival as other than an academic and intellectual curiosity, I may never know the state of being called *carny*.

The nature and question of being a carny is an active conversation amongst the carnies that I met and knew. While it may be a conversation that I as researcher initiated, the question of who is entitled to the honour of being a “carny” was nonetheless hotly debated. Many of the carnies find in the carnival company a community. Many of the carnies find employment with the carnival after they have not been able to find it elsewhere, whether this is because they do not have sufficient education or skills, or lack a reliable employment history that other employers will trust. Pat, a carnival office manager, told me with some pride that, “we hire the unemployable.” Some are underage and some are too old to work elsewhere. Some find work on the carnival simply because they have friends or family working with the company. Whatever their reason for starting up, most will assert that the real reason they stay is that they enjoy the community aspects. Thus, gaining and maintain distinction amongst their peers as an honoured member of the community does become a source of individual pride.

Being labelled a carny is not without some controversy. My study was not focused upon the public’s perception of carnies, but on the carnies experiences of their world. Informally I did talk to about a dozen people and I believe that it is safe to say that the public perception of carnies is of people who are dirty and untrustworthy. I do think that this perception is changing for the better, as the companies actively work to clear their bad image. However, individual carnies still experience this pejorative attitude from the locals. One carny told me how

she did not call herself a carny. I had just spent an hour talking with her boyfriend, who seemed to be the archetypal carny (tattoos, lots of sculptured facial hair, and the easy gruff charm of a hell's angle biker on a good day) so I was a little taken aback. She told me how she had been cornered by a group of local girls and started calling her names: "carny slut", "carny whore", and other trash talk. She said, *I am not a whore, they're the sluts, they sleep with any carny that talks to them*³. *Its not the carny girls that sleep with everyone. I am not a carny*. This woman sees her experience as a summer job, a chance to see a bit of the province, and to meet people⁴. At least for some carnies, and more so for the women, they are caught between their desire to enjoy their experience and being aware of how that experience is perceived in the general public (or by their friends and family), the identification of being a 'carny' is conflicted.

The question of becoming and hence belonging to an insider community, a community that actively plays – pragmatically, artistically, and symbolically – with the question of truth and appearance is an important one. Much of the popular conception of the carnival as a being riddled with con artists rests in its colourful history. The wild stories of the past are just stories now. On several occasions, carnies working the games commented that they were selling stuffed animals, there simply was a game that had to be played first. This is a shift in emphasis, from the short con to an entertainment business. Perhaps even sadly, the carnival is no longer the den of iniquity that it once was. Sadly, because this carnivalesque 'den of iniquity' held a meaning and place for such activities. Two

³ "Lot lice" or lot lizards" is the slang for girls that hang around the carnival looking to sleep with carnies.

of the more popular illustrations of carnival life are Todd Browning's 1932 film *Freaks*, and a 1980 film starring Jodie Foster, Gary Busy, and Robbie Robertson, called *Carny*. Both films clearly articulate the sordid details of carnival life. Carnies themselves cultivate an insider/outsider dualism that honours any action that might humiliate the outsider. Thus stories of elaborate hoaxes, rigged games, fake side shows, and perilous rides that even the carnies would avoid are told with great relish⁵.

The notion, often expressed wistfully, that the carnival "was different then, very different" (Jimmy King, interview 2004) has been articulated as a transition from 'old school' to 'new school'. This transition was embodied by the two carnival operations on which I have based my ethnographic observations. At MF Wagner, I heard stories about how West Coast Amusements was changing to a more corporate style of business. Many of the carnies with Wagner were dismissive of West Coast as having sold out. They criticised West Coast for their uniforms and stricter regulations and rules, even as they dutifully went off to shower and pull on their new company tee-shirts. They like to brag about their wild parties and how Wagner was closer to the spirit of real carnival than West Coast. Within West Coast, there are gradations of change: Bingo Hauser, the patriarch and founder of West Coast, and with whose unit (they have 4) I spent the most time with, was seen to be 'old school' in comparison to his son Bobby (unit #2) and his grandson (unit #3).

⁴ It is worth noting, that for all her denial of the term, she did do two more seasons after she made this claim.

⁵ The stories and storytellers are often venerated, and when the master storyteller, "Ringo" died, Bingo remarked how he would often tell the right story just when the crew needed a reminder or moral boost.

Outwards signs of the shift from old school to the new school are visible in the uniforms that all the carnival companies now have, regulations about employee behaviour, rules and regulations governing the operation of rides and games, posted where the patrons can see them. Public regulations include government licensing and monitoring of the games, rides, and employee/employer relations. Private regulations can be characterised by a more rigid social structure governing the selection of games and rides and who will work them, the partnership with independent operators working under the banner of the contracted carnival company, and maintenance of some semblance of social harmony in the *backlot*⁶ In an attempt to clean up their image, and as a shift to working with societal institutions as opposed to ignoring them, Conklin Show Inc, the largest carnival company in North America, now travels with an accredited teacher and a portable school trailer for the children of the working carnies. West Coast now requires underage employees to have the written permission of their parents or guardians; and in some instances, appropriate people are required to sign as guardian⁷. The old school is characterised by a disingenuous regard for regulations, both publicly and privately (I will discuss this in greater detail in chapter 2). Employee employer relations are dealt with abruptly and often violently. All contracts are verbal and one's word and honour

⁶ The *backlot* is the carnival term for the non-public areas where in the carnies house trailers and work trucks are parked, which becomes the hangout area during operating times. Geographically, the companies attempt to create a physical barrier between the backlot and the midway by lining up work trucks and trailers to discourage public foot traffic.

⁷ Pat, the office manager, was the official guardian of a 14 year girl who wanted to travel with her mother for the season. However her mother was a recovering heroin addict and their social worker would not allow the girl to travel without some stronger guardianship; sadly, the girl, although eager to start high school in the fall, ended up pregnant.

is paramount in interpersonal relations⁸. The carnies express admiration for the old school ways, whether because of the implicit machismo that characterises it, or because it is less a formal, less corporate way of doing business, or (most likely) because it is more relaxed way of life for the employees (if they understand the unstated codes of conduct). However, it is understood that the increasingly corporate model of business dealings is inevitable. Those that do not want to continue will find other means of employment. It is now accepted that the carnival is “big business... its big expensive equipment, big things to pay everybody, like workers compensation, and taxes, everything. It is big business now. Whereas 30 years ago, it was sawdust on the ground and everybody hustling. Was what it was” (Pat, interview.)

One writer asserts that “the midway mostly trades in fakery” (Brouws 2001:8). This, a common and popular sentiment, is a superficial and misleading representation of the carnival experience, both of the insider and the carnival patron. One of the keys to the carnival is that it is foremost an embodied cultural experience that, at its most successful, is about a specific interaction between people. This may come as an individual interaction, such as an individual negotiating a game with a joint agent – often becoming an actor in a mini-drama being staged publicly for the other carnival patrons; or as a collective interaction,

⁸ Even into his 70s, Bingo Hauser was seen to express his anger through his fists; and as the president of the company, he was never the one to hire or fire employees, but rather delegated this to his office manager or lot foreman. The only piece of paper I saw Bingo sign was my release form, after I had conducted all my interviews and principle photography, and I was about to leave.

wherein the carnival crowd begins to endow their present/temporal carnival experience with an ephemeral energy that is actively engaged within a celebratory moment. I have struggled with the correct word to describe the assembled public that come to the carnival to be entertained⁹. *Audience* ("the assembled listeners or spectators at an event, esp. a stage performance, concert, etc [or] addressed by a film, book, play, etc."need reference) suggests a passive group assembled together to hear and observe. The carnival experience involves participation, suggesting *participant*. Participant captures the notion of engagement that is experienced; however, it implies a sharing of the experience. I found that the carnies tend to deny access into the experience beyond that of *mooch* or *townie*: carny terms used to describe the locals – in essence those who were to provide money and be preyed upon. *Patron* suggests a level of authorised privilege that is not present in the relationship for many of the fore mentioned reasons, yet it acknowledges the financial relationship between the carny and their principle means of finance. Carny terms are not of much help; for the most part they tend to be derogatory and patronising. Generally, the carnies refer to the public by volume, an indication of an economic relationship rather than the experiential. I suspect this theoretical struggle for a semantic representation suggests the unique and ambiguous character of the carnival experience, lying somewhere between observer and celebrant. This experience, wherein we, the public, flips back and forth between observer, dupe, actor, and patron is rare in contemporary

⁹ Obviously whatever term I come up with will be a generalisation of variegated experiences so I have to trust that I will be able to communicate when and where the public experience of the carnival does expand beyond the universal to the specific.

society¹⁰, and the existence of this ambiguous space in public and popular culture is part of why I have been and continue to be intrigued by carnivals today.]

This ethnography began in the fall of 1997, when Elisha Burrows and I visited a carnival company at the Armstrong Interior Provincial Exhibition as the preliminary stages of a film project. I had made initial contact with the carnies when two carnies were hired to drive trucks on a film that I was also working on. I was running the generators, and as the generators kept breaking down, Bob Holt and I started talking about other breakdowns over the years. Bob Holt was, at the time, a part owner of a successful carnival company: MF Wagner. When I asked if I could visit the carnival to research a documentary, he agreed. The following year, Elisha Burrows and I travelled the Armstrong Interior Provincial Exhibition (IPE), where we spent one week meeting, filming, and introducing ourselves to the carnies. In the ensuing two years, Bob and MF Wagner parted company, and Bob suggested that I contact Bingo Hauser, owner and president of West Coast Amusements, to see if I could travel with them. In the spring of 2000, I visited West Coast at the Cloverdale Stampede. In 2000, I travelled on my own with West Coast Amusements, spending 6 weeks with this carnival company over the course of their travels. Then, in the spring and summer of 2002, Elisha and I spent 8 weeks with West Coast recording for the documentary

¹⁰ Carnival lies outside of cultured performances (such as the avant- or political theatre, dance and performance art) that are specifically about breaking down the schism of audience experiences that the popular culture (such as television) reinforces. While I do not have time to engage in an adequate comparisons, carnival succeeds as entertainment where the more cerebral performances tend to the didactic. Granted this interpretation of carnival is supported by a theoretical analysis that many not be common to most patrons, many of whom are engaged in the carnival as a totalizing and spectacular space (which on first glance would seem to negate this theoretical position.) I believe it is in the fissures between the carnival an entertainment space (safe) and carnival as social space (un-safe) that unsettles the public experience – crating a

film, again over the course of one season. During all of these times, I lived with the carnies, worked alongside them when I could be of use, travelled in their vehicles, and socialised with them whenever I was welcomed.

Initially, the carnies presented me, as a researcher, with several challenges. The first was how to identify myself: as academic researcher or as filmmaker. The carnies are a closed society and one that does not welcome institutional inquiries. The reasons for this are readily discernible, and are based upon the colourful and often not exactly legal dealings with the public by the companies or individual carnies (which I will discuss in chapter 3). I was fortunate to have the trust of a gatekeeper who had sufficient personal prestige to sponsor my presence, Bob Holt, whose own colourful history is chequered enough to have earned respect on both sides of the law, and as a carny. I suspect that for many of the carnies who supported my studies they welcomed my presence as a “filmmaker” (rather than as a university researcher). I think that they cherished the idea that their lives, which they recognise as being outside of the normal, are the makings of a film; it made sense to them. However, they did not particularly trust the institutional involvement that accompanied a film or a Master’s thesis. Some people were indifferent to the presence of recording devices (whether it was a video camera, still camera, or voice recorder), and some were antagonistic¹¹. Part of the concern was the law, and part of the concern was

Brechtian alienation – whereas popular culture intends to create suture between a the observer and the observed.

¹¹ One owner was very inviting of me into his life, would ask me to accompany him to coffee shop, would answer all my questions, and generally let it be known that I was welcome at his company; which then allowed his employees the freedom to talk to me. However, when I once asked if I could record our conversations, he waved off the possibility. Another man walked up to Elisha and me and said that if we took one picture of him he would break the camera.

that if the outside world learned too much, it would change their lifestyle and work, even the carnival itself. Consequently, in my written thesis, I have had to rely upon field notes, memory, my impressions, and video interviews that were conducted for the documentary (with the eye to a wider public audience.) All told, I conducted over 30 interviews and engaged in 15 weeks of participant observation over 5 years.

Accompanying this text document is a video documentary, recorded primarily in the summer of 2002; co-directed and written by myself and Elisha Burrows, produced with the assistance of the Banff Centre for the Arts, the Canada Council, the National Film Board. The film has been constructed to stand on its own, and to a large degree so has the text. However, they also work in relation to each other. The film demonstrates the enthusiasm and commitment that many carnies feel for their work, even amidst the social dysfunction (e.g., alcoholism, poverty, and illiteracy are discussed in the film). One of the intentions structuring the film was to illustrate the physicality of the carnival experience: as such we took the camera on the rides, and engaged with the games and the travel from a first-person perspective. We wanted to show the *backlot* of the carnival, the world that *townie* never gets to see. The film is largely illustrative and, we hope, without too much didactic editorial direction. There is one scene in particular that I believe highlights the moral and cultural ambiguity of the carnival. One of the *agents* working a machine gun game encourages two young native kids to shoot a black *Raggedy Anne* doll that one of them had won at another game. Watching two native kids blithely blast away at *Raggedy Anne* is reminiscent of the carnivalesque violence that characterises Francois Rabelais'

Gargantua and Patagruel. The symbolic violence of the image is a perfect pairing of the capitalistic zeal with which the carny proceeds to fleece the kids out of ten dollars for the bizarre pleasure of “shooting a little doll”. Elsewhere in the film, it is our intention that the narrative journey of the single mother, Diane, illustrates the positive quality of the carnival; as a space where a high school drop out and single mother is able to earn an income and self-respect in a job of her own choosing. I have no doubt that it is these small success stories that keep people like Diane around the carnival, because there is a sense that no matter who you are, or what social baggage you might bring with you, at the carnival you can write your own story. The film does not show, because it occurred after we had finished shooting, that the owner of the company took back his trailer, thereby closing off Diane’s options and means of subsistence; because it was the trailer that Diane had been using to live and cook in, and without it, she had no resources with which to continue.

The film is intended for a more popular audience and is thus less critical of the carnival companies and carnies, who for obvious reasons were not afforded the anonymity that the thesis can offer. In fact we both struggled and argued with the conundrum of how to ethically articulate the criticisms deserved to be made about the carnival, and yet not betray the trust that had been extended to me, and us, by the carnies and owners alike – without whom I would never have been able to do the research or make the film. Part of my concern with developing a strong critical position in the film was that the carnival has a tenuous reputation as it is. The public’s perception of the carnival is of shifty characters operating unsafe rides for exorbitant prices. I did not want to make a

film that would encourage this stereotype. Neither, however, am I interested in eliding the very real criticisms of the carnivals and their “traditional” operations. I suspect that this issue is not specific to our film, rather it is an ethical dilemma with which all sympathetic documentarians must deal. We chose to focus on making their world whole, showing as best as we were able the complexities of their lives, so that the dysfunction would become a part of the story rather than *the* point of the story. The other part of my solution was to address some of these issues in this text; where I can protect people through a constructed anonymity, and where I can develop an analysis that addresses the nuances of the situation.

June 5th 2000 (continued)

Darcy, John, Troy & Mike gave him [Ringo] CPR until the ambulance arrived but I don't think that there was ever any hope. When I got back after a seeing movie, Gone in 60 seconds, there was an ambulance and 2 cop cars, and the crew was standing around huddled in clumps. (field research notes)

Was there anything to the fact that Ringo's trailer, and the spot where he hit the ground was three feet from where my tent was and where I continued to sleep in that Zellers' parking lot?

“A lean, hungry, half-starved Wolf, prowling along for food on a clear moonlit night, fell in with a good looking and well-fed Mastiff; and after the compliments of meeting were duly passed between them, the Wolf commenced the conversation: “You look extremely well, my friend; I vow that I do not think that I ever saw a better looking or more comely person: but how comes it about, I beseech you, that you should live so much better than I? I may say, without vanity, that I venture fifty times more than you do, and yet I am almost ready to perish with hunger.” The Dog answered very bluntly, “Why, you may live as well, if you will do the same for it that I do.” – “Indeed! What is that?” say he. – “Why,” says the Dog, “only to guard the house a-nights, and keep it from thieves.” – “With all my heart,” replies the Wolf; “for at present I have but a sorry time of it; and I think that to change my hard lodging in the woods, where I endure rain,

frost, and snow, for a warm roof over my head, for regular meals, and good food, will be no bad bargain.” – “True,” say the Dog; “therefore you have nothing more to do but to follow me.” Now as they were jogging on together, the Wolf spied a crease in the Dog’s neck, and having a strange curiosity, could not forbear asking what it meant. “Pooh! Nothing,” says the Dog. – “Nay, but pray!” says the Wolf. – “Why,” says the Dog, “if you must know I am tied up in the daytime, because I am little fierce, for fear I should bite people, and am only let loose a-nights. But this is done with a design to make me sleep a-days, more than anything else, and that I may watch the better in the night-time; for as soon as ever the twilight appears, out I am turned, and may go where I please. Then my master brings me plates of bone from the table with his own hands; and whatever scraps are left by any of the family, all fall to my share, for you must know I am a favourite with everybody. So you see how you are to live. Come, come along; what is the matter with you?” – “No,” replied the Wolf, “I beg your pardon; keep your happiness all to yourself. Liberty is the word with me; and I would not be a king upon the terms you mention” (*The Fables of Aesop*).

Later, Bingo is walking around the cop cars, notices one of them is missing a hubcap. He walks over to where I am standing with Darcy and, with a distinct twinkle in his eye, asks him if he stole it. He then says goodnight and walks into the darkness of midway.

As everyone begins to walk away, Mike walks up to me, points his finger at my chest and says that Ringo was a real Carny and I had better tell the world what that meant (field research notes).

I have structured my thesis into two parts. The first short chapter is a description of the carnival in action, and photographs of the carnival and carnies that I took during my time with them. Chapter 2 is about the organisation of the carnival seen through the filter of its economics. These economics shift from the macro (how the carnival operates in the public domain, and how the carnival companies operate as a conglomerate umbrella under which independent operators will work as sub-contractors) to the micro-practices of employer

employee relations within the carnival. This is preceded by a brief intermezzo, a descriptive passage of the carnival in full swing, accompanied by photographs of the carnivals that I took during my research. A similar interlude exists between chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2.5 is a descriptive passage about the time spent travelling, and is accompanied by some maps showing the four units of West Coast Amusements, and their extensive journeys across western Canada. Chapter 3 is a look at different meanings of carnival for those who work there. For many people, carnival is a place that combines adventure and home. Travel is one ingredient in providing this adventure, and the community of people is the glue that enables them to construct what, for many, is a foster home. Intertwined in this, are instances of illegality; whether it is the acceptance of convicted criminals as peers – connected to home – or the tacit condoning of illegal dealings with the public as part of the carnival business – adventure.

Chapter 1.5 : Ballyhoo¹²

“Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While the carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it” (Bakhtin 1984 :7).

At its best, walking around a carnival is a dizzying rush, a total sensory overload: the smells of food, of dirty greasy machines, palatable feel of thick muck or caking dust; the sounds of overworked electric motors and pneumatic brakes, screams of terror, of delight, of 5 chintzy music Blasters; the flashing lights, bright colours, gaudy makeup, stuffed animals, cheap toys and trinkets; and the crush of people, always the people.

Fried onions, hot dogs, hamburgers, mini-doughnuts; ahh can you just taste them? On a nice sunny day, the smells seem to float wherever you are. Inciting you to indulge, like some friendly aunt: *eat, eat, you are only young once -- enjoy yourself*. If only cotton candy could have a smell that matched its neon colouring. Imagine a bright pink wafer aroma wafting down the midway. As it is, the sharp short colours – fuchsia pink and day glow blue – are enough to send every child and every wanna-be child to scurry to the *Floss joint*, eager to have the sugar melt like butter in their mouth. I have come to appreciate my sense of smell as the defining indication that I have arrived on the lot. It is the combination of hamburger onion, French Fries, and motor grease.

If it is raining, then it is the smell of mud, a particular mashed in variety that has been squished between too many tires. It is the smell of trod on wet

¹² “A free show given outside a side show to attract a crowd (a ‘tip’) of potential patrons” [McKennon, 1980 #44;14].

earth that you is going to track into your trailer or truck like a bad day at work. Rain itself can be fun, everyone huddles around food joints and cracks jokes and generally tries to find warmth and company, but the mud... nobody likes the mud. Puddles and mud can actually keep people away from a popular game or ride. As much as they can, carnies will work to keep the aisles and pathways clear, but there is always a certain point when the rain takes over and all one can do is wait to leave the place. The first year I was out, it felt like the rain of the spring run turned into the rain of early summer. "*Does it always rain in Williams Lake?*"; I wrote down after my third trip there. And it is not necessarily any better to be on pavement when it is raining because then it rolls everywhere rather than soaking into the ground. From personal experience, I can assure that it gets just as wet in a tent on pavement as it does on mud. At least on mud, if it stops raining the mud dries up, on pavement if it stops raining everything gets humid. You can never get away from the rain.

Nor, can you get away from the sun. The baking heat is almost as bad. The smell of hot asphalt clinging in the air you breath. Or the dust choking you as you attempt to walk past the lineups to the *Zipper* or the *Gravitron*. The sun cooks you out of your house in the morning, unless you have an air conditioner, and then it chases you all over the lot. Carnival lots do not seem to have many trees. In fact, the lot is as likely to be a parking lot as a dirt patch, and either way the only shade is the shade of your ride or joint. Some of the rides have little canopies that cover the ride operator(s), and all of the joints have awnings that do provide some relief. In the summer of 2002, in Ashcroft, Chase, and Keromeo, Bingo's unit would wait until the late afternoon before opening. One day in

Lilloet, when they did open at noon on a hot day (over 30 degrees Celsius), one of the younger ride operators collapsed from the heat and had to be carried to the Fraser River. The extreme heat is as much a deterrent to carnival patrons as is the rain. When it is sunny and hot, everyone goes to the local swimming hole. The ideal day for an outdoor event is a warm overcast day, with a touch of a breeze.

The sound of the carnival is some extraordinary creature. Whining, screeching, howling motors masked by the ever-present rock and roll, one can only wonder at the relative quiet before cheap ghetto Blasters and 70s rock music transformed the aural environment of the carnival. Over the top of this mish-mash is the intermittent screaming of teenagers on the rides and the endless loop of some particularly inane bit of muzac that accompanies the water racer game – in 1997, it was the macarena, over and over and over again. And then it is the ever present “hey, come here”, “try your luck”, “hey, what’cha do’n?” of the agents working their joints. While the agents do not overtly compete against each other, they will employ every tactic that is at their disposal to attract paying customers. An agent working the machine gun joint will fire off empty guns if the game is slow. This distinctive, machine-gun sound will attract people to the joint. If a child is playing a balloon game, where there is a prize every time, the agent will pop balloons every time a young child throws a dart and loudly count out each successful dart throw. However, the source of most of the noise on any lot is always the generator. Electric motors power most if not all of the rides on the lot, making the generator the backbone and most crucial piece of equipment for the carnival. Some carnival generators have nominal sound dampening, and they

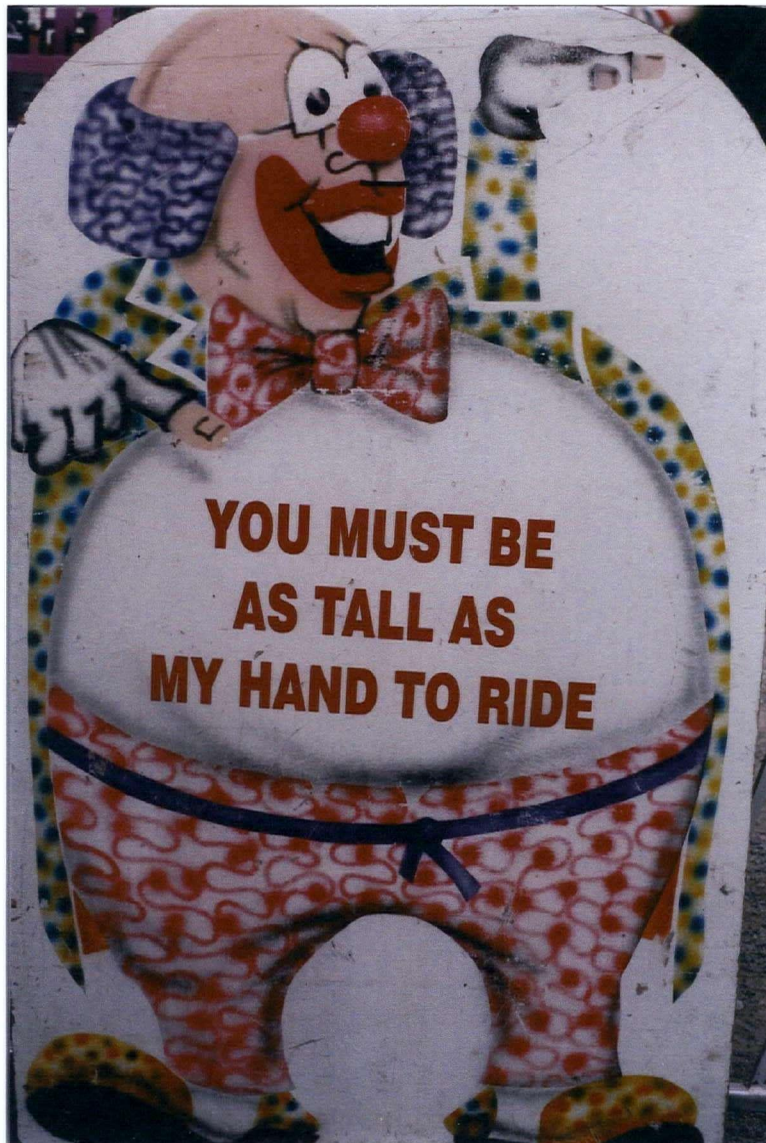
run from half an hour before *lot call* until as much as an hour after the midway shuts down; which can mean that the generator is running for up to seventeen hours in a day. On the other hand, an appeal to the quiet and serene at the carnival (sounds almost oxymoronic) is the *Ferris Wheel*. The Ferris Wheel is the oldest known ride design¹³, yet it continues to be the backbone of any carnival's pantheon of rides. The ride is gentle and smooth, the buckets swaying to and fro as the riders rise above the frantic gyrations below.

¹³ Wooden wheel rides have been documented as early as the 1600s in Bulgaria. The early wheels and rides were often operated by human power. It is not until the late 1800's, after the invention of and adaption of the steam engine that amusement rides began to be mechanised and driven (Starsmore 1975).



Enter the carnival

All photographs by Elia Kirby
1997 – 2002, various carnivals, BC, Canada



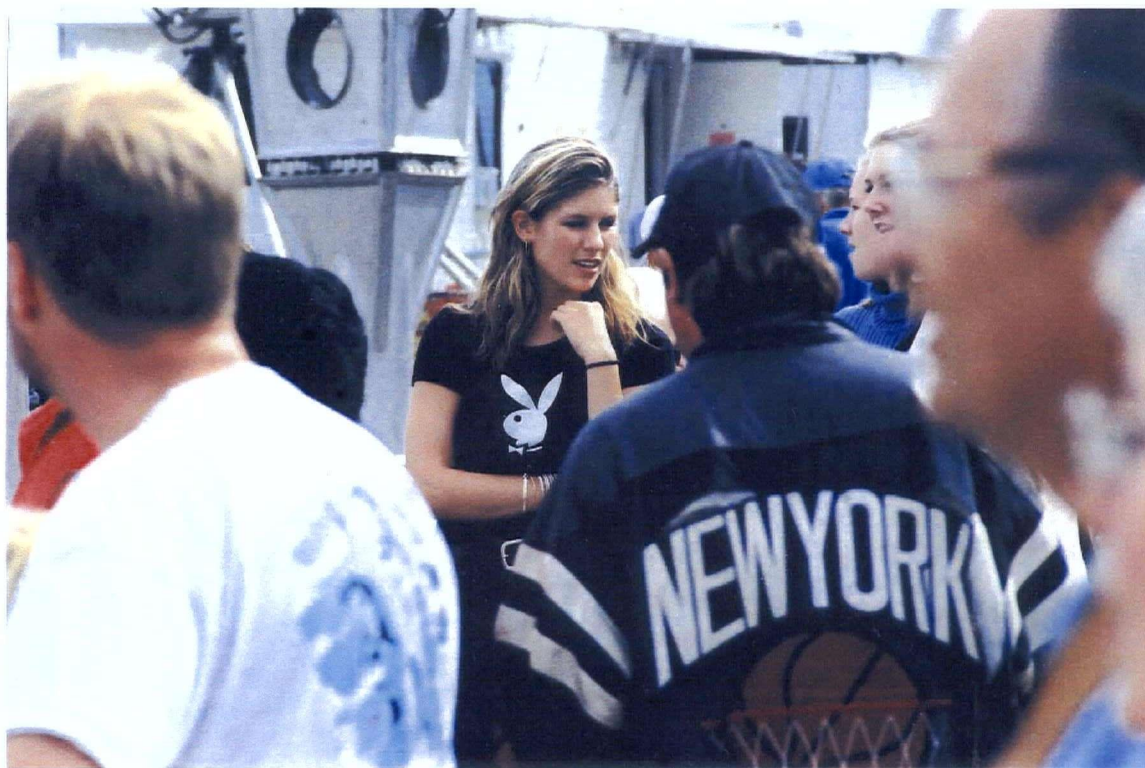
You must be as tall as my hand



On the tilt



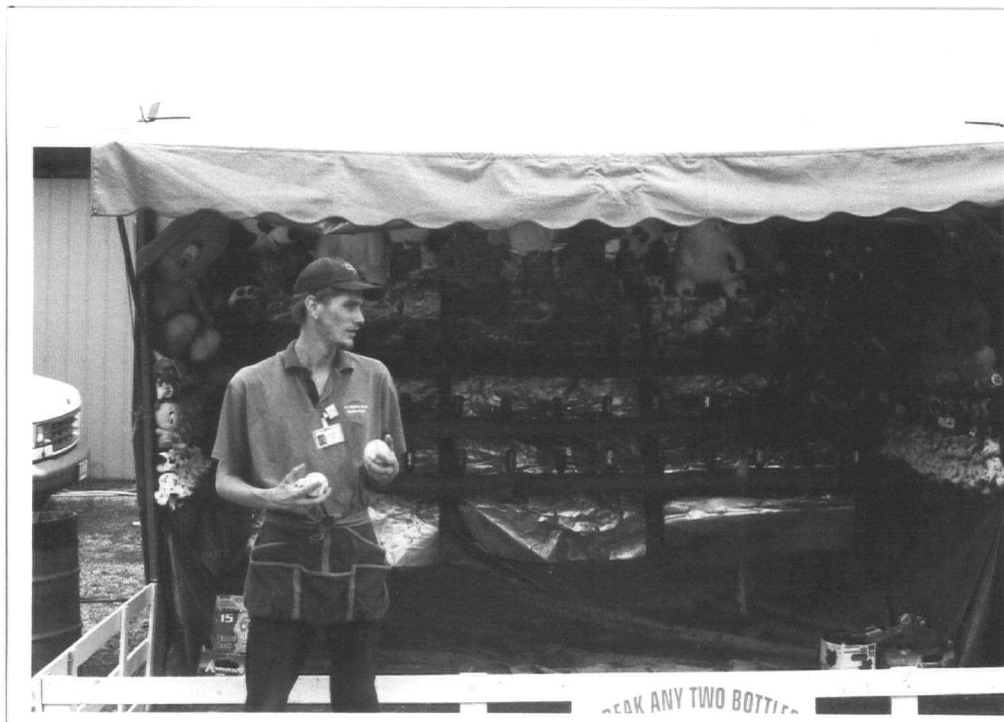
Watching



Bunny



Moss



Brake the bottle



MF Wagner



The tilt



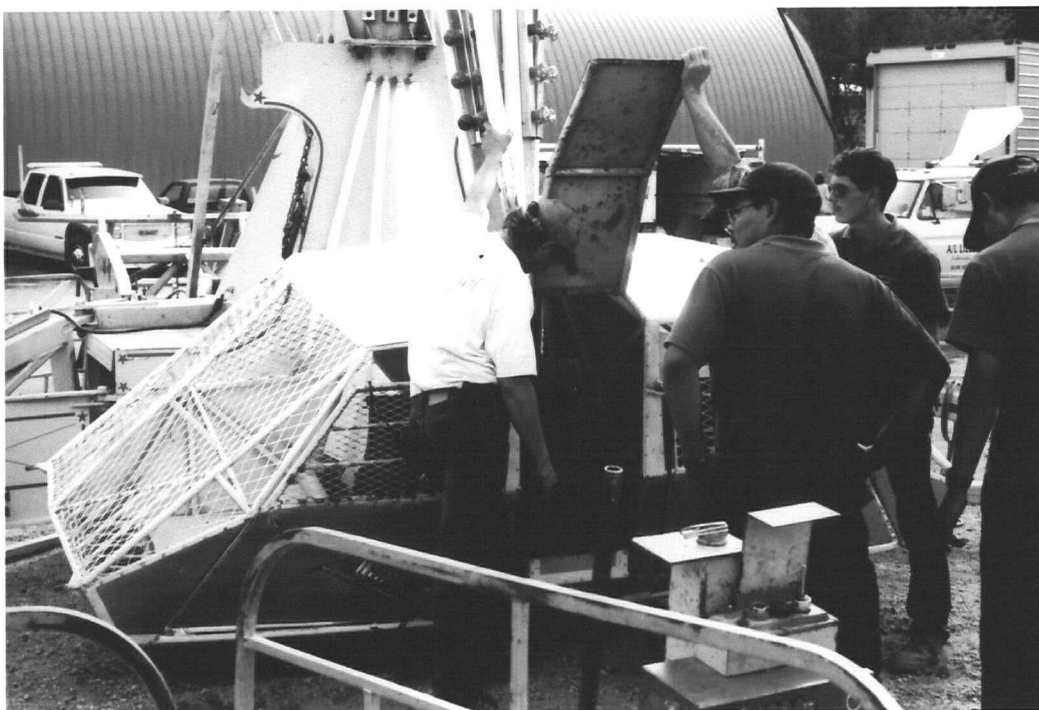
Negotiation at the Water Racer



Bulgey



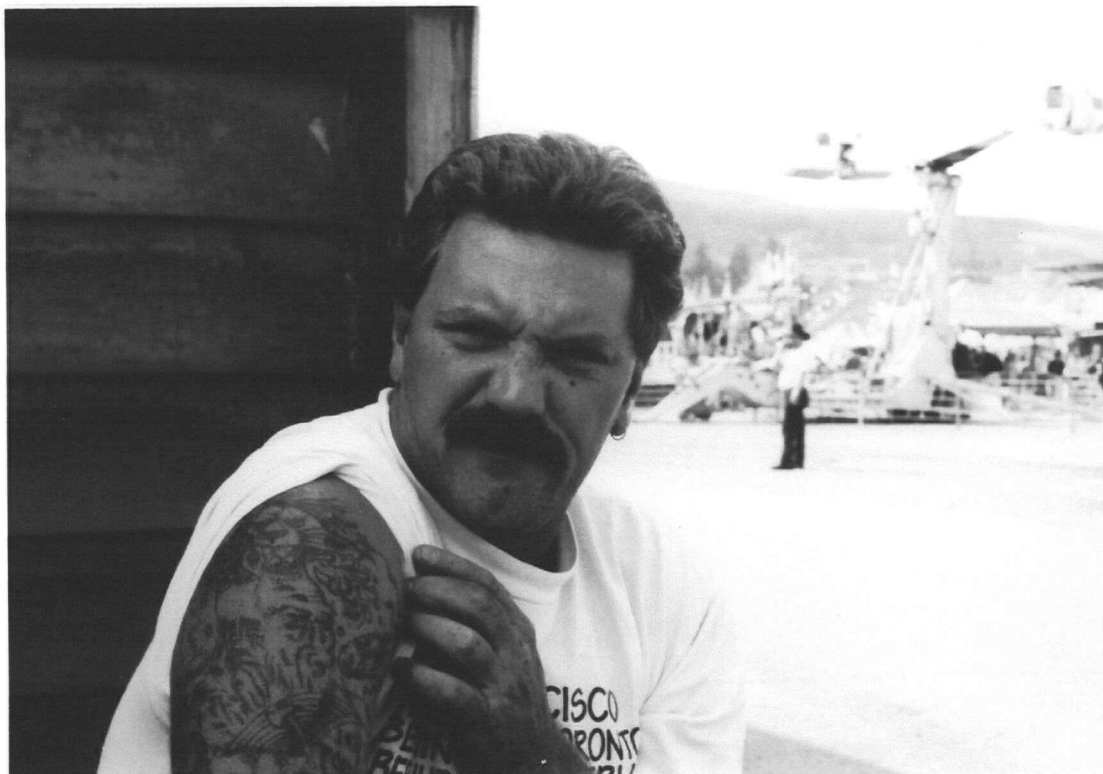
Shorty



Breakdown at the Salt 'n Pepper Shaker



Dan



Rosco



Treena



Waiting at th e Zipper

Chapter 2 : Carnival economics or *cracking the nut*¹⁴

When I first arrived with MF Wagner, I started asking lots of questions. Of course, some of the questions I asked were about the economics of the carnival: how much did people make, how much did it cost to operate, could you make a living doing carnival? At one point, after I had asked what I thought were simple enough questions regarding the basic operating costs of running a joint (such as what is the mark-up on *stuffies* and what is an *agent's* commission), one of our contacts leaned over and told Elisha that I should stop asking such questions if we wanted to stick around. After this initial social *faux pa*, I restricted my questions to the personal histories of the carnies. Later with West Coast, even though I had been granted access to the carnival by the owner¹⁵, it still took time before I began to piece together the details of the carnival's economics.

Carnies tend to frame many of their interactions around money. The *agents* in particular openly discuss their daily cut: they often compare their take with others and quickly develop a hierarchy of earnings, which equals their success as an entertainer and their status in the carnival. Even those on salary¹⁶ discuss their own financial worth. As many people try to cut little side deals with the owner (for driving between *spots* or other odd jobs) they equate financial status with social position. (The office manager of Bingo's unit complained to

¹⁴ A carnival term for breaking even during an event.

¹⁵ The fact that I had Bingo's approval was noted by the other carnies. One man later told me that, at first I would not have been tolerated by the carnies, without this unspoken approval by the boss; and that this boss was respected by the experienced carnies.

¹⁶ The *ride jocks*, ticket sellers, drivers, and the few *agents* working electronic games (such as the *skee ball*, *penny falls*, and the *bowler roller* are on a weekly salary.

me about how the base rate of pay on another unit, which did more travelling, was the same as what she and the lot foreman were paid (\$450 per week.)) This may be part of a culture that has developed out of the proliferation of petty con, wherein the object of the event was to make as much money as possible, while trying to make the *townies* look the fool. The best way of knowing if you had hooked a sucker (*a live one*) was if you had the contents of their wallet. But rather than being divisive, the responsibility and independence that comes with the hustle of making a deal on the carnival creates a sense of *belonging*. Jimmy King, the *jointline manager* (who managed all the *agents*, administered the stock, *stuffies*, and received a 5% cut on the entire *jointline's* gross) for West Coast, discussed the way this thinking permeated carnival life:

Elia: Now here's a question that you may not want to answer

Jimmy King: If I don't want to, I won't.

E: What are the differences between the *alibi joint*, *flat joint* and something else, store..?

J: *Balloon store*, *candy store*? Same shit different pile. [pause] You are working a percentage. The stock costs so much, you get paid so much, the office gets paid so much, it cost so much to get it down the road. Okay. And everything is percentage, including the way that you think. I don't know if you get what I am saying. [smiles, looks away] After a while, you work in a trap [*joint*] for a while, and you own 25% of it, that's the way that you feel. It my *joint*, its my *hole*, its where I live.

On the carnival every transaction is a possible deal, whether it is between the carnies and the public, the carnies and the company, and between themselves.

In this chapter, I will be discussing the nature of the carnival economics: roughly divided into three themes. The first theme is the relationship between the public and the carnival they encounter/interact with during the event. This includes the individual's interaction with the carnival and how this is influenced

by the physical layout of the carnival, which can encourage public spending; the structure of the joints, and the economics that govern the playing of the games. I will then discuss how carnival businesses are run, briefly outline the contracting of an event to a carnival company, and how independent owners work within the carnival structure. Lastly, I will discuss the financial relations between the carnival owners and their empties, and between carnies themselves.

Working the *blow off*¹²:

It is worth remembering that the public experience of the carnival is visceral. It is an environment of extreme stimuli. When the carnival is in full swing, there is almost no other space that comes close to simulating the apparent chaos and disorder that seems to pervade. On one hand, it is simply the sound and spectacle of many people having a lot of fun at the fair with many colourful booths and swinging rides. It is almost a cliché to pronounce that the carnival is structured anarchy. However, dislocation of personal or social order is carefully cultivated by the travelling shows. There is a pragmatic reason for this: the less self-conscious the patrons are the more they will spend. The carnies take care to structure their environment in such a manner that the patrons will engage in temporary bouts of carnivalesque abandon.

The carnival is a study in adaptability: for example, at the Oak Bay Tea Party, in Victoria on Vancouver Island, Bingo Hauser's West Coast's unit #1 is squeezed into a tiny seaside park (see figure one.) Yet, and perhaps because of this, the whole event has a charm and focus that is missing in the larger fairs,

such as Cloverdale Stampede or Williams Lake. Here the *midway*, being the line of games and concessions, is laid out in a horseshoe pattern, with the opening facing the beach and the bandstand that has been set up for the occasion (see figure #1). *Kiddie land*, being the collection of rides designed for young children (ex. *dragon wagon*, the *Berry go-round*, and the *Zamphereli*) is grouped close to the street entrance, leaving the larger rides to the wider playing space inside the park. There are two advantages to this. One is that in order to attract the families in the daytime, the carnival needs to project an image of safe fun. Therefore by putting the easy and safe rides on the outside, families driving by can see that there will be rides for their young children. A further advantage is that, as the young families leave early in the evening, *kiddie land* tends to quiet down earlier. In this lay out, Bingo has created a small barrier between the big rides and the street and nearby houses. As the bigger rides attract a rowdier crowd that stays late, this separates the noise and activity from the local neighbours and the street. The *joints* and concessions are nestled in under the trees. Interspersed at strategic locations are the ticket booths. One local food concession has a permanent building well outside the ring of company joints, close to the bandstand. Lastly, tucked in behind everything are the camper vans, short house trailers, the bunkhouse, and whatever else any particular carny calls their *house*.

¹⁷ A *blow off* is the crowd leaving the big top, or any other big attraction.

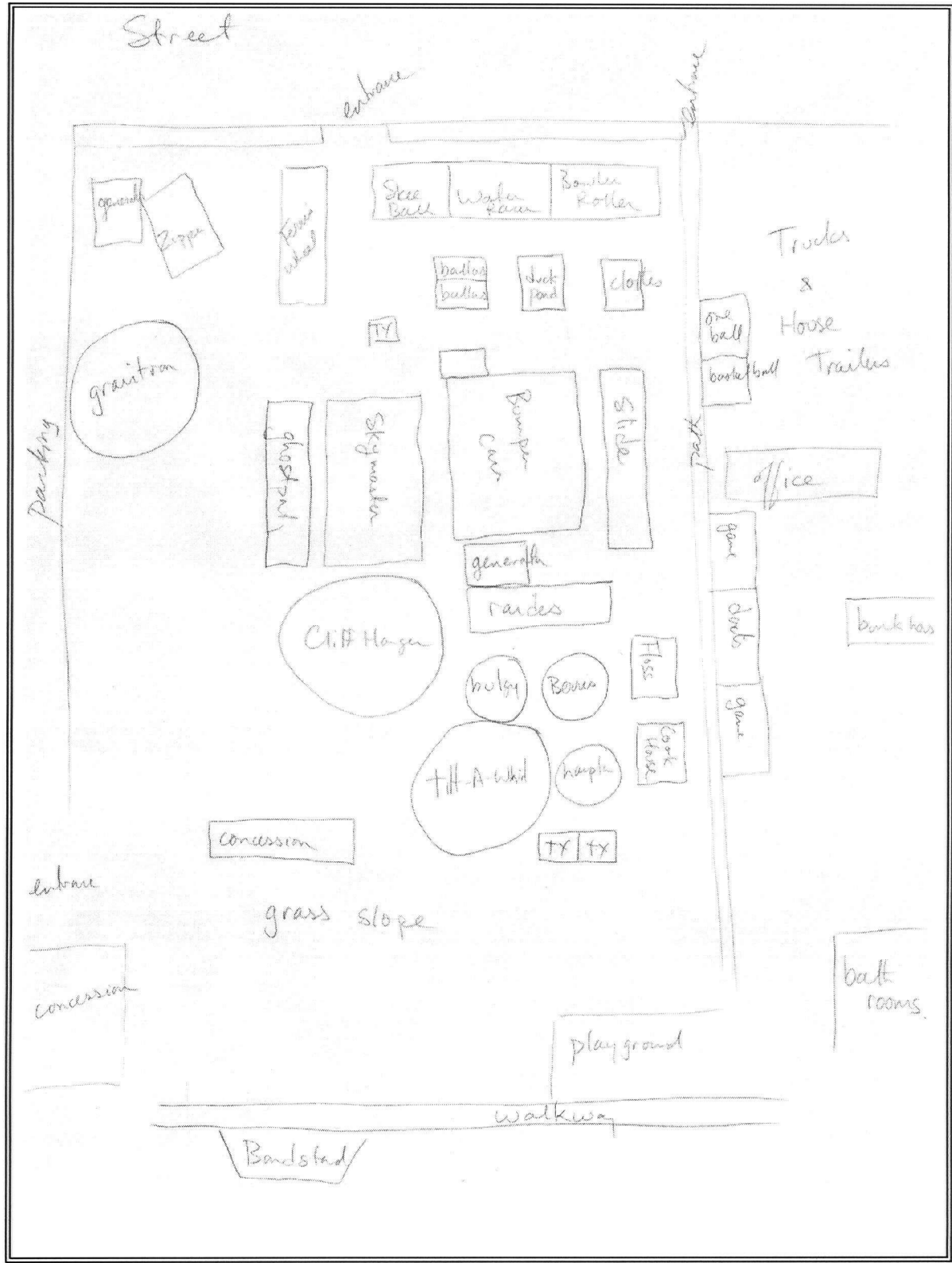


Figure #1: Oak Bay Tea Party lot layout: 2002

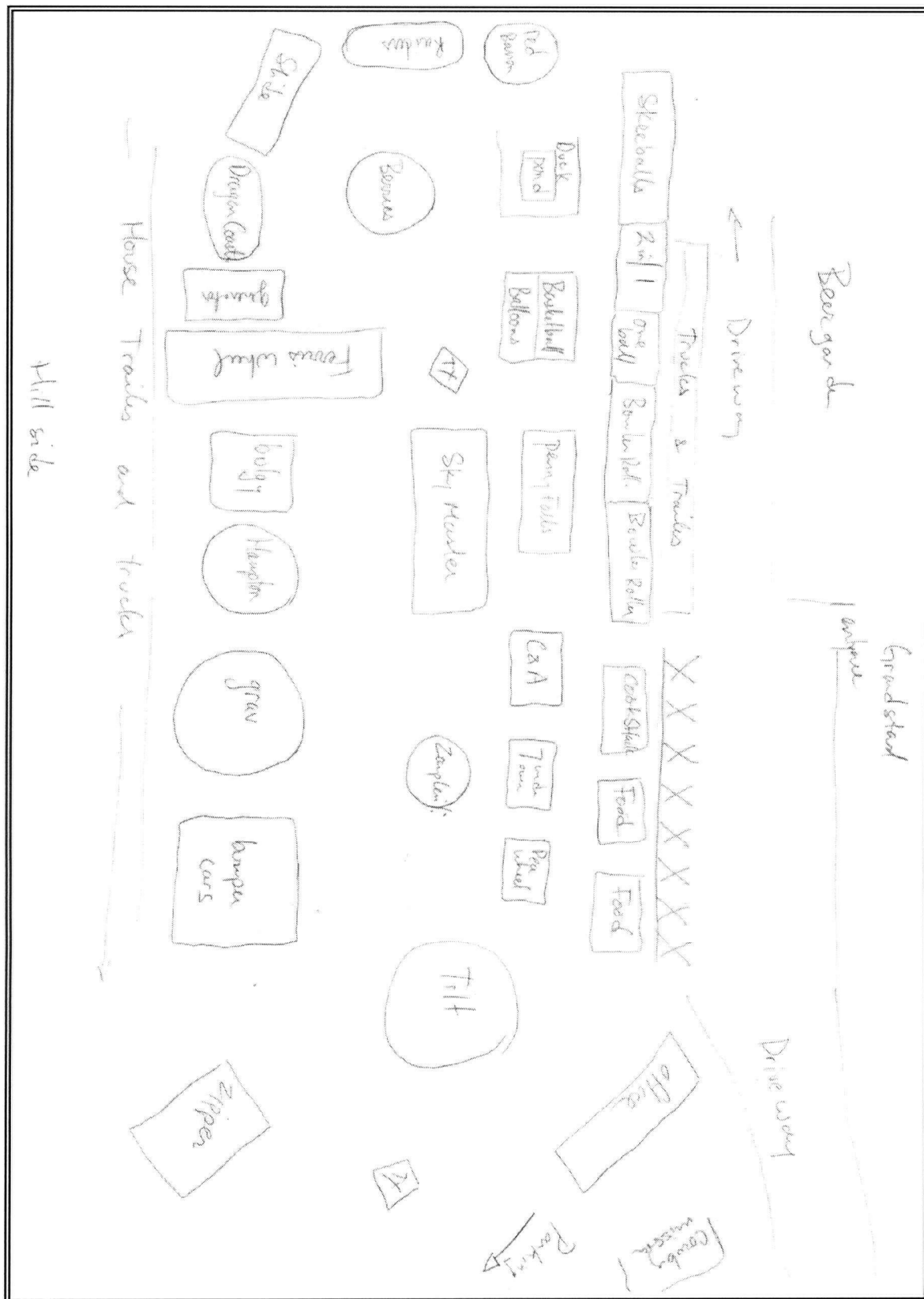


Figure #2 Williams Lake Stampede lot layout: 2002

As Bingo has played most if not all of the towns on his route before, he and the crew have developed a pattern and layout for each site, that they adapt depending upon the rides and games that they have for that year. Often during the actual "*loc'ing*", the conversation would be about the layout of the previous year, during which the experienced crew would remember where their particular piece (joint, concession, or ride) was located. Lately, people started to remember how Ringo would park his *floss joint* on the lot as soon as he drove on site, then everybody on the midway would know their place in relation to his joint: "Well Ringo's here, so I must be there." Bingo, who does not profess to have a particular philosophy in regard to the lay out, nevertheless would pay attention to several variables: flow of people into and around the lot; placement of the major rides in relation to the generator(s); and an attempt to block the noise of the carnival from neighbours by means of the house trailers. Of these considerations, the most important is the flow of people into and around the lot. Creating a good patron flow is important to the success of the midway. If it is possible, the carnival will try to create distinct entry points with specific paths for everyone to follow. Inversely, Jimmy King told me, with a distinct chortle, about one time they were playing a ball diamond with a fence surrounding the whole lot. He said that the carnival was laid out in such a manner that they managed to 'hide' the two small exits, and everyone made several extra laps of the midway before they figured out how to escape. During those extra laps, the carnies were able to work the *mooks* a few more times.

As far as I observed, the midway was positioned so that the avenue would stretch off the dominant entrance to the site. There seems to be two general

patterns: a horseshoe and a straight avenue/boulevard. Of the two, the horseshoe pattern has been specifically developed with the midway in mind. Usually one of the ends of the horseshoe leads off a main entrance. In the middle of the horseshoe are either rides or tents shows if there is space, or if necessary, this is where they might put the house trailers. The intention of both layouts is for a smooth flow of people past all the joints, sometimes called the *front end*, before going to the rides (the *back end*). Generally it is assumed that people do not trust the games and come for the rides. So another consideration is placing the joints in such a manner that the patrons will be forced to walk past them at least twice: coming and going. Anyone familiar with most tourist attractions (e.g., Vancouver's Aquarium or Science World) will notice that it is common for patrons to exit the attraction through the gift shop, where people and their children are bound to browse through the toys and gifts.

There is a traditional hierarchy to the placement of the joints in the horseshoe based upon a simple psychological assessment: as people are thought to be inclined to lead to their right, then the first joint on the right is assumed to have the first crack at getting a crowd (McKennon 1972). With MF Wagner in 1997, the senior and most respected *agent* was given a prime spot just in front of the main entrance. I asked Bingo, a *ride jock*, what he thought of this, and he shrugged. As an owner he was more concerned that people could move. I asked one of the younger *agents*, and he said he liked to be beside a *floss joint* or a concession, as people were always hungry or wanted a candyfloss. Another time late in the season, two of West Coast's units were playing the same event and there were two *joints* of the same game: both machine gun games. The two

agents were trying to figure out how much the other joint would affect their own take. Considerable discussion and self-analysis went into the relative impact of the cosmetics of each joint, the size (one was larger) and the experience of the agent. In the end, it was decided that the placement had the primary influence on the weekend's take. (The larger joint was placed closer to the entrance and did considerably better¹⁸.)

Another time that I observed the placement of a *joint* influencing business was at the Kelowna Regatta. Shorty's joint, a double-sided balloon joint, was placed with his side facing away from the midway toward the rides. This was a common placement. However in this instance, a low concrete parking barrier was about 5 feet in front of the joint. Between being away from the flow of the crowd down the midway, and having the concrete barrier, his first day's take was very low. The following day, after they shifted the *joint*, he went from grossing \$700.00 to \$1475.00 (of which his take is 25%).

On another occasion in Williams Lake, the local fair board decided to put a small parking area for their staff, with a small concrete parking barrier and 40 feet separating the midway from the entrance into the Stampede bleachers (see figure #2 – the concrete barrier is marked by the 'xxx's' on the right side).

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that this minor conflict reflected the larger transition of power from the *old school* (of Bingo) to the *new school* (represented in a real way by his son and grandson.) At one point in the comparison of the two machine gun joints, the *agent* working with Bingo reflected that as Bingo was the owner of both units, he made the same money regardless of which *joint* did well. (At the end of the fair, the *agents* compared their respective takes, and concluded that their combined take was approximately the same as it had been the previous year when there had been one *machine gun joint*, operated by the older *agent*.) In this particular instance, Bingo's grandson, who was the *jointline manager* for unit 3, laid out the combined *midway* and determined which joint went where. It was decided that Jimmy King, the *jointline manger* for unit 1, did not have the influence or clout to demand a better placement for this *joint*, even though it was one of the top earning *joints* in Bingo unit and this *agent* had a lot more experience and respect than the other *agent*.

Traditionally, the carnival played just of the entrance, where the majority of the patrons would park further away and walk through the midway to reach the Stampede. Without this direct route through the midway, the Stampede patrons simply passed by the midway without being enticed to play or spend money. This became painfully obvious one slow night when, after the Stampede finished, the carnies watched the exiting crowd, the *blow off*, walk away with out even glancing at the games, rides or concessions which had stayed open for them.

I suspect that one of the reasons the carnies have a remarkably pejorative attitude towards the locals and the patrons (common carny terms are: *mooch*, *sucker*), is that they have become practised at shaping and controlling the flow of crowds through space. Being on the working side of a carnival is an excellent place to observe and in some ways influence the movement and behaviour of large crowds. They have come to recognise and control the factors that will influence the crowds: placement of the game or ride within the midway, the *flash* and cosmetics of the ride, and the experience of the *agent* working/entertaining the crowd, the weather, and the architecture/landscaping of the lot. All of these factors and their influence upon a crowd are relatively predictable. By extension crowd itself begins to be seen as predictable. After spending time with the carnivals, my own sight became influenced by this mild but constant viewing of the patrons as a crowd. When walking through the midway, I began to notice how I would spot the carnies, but gloss over the patrons; they ceased to be individuals and became volume.

Dealings with the Establishment

Bingo seems to have eyes in the back of his head. I noticed this trying to film him for the documentary. Every time we tried to catch him interacting the other carnies or the public, he would spot us, and quickly put somebody or something between the camera and himself. It was not just the camera that he avoided. He was just as adept at avoiding public regulators or any other public situation that would require him to acknowledge that he was the owner and president of West Coast Amusements. I was standing on the side of the lot with him once-- he was *loc'ing* the rides and there was a lot of work to do-- when a man walked up and inquired about the possibility of a job with the carnival. Bingo pretended that he did not know and urged the fellow to talk to the lot foreman or the office manager. Another time, a zealous Workman's Compensation Board official came to evaluate safety on the job site, as part of a new code of standards and regulations that are being enforced in the workplace. Privately, while discussing the infractions with the lot foreman and the office manager, Bingo and Bob almost worked themselves to the point violence. However, when it came time to deal with the official, both of them hid in their trailers and left it to others to untangle the rules. At first I thought it was simple tact and a self-awareness that they were too emotional to efficiently deal with the situation. However, I suspect that there is a broader intention to this behaviour.

In 2000, a human rights complaint was filed against Bert Dalglish, "a sub-contractor" and West Coast Amusements (sbhlawyers.com 2000). In the BC Human Rights Tribunal, the complainant, who was 6'1" and 350lbs, applied

for a job over the telephone, at which time he indicated his physical stature.

Upon arriving at the lot, he was informed that he was "too big and too heavy" for the carnival's "fast-paced life-style" and that there were no uniforms available for him.

"The tribunal held that Dalglish discriminated against the Complainant because of a perceived physical disability, as there was no evidence presented to establish a bona fide occupational requirement, and no evidence that Dalglish could accommodate the Complainant... As Dalglish were [sic] subcontractors to West Coast Amusements Ltd., West Coast Amusements were not liable for their discriminatory conduct [sbhlawyers.com, 2000:12 #59]."

While, 350 lbs. is on the large side, a simple observation of the carnies would confirm that they do not have a particular policy against hiring overweight people. I suspect that there was more to the story than is reported. The particulars of the case are not as interesting as the observation that Dalglish, whom I know to have had a long standing association with West Coast Amusements as an independent operator, was legally at arms length from West Coast. This hands off approach to the hiring and firing of people, seems to be efficient in separating the company from potential legal repercussions that might occur, as demonstrated in this instance.

Generally there was resentment against regulations, which the carnies felt were designed for other businesses and equipment. They would often cite practice and experience as adequate tests of safety, whether this was for equipment or people. In particular, the Workers Compensation Board (WB C) has earned a bitter reputation with the carnies¹⁹. Part of the enmity towards

¹⁹ And to some extent, WCB has angered other government ministry inspectors, specifically electrical inspectors who felt that WCB was crossing jurisdictional boundaries. During one electrical inspection, when I was passing as a West Coast Employee, I heard an earful from the

WCB stems from the fact that in 1998, the BC Government (the social democratic New Democrat Party were in power at the time) passed into law the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation. This allowed WCB inspectors new and expanded powers of inspection and regulation of infractions. However, although the WCB launched a province wide campaign to publicise and inform the public about work place safety, it would appear that the carnies are reluctant to adopt, or perhaps pay for, the new changes to their work place. Part of this is not the companies' fault. Bobby Hawser, Bingo's son, is a member of the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) committee (Z267), which covers the amusement ride industry. They have adopted internal safety inspectors and they do enforce safety standards (hard hats, steel toe boots, and appropriate protection when necessary), but high employee turnover and established work practices make it hard to ensure continued adherence of new rules.

It is also hard not to shake the impression that a carnival is an easy site to inspect and find fault. One of the infractions that was cited by the inspector in Westbank, where I was able to observe an inspection, was that the workers washing the trucks did not have adequate sun protection. This involved a case of several fellows hosing down a truck with no shirts on. Incidents like this, and later, at a Department of Motor Vehicle weigh scale, when Bob Holt's trailer was pulled over for not having a working emergency brake, fuelled the carnies' speculation that they were all too often targets of government regulations. As

inspector about his relations with the new WCB inspectors and regulations. I had the distinct impression that our shared commiseration enabled the inspector to gloss over several infractions on West Coast's part.

Bob Holt said; "I guess they have too earn their quota some how." Or Jimmy King:

You've been around us for a few months now. You know that we can do pretty well what we want, within reason. Absolutely nothing we have out here is illegal, and absolutely nothing out here disrespects that in anyway. You can't tell them that. Ohhh you are a rip-off! A rip-off is when you take money away from someone and they have no choice, they have to give it you. I think the government qualifies, but I don't see as how we do. Now you are okay with that, [motions as if taking money from someone in exchange for a *stuffie*] okay now here you go, and give me the money. GST is a rip-off!"

"Everything is a percentage"

The carnival is first and foremost a cash economy. A busy day at the carnival results in many one-gallon buckets and large coffee tins of coins shuttling back and forth through the lot. The office staff keeps five-gallon pails on hand to store quarters, loonies, and toonies (one and two dollar coins). The *agents* working the games will often cash out thousands of dollars at the end of a good day (although just as many will also sit at a joint and not make enough to cover their own food expenses.) Several times, after certain employees left halfway through the season, rumours started to circulate about their nimble fingers. However, such a cash economy has its advantages for the owners as well. Aside from the ride tickets, there is no record of the strictly cash transactions that are made during the day.

By and large, the whole of the carnival economy, from the sandwiches and pop for sale at lunch time to the straight dealings with the local officials, is based upon a "point" system. The traditional mode of operation for a carnival operation

was that one company would hold the contract to play a fair or event. This company would pay a flat fee or percentage to the fair board or event producers. Usually, the carnival company would guarantee to provide a rides, games, and concessions in exchange for a set amount of space. They might negotiate how much publicity each would be responsible for, and whether there is an entrance fee for the site. The event might request a set number of “bracelet” days (when during certain number of hours, you can ride as often as you want for a flat fee.) Depending upon the size of the event, the carnival companies are paying between five thousand to ten thousand dollars to the event company. As the success of a carnival event can be influenced by landscaped architecture or other factors, such as the location of parking and the main gates (or the concrete parking barriers as at in Williams Lake), the negotiation over this set space is quite critical. Within a given fair, Bingo has a contract for a set amount of space, within which he has the license to set up his own equipment or sub-lease to independent operators or concessions. As an example of how important the negotiated space is for the events; the second year I visited Oak Bay, one ride had to be moved back 15 feet, as the local producer felt that it would infringe upon the crowd space of the people watching the bandstand. Another time, I talked to the owner of an independent coffee stand that had sub-leased space from West Coast. In this fair, Aldergrove, all the independent food stands were in one localised area. As this concessionaire was on West Coast space, where there were no other concessions, she was doing much better business than if she had been placed in the food area. For this privilege, she was paying a fee to West Coast.

The historic carnival tended to sub-contract to many independent operators: ride owners, food and merchandise concessionaires, game (*joint*) operators, and, historically, with tent shows (Freaks, geeks, girly shows, pickled punks, and others). These independent operators would negotiate a fee or percentage (*points*) of their gross take in exchange for a spot on the midway. In exchange, the carnival would provide the spot to play during the event, and access to facilities and infrastructure (electricity, water, bathrooms, etc). West Coast still operates this way albeit, as there are fewer independent operators in the carnival business, West Coast has started to provide its own concessions and games. Even Bingo's children and grandchildren all own equipment and operate their equipment under West Coast's banner; as such they pay a percentage of their take to Bingo. The point system, where everyone from the boss on down is out for their own take, has reverberations through the whole community. Certainly it generates a certain amount of grumbling: the carnies working with Bingo on his unit #1 would grumble that when unit #2 and #1 played the same spots, Robbie Hauser, who had started to manage the *jointline* for unit #2 and owned his own joints in this string, would place his and the *joints* of unit #2 in better spots over those of unit #1's, thus ensuring that his percentage would be better. But at the same time, this point system is an expected and acceptable fact of carny life. For example, Jimmy King, the manager of the *joint line*, sells sandwiches and pop to his employees on set up day. On MF Wagner, their lot foreman told me how he made more money with his generator selling electricity to individual operators and MF Wagner, than he did from his salary. In both of these situations, I would have expected the company to provide these amenities

to their employees (if that is required to help them do their job) or to the carnival as a whole (clearly it would have been cheaper for Wagner and the others to rent a generator as a group rather than as individuals.) As another instance of the expectation that individual entrepreneurship should be turned onto the carnies themselves, several carnies urged Elisha and I to sell copies of the documentary that we were making back to the carnies themselves! Where I saw misguided opportunism, they simply saw an acceptable opportunity to make some money. Within the context of the carnival, it would never have crossed their minds to assume that Elisha and I were indebted to them for their participation in the film. Their expectation was that we would sell it for more than the hard 'costs'.

Employee relations

West Coast's salaries vary depending upon the previous work experience of the individual carny, on their responsibilities, and the unit with which they are travelling. Bobby, with unit#2, pays more (a base weekly? salary of \$450.00) but they travel further and can even play two spots a week. Bingo's unit plays one spot a week and has a lot more time off. His salaries start at \$350 a week for the *ride jock*, the drivers, the maintenance people, and the food concession workers. An average week would involve 6 to 8 hours of travel, 6 to 8 hours of set up (depending upon the ride), 3 to 4 hours for any maintenance required, and responsibility to operate the ride or work the concession from 10AM to 12 or 1AM, with a one hour break every two hours (i.e., an average of 8 or 9 hours

worked each day for 3 days). Then they would immediately strike after the last night (this usually takes 4 to 6 hours). People then often immediately start to drive to the next spot once their truck or vehicle is loaded. Generally, this translates to a maximum work week of about 44 or 50 hours a week for unit #1. Given the wages and hours, this works out to 7 to 8\$ per/hour, slightly less than BC minimum wage.(Although there is variability: many of the carnies get away with 35 to 40 hours a week and hence make from \$8.75 to \$10 per/hour, which), while others work 50 to 60 hours a week doing maintenance and other odd jobs.) I do not know the comparable hours for the other units, although they reportably require longer hours of work. Some carnies are able to negotiate a slightly higher salary depending upon the responsibilities that they are willing to assume. Each ride or concession has a foreman, which pays \$10 to \$20 more per week. Drivers also receive a slight increase depending the number of trips they are expected to make and their type of license: a class #1 with air will make more than a class #3 or #5 license. The highest salaries on the lot are given to the lot-foreman and office manager, who are paid \$450 on Bingo's unit. The agents working the \$0.25 electronic games (*Skee Balls*, *Roller Bowler*, and the *Penny Falls*) are on salary, \$350.00 per week. All the other agents are paid a 25% commission on their daily take²⁰. The work week for these people is usually a lot shorter, an average of 30 – 35 hours a week, and they are not expected to participate in the general maintenance of equipment beyond their own *joints*. The joint managers also receive a commission off of the *midway's* take, in the neighbourhood of 5%

²⁰ Comparitively, Conklin Shows pays their *agents* a 10 to 15% commission, depending upon the skill and negotiating skill of the *agent*, but most *agents* will still make more money because

of the gross. It is generally understood that a good jointliner will gross more money over a season than the salaried employees, however most of the money is made in 4 or 5 spots. The basic money management needed to survive over the season often means that the younger carnies choose the dependable position of the salaried position. A salary also qualifies one for Employment Insurance (EI) at the end of the season. Some jointliners will take on added responsibilities, driving or managing the stock/prizes, so as to receive a small stipend (\$100 to \$150 per week) enabling them to qualify for EI over the winter. People worked other benefits if they could. One young family was touring with unit #1: they had met on the carnival, had a baby and then came back for the season with their son, now two years old. The husband was working on a ride, and they were living in a camper van. Normally carnies have to pay for their own gas and transportation if they bring their own vehicle. However, he would drive a company pick-up truck in exchange for personal gas money and ferry expenses. He was quite proud of this arrangement, and was working very hard to maintain his good relation with Bingo.

At the end of the year, each carny, if they had managed to stick it out to the end, is given a bonus. I couldn't help but think of these bonuses as the proverbial carrots on a stick. The year-end bonus was a common topic of conversation whenever salaries were raised. I was a little surprised to hear that in most cases they rarely totalled more than half a week's salary. Some employees, often

Conlkin's events are bigger with better attendance (such as the Florida State Fair and the Calgary Stampede.)

because of enormous effort, did receive larger salaries: the driving coordinator was expecting a bonus of \$800.00

I grew suspicious of how bonuses are calculated when I heard how when the two units were playing the same spot, the ticket sales from the combined sales was being accounted by the office of unit #3. The office manager of unit #1 was worried that this would affect her year end tally and limit her ability to pay out the bonuses. She was confused by this accounting procedure and commented that these seeming irregularities occurred at the whim of the owner. On one hand, I had the impression that Bingo, after a lifetime on the carnival, habitually changed his policies and financial dealings because he did not trust people. On several occasions I was told that Bingo had abruptly changed how the financial accounting was handled and by whom so as to get a better idea of the companies finances. However, there was also the insinuation that Bingo also did this to intentionally reduce his unit's apparent gross so as to justify smaller bonuses.

Whether true or not, what this underlines is that carnival bonuses are dependent upon the largess of the owner or boss. Most of the owners or bosses in the carnivals were quick to anger²¹. It is common speculation that at the end of the season, the owners will begin to fire people to avoid paying out bonuses. This spate of firing will begin a couple of weeks prior to the actual last spot. I suspect what prompts this rumour is that all carnival owners are known to be stingy with

²¹ A couple of times I was caught by surprise as I watched what I thought was a minor quibble turn into a firing situation. In the middle of the season, I observed one owner almost short change himself of knowledgeable employees when he ordered one of the Ferris *Wheel men* off the lot after a shouting match. With the Ferris Wheel man went his new girlfriend, who had been working the *dozers* or *penny pushers* game all summer. Shortly after their departure, rumours started about how she had been short-changing the owner -- something that would be very easy for anyone to do in what is essentially a cash economy.

their money, and that often the reasons for the firing are or have been common enough behaviors throughout the season(s). This makes people wonder why the firing occurs when it does. One of the reasons that the rumours circulate is that the firing in West Coast Amusements is done by one particular lot foreman, who is known to be a hard and violent man with a drug and alcohol problem. It is said that Bingo tolerates him because he is responsible for ensuring the regular operation of the unit Bingo's wife, Jackie, manages²². At the end of the season, unit #1 and #3 play two spots together, during which time, the lot foreman will reputedly fire anyone who disobeys him, but mostly people from unit #1.

In defence of the owners, the two instances where I personally witnessed people being fired involved legitimate reasons, and one was dubious. The first instance was when a *ride jockey* was working a ride smelling of alcohol, or possibly still drunk. The employee was warned, and the following morning, when he was in a similar state, he was fired. In the dubious situation, three carnies were working to unhitch a semi-trailer from a truck. Their boss told them to do it in a manner which they felt was unsafe, of which they informed him. After they carried out his plan, their concerns were proven correct, and although no one was hurt, one of the trucks was damaged. Angry that the truck was damaged and angry at the workers for not being able to execute his plan successfully, the boss reprimanded the three employees. The following morning, the youngest of the three was upset at being blamed for something he did not feel to be his fault, and decided to confront his boss. He was promptly fired. In the third situation, late one night

²² There is probably reason to speculate that there is a perceived need to ensure that there is a strong masculine presence to maintain order amongst the carnies.

two employees decided to drive for more booze while very drunk. They drove off in the service truck (the keys to carnival vehicles are always left in the vehicle). Before they reached the road, one decided that he was too drunk, got out of the vehicle and passed out on a nearby park bench. The other man drove into town and was stopped by the police, who impounded the truck and charged him with impaired driving and driving without a license. The following morning, the second fellow lost his job, and the first fellow lost his bonus.

It was hard to understand what was going on here. On the one hand, employers are entitled to reprimand employees for irresponsible behavior; on the other hand, there seemed to be enough circumstantial evidence to suggest that the owners would use various means to avoid paying year-end bonuses. I suspect that, at the very least, when two companies did play the same spots at the end of the season, there was a surplus of labour, and there was no longer any economic incentive to tolerate behaviour that they had tolerated all summer when it was difficult to find experienced carnies on tour. Everyone acknowledged that, whoever was fired, they were more than likely to be hired back the following spring. One informal estimate, by a carny who had worked with two different companies over 12 years: was that about 75% of the workforce were people who had been working with carnivals before. The companies relied upon experienced workers to run their equipment. Pat commented that it was getting harder for the companies to maintain their experienced labour as the older managers were getting to old or sick to tour and that, for various reasons (including the relatively smaller carnival salaries compared to other industries, and that younger people were not as interested in travelling with the carnivals as they once were) it was

getting harder to find people willing to travel. Which suggests that the year end bonuses were an important part of the employer's attempt to maintain quality people. In this way, the social and financial stakes for everyone were quite high and important to maintain.

By way of concluding, I want to briefly return to the larger scale of the carnival operations and consider some of the pressures that threaten the carnival business. There are times when the carnival company sets up on their own rather than participating in a larger attraction. In such cases, the carnival rents a space (for instance, an empty city lot or mall parking lot) and pays a small fee for water and parking privileges. Compared to the larger events, where there is a public event at which the carnival is playing (e.g., Williams Lake Stampede; Oak Bay Tea Party'; Saanichton Fall Fair), the carnival on its own tends to show its age and the taudry nature of carnival as entertainment: in essence there is little celebration to the event. As an observer, these events are the ones that troubled me the most. I felt my own nostalgia for the fall fairs that I attended as a kid, where games and rides mingled with abundant agricultural bounty, where the excitement of starting school after the summer holidays was found in seeing your friends at the *Zipper* or the *Sky Diver*. As such, my first reaction was to assume that this sad sight was an indication that the carnival was on a slow decline.

Feeling thus, I was a bit shocked to hear Pat, Bingo's office manager and a former carnival owner herself, ruminate that it is the absence of such events that might signal the potential decline of carnival. As malls start to sell off or develop their large parking lots, it is getting harder and harder for the carnivals to find spots in between the big events.

Elia: What do you think is the future of carnival?

Pat: Well, I think the shopping centres are going to die out, they're dying out now. When I started, when I had my own [carnival], the shopping centres... it was a big deal for us to come on. But now when they have dead parking, they are selling it to a restaurant or selling it to a gas station or a bank, and they are chopping up their lots. So now carnivals don't.... eventually that's going to be out, the carnivals won't have a place to go. Already they are getting fewer and fewer every year, they built that cineplex on Guildford. We used to go in there every year, but we can't be on that lot. I think that in a few years we won't be able to play the malls anymore. [...] A lot of these towns are developing really big. Like Castlegar, nice town, now there's no location. The town has built up so there's no place to put a carnival. And some of these towns don't think about carnivals or circuses or anything they don't allow the space for, and they don't allow you on parks or ball diamonds fields. Years ago they did, but they don't now because the grass is too expensive to look after. So its getting harder and harder to find locations. And if anything kills the carnival business, it will be that there is no place to play. There are just no locations. It might take another 20 or 30 years before that actually happens.

This is a reminder that the carnival is a business first, before it is a public celebration. Before it is community event, it is an industry or "big business" (as Pat says). There are indications that part of this shift (towards big business) reflects larger concerns: at one point, Bingo was interested in playing in Coquitlam, just off of Highway #1, west of the Port Mann Bridge, in the industrial park that exists between the Lougheed Highway and the Freeway. The city officials denied access, claiming that the carnival would be a dangerous distraction (hence liability) for drivers. Bingo was flabbergasted and wondered how the carnival could anymore of a distraction than the gaudy medieval castle design that was a façade of the Castle Bargain Shop, located almost in the same spot as where he wanted to play.

On a more pragmatic note, Pat also suggested that the general operating costs of the carnival were more likely to undermine its ability to continue. She says that the costs of insuring the operation (vehicle and business insurance)

have increased 500 percent in the 20 years. Knowing that each ride costs between one hundred thousand to even a million dollars to purchase new, that to get each ride down the road will require at least one semi truck, and to store all these rides in the winter time Bingo needs large barns and parking spaces; it is tempting to look around the lot and estimate Bingo's gross worth (over several million, I suspect.) However, given the fickle nature of the business (the reliance upon weather, an unreliable work force, and increasing competition for the public's entertainment dollar) it is wonder that the carnival succeeds.

However, it at once a business and a cultural entity, that has become a part of many communities annual festivities. In Lilloet, where the carnival self-produces, and, with the small population size of the town, just manages to break even, Bingo decided to shift his dates slightly to accommodate a better event. The owner of the campground where the carnival plays commented that many people were worried that they wouldn't show up at all after they did not appear at the regular time. It would appear that there are many conflicted expectations that are placed upon the carnival, and that in order to survive, it will have to walk a fine line between business and tradition. I suspect that many of the people who work in or for carnivals have an intuitive sense that their jobs are about providing more than entertainment: a simple answer was the most common – "fun".

Chapter 2.5 : Pig Iron²³

"The life of the nomad is the intermezzo" [Deleuze, 1987 [1980]: 380].

As the night wears thin, when the *mooches* pockets are lighter and only a few teenagers are waiting in line for the *Zipper*, the call will go down the midway to close up for the night. Or, if it is a *teardown* night, people will start as quickly as they can to pull the *stuffies* down, push them into big bags and toss them into the *stock van*. Then the vinyl sides and banners come off, the joint sticks and stakes are pulled and quickly, quickly the midway is becoming a thing of the past. Everything is piled into the trucks and the *joint-liners* gathers at the office to cash out.

Like prehistoric dinosaurs, the rides are torn down. With a great clanging and swearing, fingers narrowly missed by heavy *sweeps* and *buckets*, and with a lot of smeared dirt and black grease, the *ride jocks* fight with the *pig iron* lit by the pulsing, flickering light of the ride itself. Slowly folding up from their great height and bulk, it doesn't appear possible that they will fit into the compact space of a semi-trailer that will cart them away and into the night.

Then, in the quiet early morning as the *townies* lie sleeping, the trucks head out. Slowly, each truck seemingly on its own mission with driver and passengers wheeling slowly onto the road and down the black top. As the miles pass by, the road blending into another, province by province the carnival makes

²³ A circus and carnival term for the rides that is still in use today. Derived from the crude iron used in the manufacture of the rides (McKennon 1980 ; Pearsall 1996).

it way from *spot* to *spot*. Driving into Cache Creek, from Williams Lake to Westbank, near Kelowna, we run into two other carnies at the Husky Truck Stop. Coming up the grade on Highway #1 into Kamloops, we hear the trucks gear down as they merge on the #5. I watched them pass through the weigh scale outside of Keremeos, south of Kamloops. And winding through Enderby on Highway #97, we stop at a friend's house for a quick shower before heading further south into the Okanagan Valley.

Driving between Williams Lake and Lillooet, the drivers have to double back, some making three 8-hour round trips in less than 30 hours. Arriving at 3AM in the morning, five of us jump into a small car to ferry the drivers back for the trucks left behind. We arrive only to depart, each driver to his own vehicle and the road ahead. Half back again the fatigue catches up to me, I find shade under a tree at a highway rest stop and stretch out to catch an hour of sleep. Later, I marvel at the Fraser Canyon, the magnificent drop-off barely outside the span of the road and I shudder at how in the dark of the night we blithely whistled past oblivious to the danger of a missed step.

Driving, sleeping, eating, driving, driving more, and not sleeping, the carnival winds its way across the country. Every driver I know has some trick to keep themselves awake as the hours drag by. Roll the windows down, the radio up as loud as it can go, try to squeeze the wheel, sing, coffee, anything to keep you awake. If that doesn't work, somebody found a year's supply of diet pills, and the home-made bennies will keep everyone awake.

"Just look for carnival equipment" Bob said, "just head." Finding the carnival is surprisingly easy. Look for the trucks. There is a good chance that it

will be visible from the highway or main road; a big space with accessible parking, the fair grounds, an arena parking lot, an empty city lot, a park, or a mall. Just look for the equipment, and the house trailers, and a few tents, and some ratty old cars. Upon arrival, everyone gathers together as though the few hours separated by travel had been a great adventure. They compare travel times; how was the drive? Where did you eat? Did you get a shower? Then they start to investigate the town. Anybody been here before? Where are we? Is there a laundry mat? Pub? Store close by? Is the boss in yet? Where are we again? Where is your house?

The houses are established, the barbecues unpacked, the camping chairs come out, the patio furniture set up, the pets tied up, and – voilà – home again. There is usually the rest of the day, and the night to explore, relax before lot call at 9 or 10AM the following morning for setup.

Westcoast Amusements, Ltd. Route List 2002, March - June

Unit #1

March 18 - 23	Westminster Quay
March 26 - 31	Westbank
April 3 - 6	Oliver
April 8 - 9	Grand Forks
April 12 - 14	Nelson
April 17 - 20	Cranbrook
April 25 - 27	Invermere
April 29 - 30	Kimberley
May 3 - 5	Fernie
May 8 - 12	Trail
May 16 - 20	Creston
May 24 - 26	Ladner
June 1 - 2	Oak Bay
June 7 - 9	Esquimalt
June 13 - 16	Duncan
June 20 - 23	Ashcroft
June 27 - July 1	Williams Lake

Unit #2

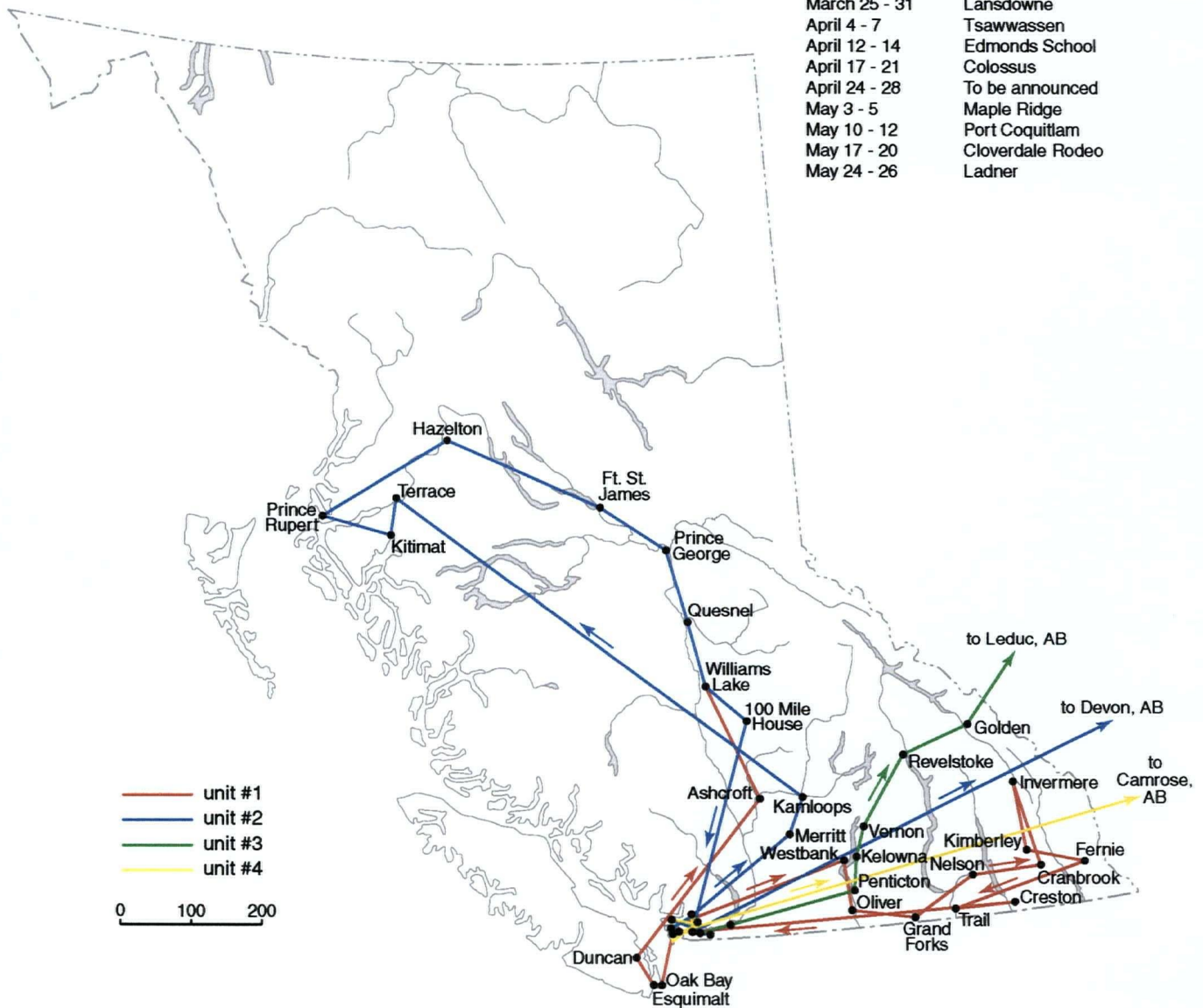
March 6 - 10	Delta
March 12 - 17	Abbotsford
March 20 - 24	BC Place
March 27 - April 1	Lansdowne Mall
April 3 - 7	Coquitlam Centre
April 9 - 10	Merritt
April 12 - 14	Kamloops
April 18 - 21	Terrace
April 22 - 23	Kitimat
April 25 - 28	Prince Rupert
April 29 - 30	Hazelton
April 30 - May 1	Ft. St. James
May 3 - 5	Prince George
May 6 - 9	Quesnel
May 10 - 12	Williams Lake
May 13 - 14	100 Mile House
May 17 - 20	Cloverdale Rodeo

Unit #3

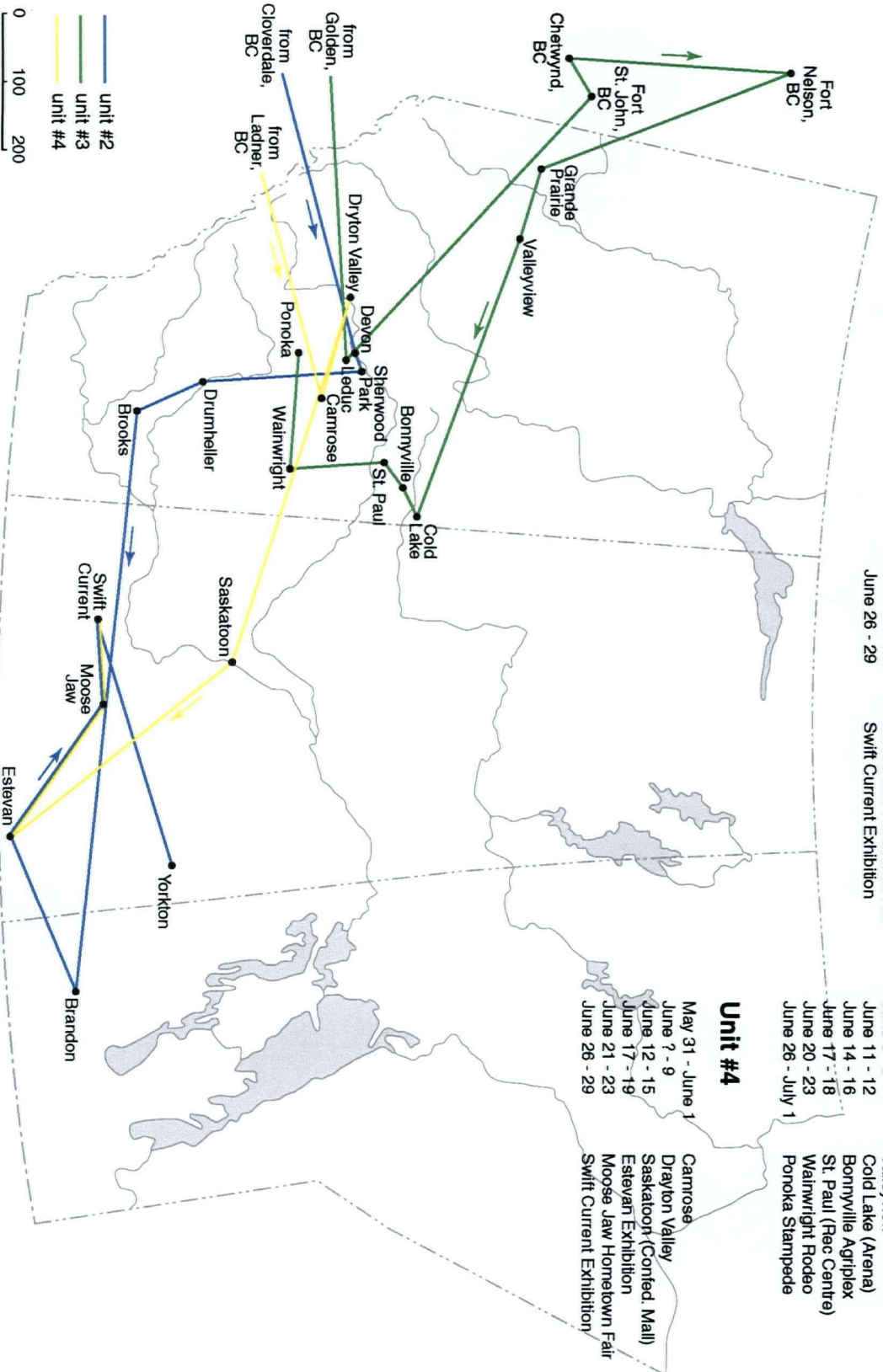
March 15 - 24	Langley
March 27 - 31	Chilliwack (Cottonwood)
April 4 - 7	Penticton (Rec Centre)
April 10 - 14	Kelowna (Orchard Park)
April 17 - 21	Vernon (Zellers Lot)
April 23 - 24	Revelstoke (Central Park)
April 26 - 28	Golden (Legenz Diner)
May 8 - 12	To be announced
May 16 - 19	Ft. St. John (Totem Mall)
May 21 - 22	Chetwynd (Rec Centre)
May 24 - 26	Ft. Nelson (Rec Centre)

Unit #4

March 14 - 17	Haney
March 20 - 24	BC Place
March 25 - 31	Lansdowne
April 4 - 7	Tsawwassen
April 12 - 14	Edmonds School
April 17 - 21	Colossus
April 24 - 28	To be announced
May 3 - 5	Maple Ridge
May 10 - 12	Port Coquitlam
May 17 - 20	Cloverdale Rodeo
May 24 - 26	Ladner



Westcoast Amusements, Ltd. Route List 2002, March - June



Westcoast Amusements, Ltd. Route List 2002, July - Sept.

Unit #2

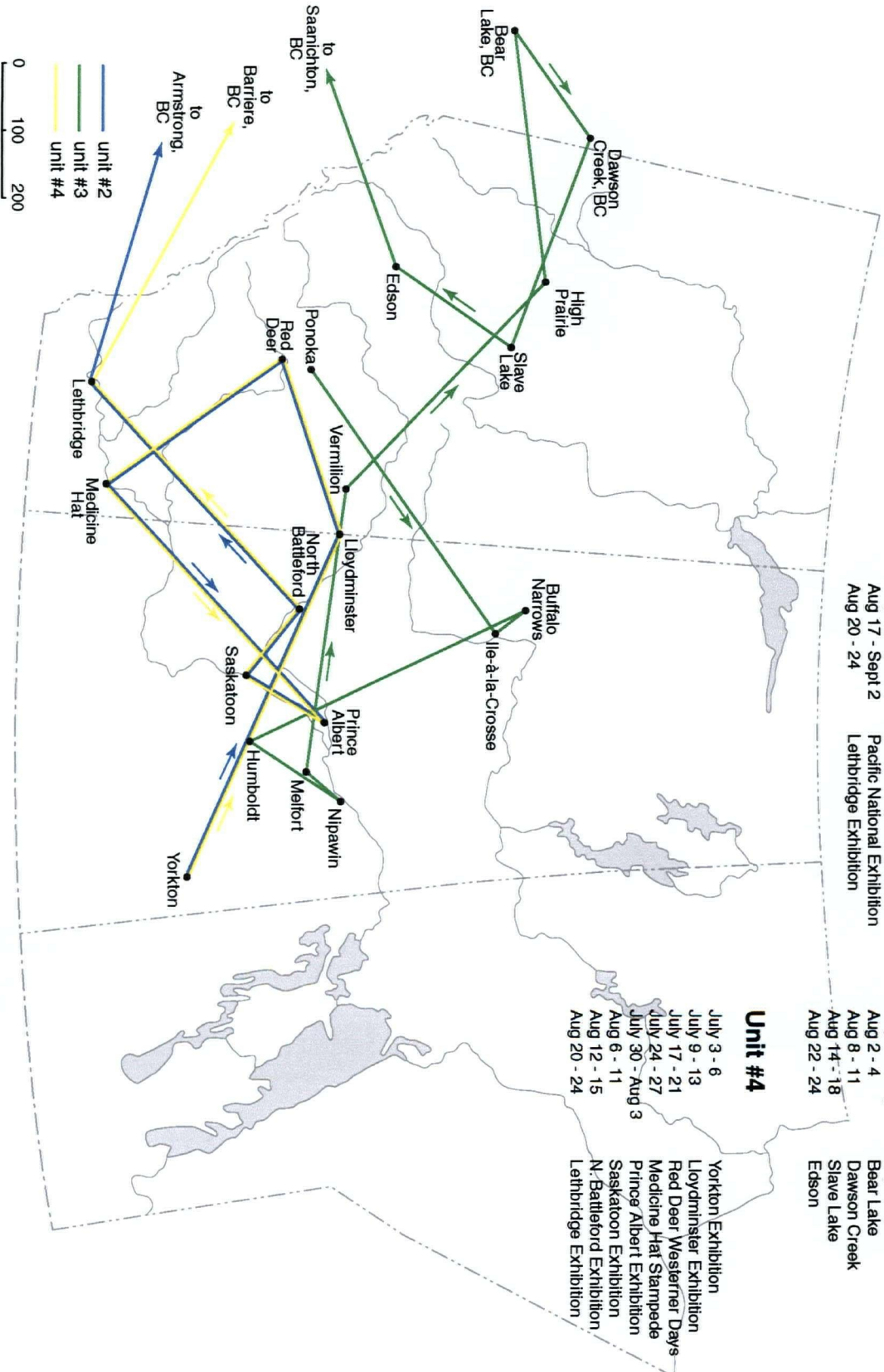
July 3 - 6	Yorkton Exhibition
July 9 - 13	Lloydminster Exhibition
July 17 - 21	Red Deer
July 24 - 27	Medicine Hat Stampede
July 30 - Aug 3	Prince Albert Exhibition
Aug 6 - 11	Saskatoon Exhibition
Aug 12 - 15	N. Battleford Exhibition
Aug 17 - Sept 2	Pacific National Exhibition
Aug 20 - 24	Lethbridge Exhibition

Unit #3

July 5 - 7	Ile a la Crosse
July 8 - 9	Buffalo Narrows
July 11 - 13	Humboldt
July 15 - 17	Nipawin
July 18 - 20	Melfort
July 25 - 27	Vermillion
July 30 - Aug 1	High Prairie
Aug 2 - 4	Bear Lake
Aug 8 - 11	Dawson Creek
Aug 14 - 18	Slave Lake
Aug 22 - 24	Edson

Unit #4

July 3 - 6	Yorkton Exhibition
July 9 - 13	Lloydminster Exhibition
July 17 - 21	Red Deer Western Days
July 24 - 27	Medicine Hat Stampede
July 30 - Aug 3	Prince Albert Exhibition
Aug 6 - 11	Saskatoon Exhibition
Aug 12 - 15	N. Battleford Exhibition
Aug 20 - 24	Lethbridge Exhibition



Westcoast Amusements, Ltd. **Route List 2002, July - Sept.**

Unit #1

July 4 - 6 Lillooet
 July 11 - 13 Chase
 July 16 - 17 Keremeos
 July 19 - 21 Kelowna Regatta
 July 26 - 28 Maple Ridge
 Aug 1 - 5 Agri-Fair
 Aug 9 - 11 Chilliwack
 Aug 16 - 18 Nanaimo
 Aug 23 - 25 Comox (tent)
 Aug 31 - Sept 2 Saanichton
 Sept 5 - 8 Port Alberni
 Sept 13 - 15 Luxton (tent)

Unit #2

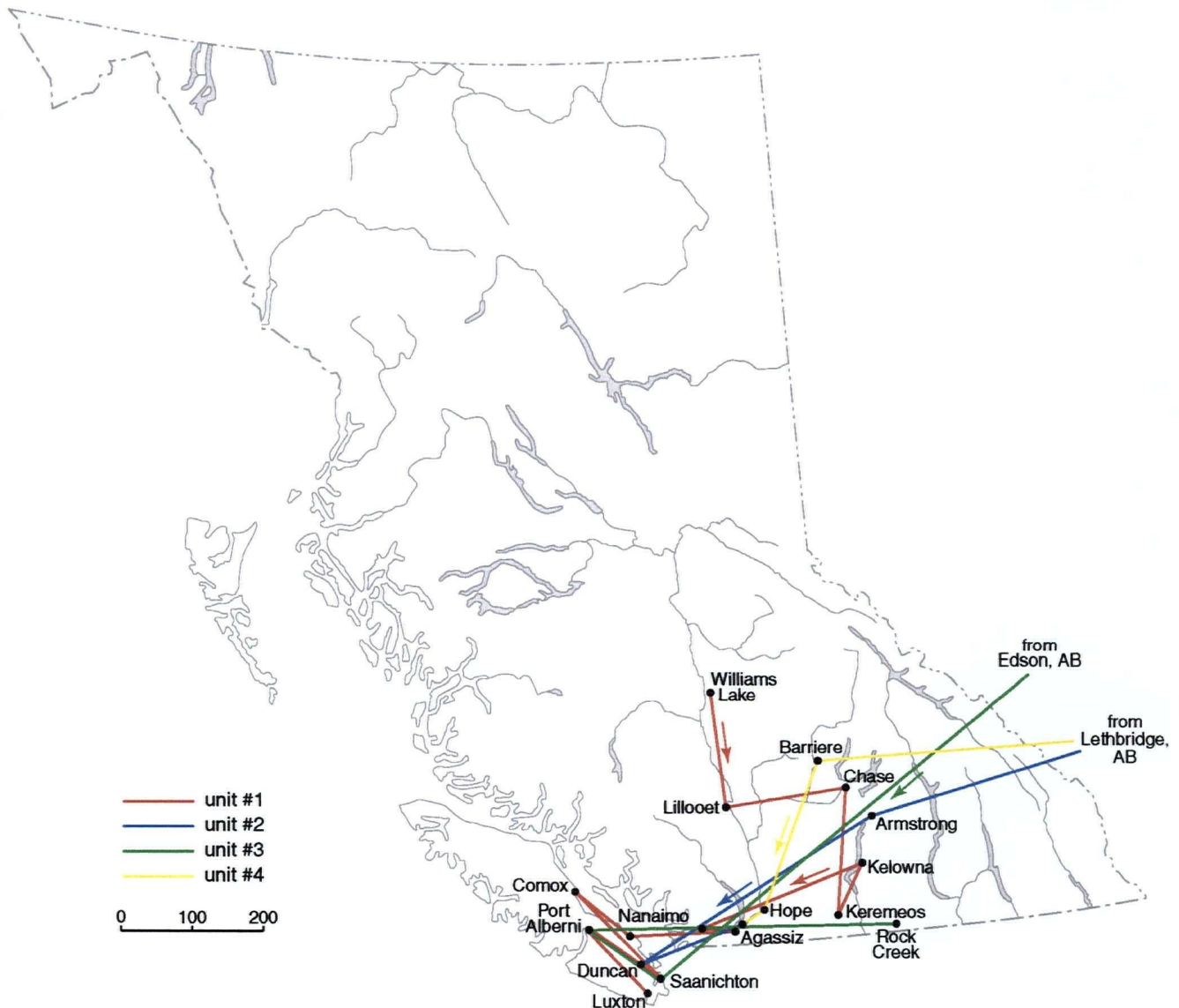
Aug 28 - Sept 1 Armstrong
 Sept 5 - 8 Duncan
 Sept 13 - 14 Agassiz Fall Fair

Unit #3

Aug 2 - 4 Bear Lake
 Aug 8 - 11 Dawson Creek
 Aug 31 - Sept 2 Saanich
 Sept 5 - 8 Port Alberni
 Sept 14 - 15 Rock Creek

Unit #4

Aug 31 - Sept 2 Barriere
 Sept 6 - 8 Hope Brigade Days
 Sept 13 - 14 Agassiz Fall Fair





Williams Lake Stampede



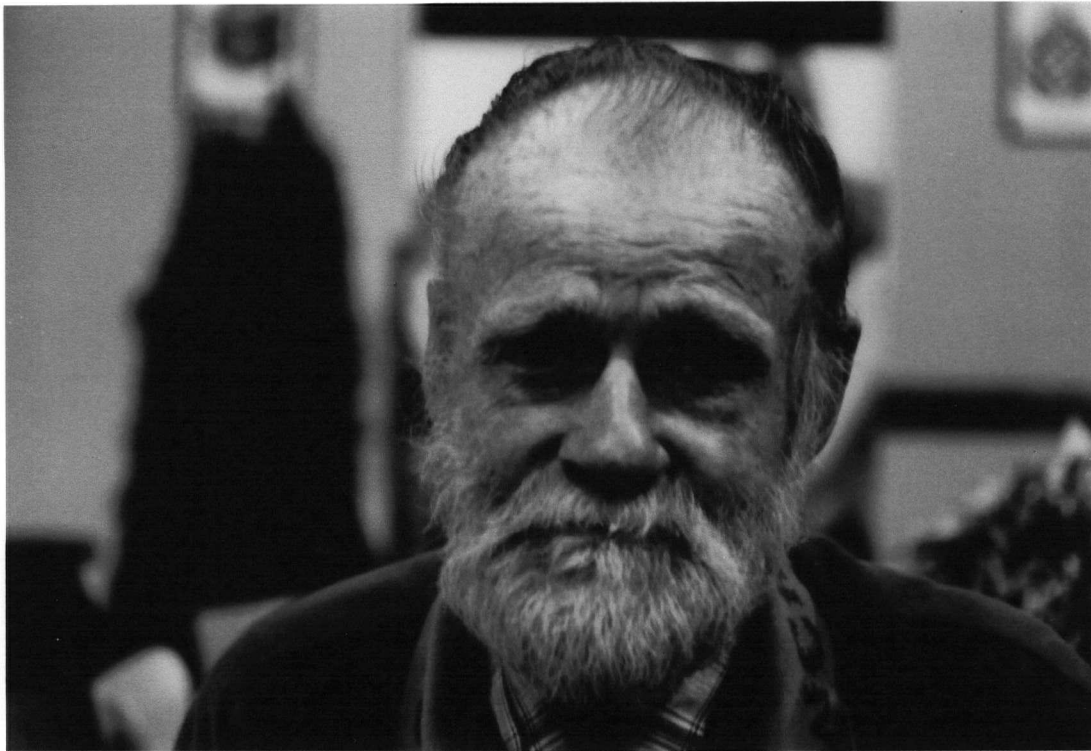
Rolling up the canvas



packing up Kiddie Land



Tearing down the joints



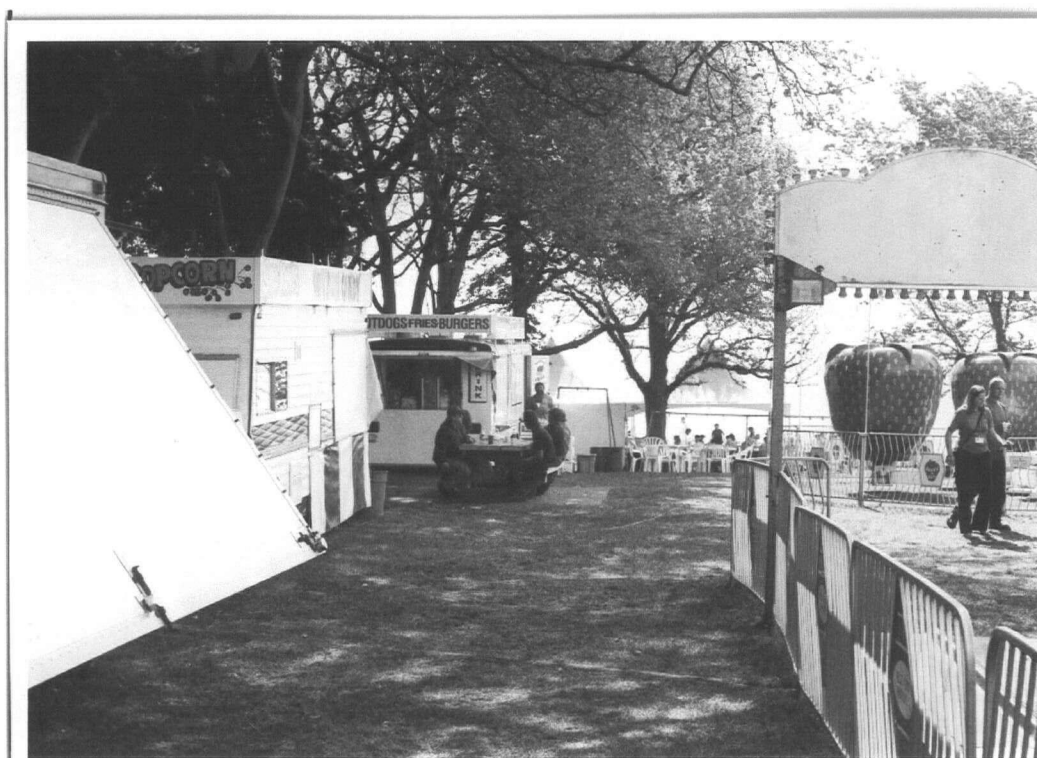
Jackson



Darcy in the Water Racer



In the Pie Car



Breakfast at Oak Bay



Bob Holt and Bingo



Skippy



Carnival at night, Williams Lake



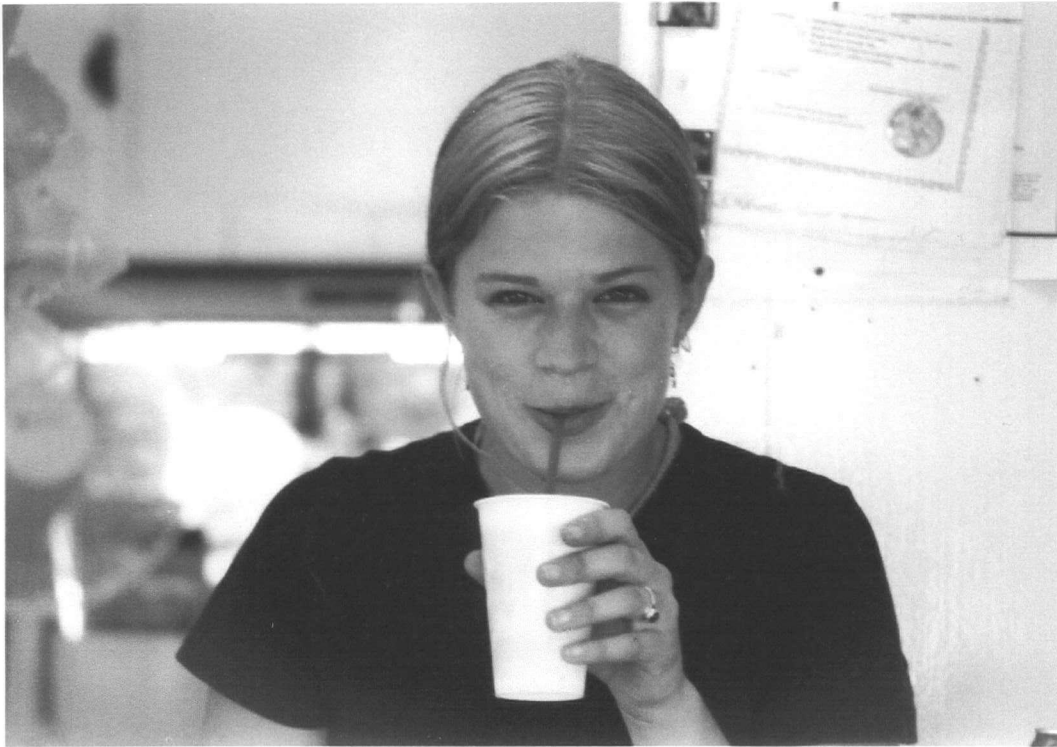
Willys Hamburgers



Interviewing Elvis
Photo by Aaron Freschi



Tongue



Autumn



Lights on the Grav'



The Zipper

Chapter 3 : Life on the road

Elia: Do you think that the carnival encourages itchy feet or do you think that people with itchy feet find the carnival?

Shorty: It's just because you have fun and I see a carnival come into town, like what happened and I wanted to go. Jump in a joint, have some fun, tease some people, make some money, you know, and bang I just jump on. It's fun.

Many people's first encounter with the carnival is similar to this: a carnival came to town and 'I knew someone', or 'I wanted to have some fun', or 'I needed a job', etc, etc. I suspect that at first their carnival is a bit of lark. It is a summer holiday, a chance to make some easy money, or to escape from something for a while.

Bingo: And we were kids, and I had a friend of mine, we went to school and we went to get a job, and they looked at Sonny and me and told us to come back in a year or two when we were a little older. (Laughs.) We went back the next year and got a job. We went with them to Calgary and back east. It was an experience. Never came home with any money of course. We had a good time. How many kids leave home and go out for the summer? Nowadays, they go to Europe. When we were kids, we were lucky to go to Winnipeg from Brandon. That was a big deal to see the street-cars, and all the lights on Portage and Main.

But, then it becomes more than that. The working for the carnival becomes a way of life and the people a community that is more important than the life and community at 'home.'

Elia: So how long are you guys going to do it?

Adam: I don't know.

Antaya: Not sure.

Adam: Everybody is probably thinking that I am a lifer, and it wouldn't be too surprising. I am not going to say I am, but...

Antaya: It's a hard thing to get away. Once you've been hooked, it's a very hard thing to get away from it.

Adam: It's like a drug. It's addictive.

Antaya: Yah, it is. You swear that you are not going to come back at the end of the season. And then that March, you are like, I can't wait to get to the carnival, the carnival is going to start soon. And then all of us are there again. Like

basically the whole crew from last year is still here this year. We all came back. I thought that was neat. The family is getting together again. Family reunion for 6 months.

The Carnival becomes the home for many people: the *old timers*, the *lifers*, the guys (they are almost always guys) – Jackson, ‘Barndog’, Shorty, Wally, Bingo, Ringo, Jimmy King, Pat, and Bob Holt. The ones the young carnies look up to these people in awe and, if they are like Adam, with a little bit of dread: is that what I am going to do with my life?

Elia: Why do they stick around?

Shorty: Gets in their blood, and a lot of them don’t have family or friends. And even if they do, they’re not close to them, and here they can fit [in], where a lot of places they can’t.

And Bingo, will he ever quit?

Bingo: Like I say, I would never totally walk away from it. What are you going to do? If you been travelling? I’ve been travelling all my life. I don’t how many times I’ve been across Canada, you know, and out on the prairies and that.

The carnival is a place where young people, mostly from rural and uneducated backgrounds, can find adventure. Bingo’s story, how he ran away from home with his best friend, worked his way through the circuses and carnivals, managed to scrape enough together to purchase a ride, and then slowly built his business to be the largest carnival company in western Canada, is an inspiration for many young carnies. One of the reasons for this is that the carnival becomes a home. Many of the carnies came from broken or dysfunctional homes, and the carnival becomes a foster home for these people. Then as the carnival offers a person the combination of: an easy escape from where ever you might be (there are a few reasons one might need such an escape

route: the law, spouses, work, family, etc); an opportunity to blend in with a large crowd; a place most anyone regardless of their background or work experience can find a place to work; a community of peers; and a tradition of the petty con – it is not surprising that a thread of illegality runs through the carnival.

Historically, this would be included in the business operations. There are so many recorded histories of elaborate hoaxes, *gaffed* games, and other petty cons, that it almost is not necessary to establish their existence. Now the illegality is centred around petty drug trafficking, and the evasions of ex-convicts or others on the run (e.g., dead-beat dads). I caution that, by focusing on this theme, I am not suggesting that everyone, nor in fact that the majority of people, engage in illegal activities on the carnival; or that the carnival businesses in any way condone or tolerate such behaviour if it becomes known to them. What is true, however, is that these activities are not condemned unless their presence threatens the now legitimate business of the carnival. All the carnivals are working very hard to clean up their image, and I will not counter, through this document, their real and sincere efforts to do so.

I begin with a few personal histories, and then further examine themes of adventure, home-making and illegality.

Bingo Hauser

When I caught up with Bingo, at the Oak Bay Tea Party in 2000, I found him standing in the shade of the *machine gun* booth watching the crowd. He

looked oddly out of place amidst the younger tattooed gnarly characters that are the carnies. He looked like someone's grandfather (which he is); brown slacks, loafers, short-sleeved shirt, short grey hair – not the preconceived image one has of someone who has spend the last 57 years of his (then) 73 years on the road. He looked relaxed, and so he should be -- this spot is one of the best for him. The event was well publicised, in an affluent neighbourhood, on the beach, and popular with families and teenagers alike. And to top it off, the sun was shining and the fickle BC weather was holding, all of which bode well for a successful carnival weekend.

I was told that Bingo ran away with the circus when he was 12, and that he built the company up from a *floss joint* and a *Ferris Wheel*. I also heard that when he was courting his wife, her parents ("show people", as carnies were once called in polite society) did not want her to marry a carny or to have anything to do with the carnival business. Carnies, or "show people", were no less immune to social prejudice in regards to carnies. Jackie's parents were concession people. Carnival society until recently had a strong and fairly rigid hierarchy. Both Harry Crews (1976), writing about carnivals in the 1970s, and Edward Hoagland (Hoagland, 1984; Hoagland, 2002), writing about circuses in the 1950s and 60s, comment upon the rigid social structure that governed both groups. In the carnival, owners were the de facto royalty, and the dirtier or harder you had to work, the lower you were down the social ladder: concessionaires with their petty mercantilism, and joint agents, who lived off their *con* or wits, jostled in the middle class. Owners, concessionaires, and joint agents would not talk or

socialise with the *ride jockeys* or *grease monkeys*, who set up and ran the big rides²⁴. Bingo, as a young kid, had originally found work on the rides, but was successful with a small menagerie (animal) show. Both positions were beneath the concessionaire and, as such, Jackie would have been marrying “low.”²⁵ Jackie’s parents were proven mistaken, because Bingo subsequently went from one small *floss joint* with an animal act to over one hundred pieces and four units playing from Victoria, BC to Brandon, Manitoba and all places in-between (see figures #3,4,5 &6 in Chapter 2.5).

Over the summer I would hear a lot about Bingo. And every time I asked him subtly if such a thing were true, he would laugh and change the story just a bit – enough to suggest that, while the details might be wrong, the essence was correct. It took two years of hanging about to get the following interview:

Elia: You first started in the carnival, what attracted you to the business?

Bingo: I don’t know, I always wanted to be in the business. It was just something. I grew up in Brandon. I can remember when, I don’t know how old I was then, I vaguely remember the Johnny J. Jones shows. That was the show of that era. Then Royal American come, and for a week or so I did all my chores and everything so I could spend all day at the fair. And we used to sneak in under the fence, when the fellow on the horse went one way, we went through the fence there, and rides were a nickel. And you know the trouble was nobody had the nickel. (laughs)

[...]

²⁴ One carny, a joint agent in the 60s and 70s, told me how he was making enough money to stay in hotels, at \$4-\$5 a night, and never washed his clothes but bought new, while the *ride jocks* would be making less than a \$50 a week.

²⁵ Ironically, with the rising popularity of television, circuses, tent shows, and animal acts fell out of favour with the public. Somehow, carnivals managed to hold onto a certain niche market. I suspect this was a combination of the physical thrill that rides were able to provide, and the ability of the carnival companies to cut costs by hiring unskilled labour to work the rides and games; whereas the circuses had expensive overhead partly due to the costs of their skilled performers. The very skills that once earned them the respect and prestige within the circus and carnivals society, now priced them out of the market. The irony in the carnival, is now the *ride jock* is the king, and the rides are the bread and butter of the carnival business these days; albeit an owner is still the boss no matter what he owns.

Elia: What was it like seeing those big shows for the first time?

Bingo: It was heaven. It was. Atmosphere, I guess, you would call it. It was electrifying. The buzz was there. You know. You go somewhere. You got to a rock concert. The vibes are there. It's kind of a difficult thing to describe.

[...]

Elia: Why do you still do it?

Bingo: I never ever really wanted to own a carnival, I don't think. I wanted to get into the circus business. [...] First of all, how many people you know they go to work everyday and they hate what they doing but they do out of necessity, cause they got a wife and a couple of kids. You know what I mean. I did it because I liked it. Half the things in life, wouldn't it be nice if we all had things to do that we really enjoy.

Bingo's story has a wholesome and successful end to it. He and Jackie created a business and a home on the road that has grown and now includes their grandchildren in an international business. (Bobby has an American company that sends rides into the United States.) However, most of the other carnies have slightly different tales to tell.

Shorty

When I met him in 2001, Shorty had joined up when the carnival arrived in Nakusp, BC. A veteran of many years and a friend Jimmy King, the *joint line* manager, Shorty was a *joint agent*, and a very good one. He was also a drunk, and a bit of a sad clown.

E: Do you like it [carnival]?

S: Carnival? Well you like – you miss it during the wintertime and you hate it when you get out. You like it for the first couple of weeks, then you start hating it, this and that. I don't know. You got to get used to it. It's a lifestyle more or less, once you get in to it

E: How would you describe the lifestyle?

S: Fun. You know a lot of people stay at home and they are committed to their lives and everything else but they don't have a lot of fun with lives you know. I come out here, I meet thousands of people, I have a good time, enjoying myself

E: Is it a hard lifestyle?

S: Not really, I don't think it is, depends but I was brought up rough so this is nothing to me – I was raised out in the boonies

E: And that helps?

S: Well, it was a lot harder, like my old man was not the nicest guy in the world eh. Like I worked hard when I was a kid, like I didn't have much of a childhood. Its kinda like having a 2nd childhood when I come out here, start having fun in my life.

Although an alcoholic, Shorty had the respect of his fellow carnies. He was regularly one of the top earners on the midway and, as an experienced hand, he helped in the decision-making (e.g., the placement of joints, distribution of *stiffies*, and teaching the younger *agents*). Although, he liked to brag when he was drunk that he knew many ways of taking people's money, he refused to describe the actual methods. That was not to be talked about and, he was quick to say, only practised in the past and on different shows. He describes his job as entertaining people.

Elia: What's the trick to getting good?

Shorty : Talk.

Elia: Talk.

Shorty: Put your hand out. Somebody is going to put something in it.

Elia: It's that simple?

Shorty: It's not quite that simple. You have to talk to people, entertain them. They are not winning a teddy bear. They are paying for their entertainment. That's all it is. You have to entertain the people. You don't just hand them a prize and say, 'Here'. You have to present it, the prize. You have to make them feel good, that they won something. It doesn't matter if they paid \$200 for that teddy bear, as long as they are happy, that you presented the prize. They shake your hand and away they go.

Elia: Why do you think that people want a teddy bear?

Shorty : Well they wanted a teddy bear, but by the time they get the teddy bear they don't realise that they just paid for a bunch of entertainment and that's it. They want the teddy bear, and they get the teddy bear, but they paid for the entertainment. That's the way I see it. Because I make sure that everybody goes away happy.

[...]

Elia: So how did you get started in this?

Shorty: (laughs), I had a warrant for my arrest in BC, right. So I took off to Alberta and I ran into a Carnival, and it was a quick way to get out, and near enough, so I joined the carnival and I liked it. I been hanging out for 15 years now.

Elia: Yah, so the carnival is a good place to hide out?

Shorty: At the time, yah. I went and got that all straightened out in the wintertime, I got that straightened out. At the time it helped.

I grew to like Shorty. We all did; he was fun, he was witty and the carnival was a place where he was at home. He had been around long enough to know what to expect and how to socialise in that specialised environment. A week or two after he gave us the preceding interview, he heard that his father died. Then his drinking increased: observe the scene in the film where he gets out of a taxi drunk and walks up to piss on the camera. After two weeks of this, during which he was not able to get out bed for work, he was asked to leave. I knew, all the carnies knew, that as long as Jimmy King, or Bingo are around, Shorty will still have a spot on the midway should he ever want it back. When he is hot, he makes more than enough money for the company to overlook his drinking. I saw this pattern repeated with other people, *joint agents* and *ride jocks* alike. In such a transient workforce, the owners and managers are willing to bring people -- friends -- on for as long as they can hold their lives together, during which time their experience can be a positive influence on the rest of the crew.

Diane

The carnival is primarily a masculine endeavour. There are about two men for every women working there, with the majority of the women being younger than 25. As the company-supplied living quarters are spartan at best²⁶, a person

²⁶ Most of the single men working as carnival employees are over 35 and live in bunks in the company trucks.

who wants to live with any sort of creature comforts has to supply their own. This is hard to do on a carnival income, unless you assume more responsibility or own something that might increase your income, in which case you might have a small camperised van or house trailer. Many of the young women end up pregnant: out of the dozen or so young girls that travel with the carnival each year, Bingo's office manager (a women) estimates that 2 or 3 will become pregnant. My observation has been that these women leave the carnival, with or without the man, to have the child. The women who do stick around, some with their children, are often coupled with a man who has added responsibility. Diane was one of the exceptions.

Elia: How long you been working?

Diane: This is will be my 12th season out here, eight years with Wagner, and the last 3 out here.

Elia: How did you start up?

Diane: I was in an alternative School at Luxton. [...] And the Teacher said, 'Diane, go get a job with the Carnival again'. So I went and got a job, and I came back to school and I said, 'Okay, I'm leaving now'. And I left with the carnival, and I've been with them ever since.

Elia: Why do you think the teacher said to go get a job with the carnival?

Diane: Cause she was just telling everyone to go get a job, and well they were there and I [had] got in last year. 'Go get a job' is a good thing. Get some experience. So I tried it out and I am still here. (Giggles.)

Elia: It's a good experience?

Diane: It's great. It's a lot of fun. There's just so many people, I am a total people person. I couldn't be stuck behind a desk. It would drive me crazy.

Elia: What do you do in the winter?

Diane: Relax, take my 6 months off, sometimes. Most of the time I do work. I go find a job somewhere. I was working in the cannery, sorting mushrooms, shucking oysters, and stuff, piecework. Other than that, I spend the rest of my time with my daughter. Talk about the carnival, and miss about everybody. Phone everybody. Talk to everybody and make sure that everybody is still alive and kicking.

I met Diane on my first visit to MF Wagner in 1997. She was working a *Sledge Hammer joint*, where you swung a hammer down on a pressure plate that registered the strength of your hit. The game appeals to the players' macho image of strength and power. Diane was perfect at it. She was young, blond, and knew how to flirt.

Elia: So do you flirt with the marks?

Diane: Yah, you have to. Ya have to. And there's some girls that flirt too, to do whatever. Flirting is half the game. When you got that guy standing there, and when you got his big wad of money sitting there. You keep smiling and chit chatting it up. *'My name is Diane. And so you live here?'* You talk to them and smile real nice and giggle lots. And *'Here I will give you an extra dart', (or whatever you know..., make you a bigger size here, you know.)* What are you doing later? You guys going to be around later? Maybe we should go for coffee. Well okay, lets go another size bigger, bigger is better, size does matter you know. "That's my best line this year, its one of my new ones. *"Size does matter."* All the ladies like that. *"Ohh yah, it does."* Its fun, flirting is fun. But there is a point of too much, and a point of enough. *"Okay I got your money, see you later buddy. We're done."*

A few years later in 2002, she has two children with two different men, and knows that she is a *carny*.

Elia: Do you see yourself working the carnival for [a long time]?

Diane: Yah, I would like to own something some day. I know I've been out here for as long as I have been, that I've been jumping around everywhere and I get to do everything that I would like to own something and be out here. I know that, kind of that depends upon Cassandra. She's going to be in school. Shot, she's 3 and 5 months, so pretty shortly she will be in school. But I am thinking with a couple of other kids out here, we might get some schooling out here. Or I might do home schooling with her, if I do actually own something and do come out. So until then I will hang tight and see what happens. Come out on the good spots. Might come out next year, you never know.

[...]

Diane: That, it isn't all bad out here. It is actually a great place to be. It's a lot of fun. You can make a lot of money out here. Its not like sitting at home for 7 or 8 bucks an hour. That's just slave labour. Tell you that.

[...]

Diane: Either you are going to make it or you are not. That is what it is. Either this is for you or it is not you. There is no in between here. Either you are going to like... you are going to like not [having] a place to wash your face first thing in the morning. You are going to like not having a bathroom around right now. You

are going to like having no food around here, because there is no food right here right now. You are going to have to walk ten blocks. You are going to have to catch a cab. Either you are going to deal with it, and like it, or you are going to leave; cause you can't handle it. It's either yes or no.

Elia: What does it take to be a carny?

Diane: Patience, craziness. Gotta be a kind of a happy person, I'd say. And you have to be kind. Partly pervert, because everyone else is out here, including the bosses sometimes. A lot of stuff out here. It's different, it's not like a regular job. So you got to... you just really got to deal with it. And sometimes it's very hard. And you just want to quit. You want to leave. Everybody does that. I betcha... Out of the year, everybody must quit at least 5 times. Say they are out of here. They have had enough. I am done. I am sorry. I am sick of it. You know. And it happens. But, those people, most of them never leave, they are still here. And, I am quitting now, and 5 minutes, you go for a sleep and now you are staying.

Elia: Why do they stay?

Diane: If you are a carny, where else are you going to go? You don't want to go and get that 8 dollar [an hour] job. You don't want to go home and sit there, knowing that everybody's out here. I'll tell you, when you are fired, when you leave this place, when you are fired or you decide to quit, you pack your bags and you are saying goodbye to everybody. I'd say the minute you are on the bus, leaving that town, changes. Something hits you: you are not in the carnival no more, and you are leaving and something in you makes you feel really sick. And you feel really empty. And ahh, there's something missing. You know you need to go back, You know you have to go back. You can't just stay away. Its different when you leave the lot to go to the store. You know that you are coming back. But when you know that you are not coming back, that's a real big different thing. Like even if you are just... I don't know.... it's just a big thing. If you've been here a long time and you go to leave, it's hard. I've been sent home. I've been sent home, 'That's enough of you, you are out of here.' And I go, but I mean as soon as I am on that bus, I am crying. I want to be back here. It's terrible.

Elia: And you are allowed back?

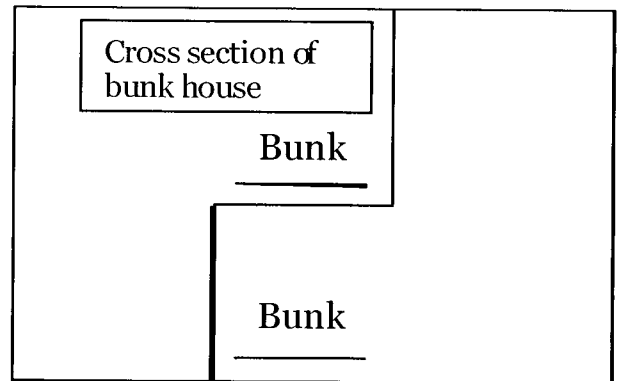
Diane: If you are valuable, they always let you back. [...] In regular life, you screw up at a job you are not coming back. They are not going to give you a second chance. You know, pretty much, you are done. Here they give you second chance and a third and fourth; if you are alright.

Elia: Does that make you feel good?

Diane: Yes, I am a valuable person out here, and I can work quite a few different things, and I enjoy being everywhere, and everywhere and doing different things. I don't really like staying in one joint all day, or one situation all year. I like to be moved around. You see different things, you see different people. Different people come to different games. Got different spots of the carnival. You meet everybody.

The carny's house

The carnies have an interesting relationship with the concept of *home*. The carny's *house* is a constructed space. It is literally constructed once a week, or every new place where they will be set up; and it tends to be socially constructed as an individual space apart from the other



people. This space is treated as such by the other carnies. If one is sitting in their "house," people will wait to be invited inside, or avoid eye contact within the close physical proximity to the "house." The physical proximity of the individual spaces can be quite tight. Several small house trailers are often pulled close to someone else's camper van or RV. There were ten bunks in the bunkhouse (which is a converted semi-trailer) in which carnies are literally sleeping under or on top of one another. The bunks were constructed as two nestled "L"s (see across). Opinion was divided as to the quality of this living arrangement. Several people commented with a smirk that everything your neighbours did was unflatteringly broadcast throughout the trailer. The first year I observed the bunkhouse, I was told that it was for men only: and on no account were any sexual activities allowed. The second year, I noticed that several women had been housed in this bastion of single men, although it would seem that no couples did stay there. It also appeared that the bunkhouse was reserved for the *ride jocks* or *joint agents* on salary. At least no *joint agents* working on commission stayed in the

bunkhouse. These *agents* stayed in slightly less formal quarters: Shorty, as Jimmy King mentions, slept on a top shelf in the stock van, with about 2 feet of clearance; the agent working the *water racer* slept in the joint's trailer, in a two foot wide area just behind the pumps and false front of the game; others slept in the back of work trucks or tents. There was one 5-ton truck, of which half the back had been converted into two small rooms with 2 bunks to each room. It seemed that there were several people staying there. Although the office manager did "officially" administrate the living quarters and who slept in them, I believe that as the tour progressed and peoples' sleeping arrangements changed, the inhabitant of each room changed as people started sleeping together.

As one might imagine, the job of moving 20 odd vehicles between places is complicated by the necessity of moving about 40 to 50 people as well. Several times people would wander off, thinking that they had more time than they did and get left behind when the drivers departed for the next spot with their "house" (i.e. truck). When this happened, it was up to them to get to the next spot. To minimise this confusion, people were instructed to stay with their "house". Nevertheless, I witnessed several unfortunate experiences: when someone's house was taken in the middle of the night or, as I saw in Chase, when two people were left stranded as their "house" (a semi-truck) dropped off one trailer and then returned (on a 10 hour round trip) for a different trailer. Fortunately, carny vehicles are never locked, and there is always some spot or seat on which to sleep.

However, the simple naming of home does not create a utopic nomadic space. The choice of calling their sleeping spot, car, van, truck, bunk, trailer or tent their "house" suggests a longing for something that is absent. I suspect that Dorinne Kondo's observation of marginalised constructions of *home* is apt:

"Home," for many people on the margins, is, to paraphrase Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, that which we cannot not want. It stands for a safe place, where there is no need to explain oneself to outsiders; it stands for community; more problematically, it can elicit a nostalgia for a past golden age that never was, a nostalgia that elides exclusion, power relations, and difference. Motifs of "home" animate works by peoples in diaspora, often peoples of colour, who may have no permanent home; people on the margins, such as gays or lesbians, for whom home was rarely, if ever, safe; and women and children, for whom the "haven" of home can be a site of violence and oppression (Kondo 1996 97 - 117: 97).

My impression is that many found within the carnival, not only a community within which they felt comfortable and respected, but a community to replace the one that they never had. Almost all the carnies I talked to came from split families. It was also common to find many people, men and women, who would adopt older men as their surrogate fathers; even calling them "dad" in public. The sequence in the film, when Bob Holt is berating one of his employees while tearing the ride down in preparation for travel, and then the man calls him "dad" in jest, is a light hearted poke at Bob in reference to this not uncommon relationship. Another time, in 1997, we were going to interview "Cadillac" about his carnival experiences. Cadillac was a young macho fellow who tended to swagger about the lot with more bravado than respect. He had grown up on the carnival, having run away from a dysfunctional home at the age of 15. He was working with an independent operator on a brand- new and popular ride, from which he derived a lot of self-respect. He called his employer, a man maybe 10

years his senior, “Dad” and “father” in public. In anticipation of the interview, we met him at the ride. As we were leaving the ride, his employer stopped me and asked that we not do the interview. We asked why and the man said that it really bothered him when Cadillac called him “dad”. We promised not to include any such reference in the film. I see several possibilities for this term and usage. With Cadillac, this expresses a yearning and a deliberate choice of his employer (who appeared to be a fair and equitable) as his father figure over his birth father, who may have been absent or violent. Another possibility is that in a highly masculine society, plutonic or repressed intimate sexual affection between men can only be assimilated in a familial model as father and son. Another possibility, with reference to the scene shown in the film when John calls Bob Holt ‘dad’, is that the term father both expresses and softens a criticism of Holt’s authority. Within all interpretations, the term, father, expresses an intimate relationship. However, clearly there is some unease among the older men about being designated as the “dad”. I never encountered the same reference with older women as mothers.

The intense desire to create and belong to a community has an explosive emotional backlash at the end of the tour.

Diane: We were kind of hoping that they could make just a kind of carnival town where we could all live together in one spot and just stay together all the time. That would be great. It would be great.

Elia: Do you think that you could live with everybody all year?

Diane: I could, I could, I am so happy to be here everyday. It’s the best job I’ve ever had. And everybody is just so much fun to be around. I mean you make so many good friends that to lose each other is just terrible.

I had been around the carnivals for several years, when I made a trip to Port Alberni – the second to last stop for unit #1. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the social order of the carnies started to disintegrate. Being the near the end of the season, people were partying every night. The alcohol and drug consumption increased considerably. People started fighting. One man, who had been a quiet and very dependable worker all season, ended up extremely drunk and spent the entire night loudly and at times violently declaring his love for a young woman. Two women, very drunk, rolled around on the ground, shouting at each other their conflicted emotions of anger, hatred and love; best friends, one of them had slept with the other's boyfriend in the middle of the season. It seemed that half the crew were being fired, and the other half were beating each other up. On reflection, I can only think that the emotional turmoil that they were feeling towards the imminent end of the season and the annual disbanding of their community was too much for people to handle. At the time, I did not know how to assimilate the emotional drama that was unfolding. I too got extremely drunk. I tried to reason with the man who was bellowing out his love. He nearly clocked me. I watched the women roll around on the ground for awhile, still shouting and lamenting. Then I went for drink with the bootlegger, the boyfriend whom the two women were fighting over, and eventually passed out on a picnic bench. At that moment, not much of the experience made sense anymore. It seemed like a lot of transgression with very little carnivalesque. It felt like a dysfunctional mess.

Illegality

When I was with Wagner, I ended up spending most of my time in the *Pie car*, in essence, a portable booze can that doubled as the in-house carnival cafeteria and concession. The term *Pie car* dates back to the days when circuses and carnivals would travel by train, although the present *Pie car* was a doublewide semi-trailer. The Wagner carnies were quote proud of the *Pie car*, several people told me how they figured that the local police tolerated what was essentially an illegal bar, because it kept the carnies out of the local pubs and thus the inevitable fights to a minimum. Later in 2002, while I was with West Coast, we learned that it was involved in a traffic accident and was damaged beyond repair; several of the older West Coast carnies commented on how the *Pie car* contributed to the general drunkenness and that they were happy there was no equivalent on the West Coast units. The *Pie car* did provide a central socialising place for the carnies, which I felt was missing with West Coast, but, I would have to agree with the criticism in regards to how it increased alcohol consumption by making it readily available.

While I was with MF Wagner, I heard various disparaging remarks about how West Coast was changing; cleaning up, and going 'new school'. I also heard stories about how a few year prior, animosity between the two companies grew to where rumours started about a planned rumble between the two companies. Stories being stories, apparently the Hell's Angles Sergeant-in-arms stepped in and stopped the planned fight. I have to caution that carnies loved these types of stories: anything that increased the bravado of their lifestyle was often bragged

about. Connections to the drug world were talked about, and people told first hand accounts of past misdemeanours and trafficking. If only half of it is true, and given that it is a cash economy with mostly small bills, established convict connections (I know of at least 4 people who admitted doing time for various offences), large gatherings of young people looking to party, and a new town every weekend, then I can see how the gangs would be involved as means to launder money and drugs. Several people talked about how they sold drugs from rides, and others talked about international drug deals. Given the source of these stories, I am inclined to believe them. I am also inclined to believe that, at least in the past, the gang connections were real.

Most of these stories were told in the past tense, and I know that the companies are no longer tolerating open drug use. Now, West Coast has a blanket policy that anyone caught doing hard drugs (mostly cocaine and other uppers) will be fired. I also know that this is a fluid policy that tends to apply only to people whose drug use begins to interfere with their work. One Carnival's *lot foreman* was renowned for his substance addictions, which was a health problem for him, and likely influenced his violent behavior towards his employees. However, as he was efficient and responsible to the carnival, he retained his job. Most of the time I spent with the carnivals, the main substances that I witnessed were alcohol and marijuana: although on previous and subsequent visits to all companies, I saw evidence of cocaine and other 'uppers'. Speed, cocaine and uppers (e.g., bennies) are often consumed by the drivers in an attempt to stay awake during the long drives, for which purpose they justified their presence.

There are carnies “dealing” marijuana and bootleggers (mostly beer) who are catering to their fellow carnies. If these people are operating within the tacit “understanding” of the companies, it is only because it keeps the majority of the carnies from approaching or looking for drugs with the locals. By localising the drug trade and after-hours beer consumption on the lot, this minimises the illicit dealings with the public. Marijuana has become more or less a socially acceptable drug – especially in BC, and its presence on the carnival is overlooked as a necessarily evil. Managers will tell me in one breath how no carnies smoke, and then later in the evening see if I want a drag with a beer. The far more serious drug for the carnival is alcohol, which I saw as the cause of several self-destructive binges: including but not limited to Shorty.

Usury

Elia: I've heard there are lot of loan sharks out here?

Diane: There is, there's loan sharks out here; borrow 20, cost you 25. You know, it's good to have if you are in trouble, if you need the money. But I think these guys, these guys are all really young. These ride guys, a lot of them are young and they are just there to... they just spend all their money, like really stupidly, you know. They are not adults about it yet. I learnt too. I had the same thing. I am not putting them down. Because I was young, and I used to spend all my money and it was gone. But you have to grow up and make the money, and spend it wisely. But they all make it, there are few of them are broke as soon as they get their pay cheques Tuesdays and Fridays. Here's to Jackson, to the loan sharks, to the loan sharks, and they've got 5 bucks. Well guess what? They are going back to the loan shark: “Give me some more money, give me some more money.” So they do, and they get their paycheque and they go back to the loan shark and give it to the loan shark and they go back to the loan shark to get some more money. It's a really vicious big circle for some of them. And they don't spend their money wisely, and at the end of the year, after getting paid 350 a week, they have nothing to show for it. And I think that is terrible. Nothing except their UI, which is coming in. And I guess that's okay. That will take care of them for the winter time.

With no small bit of irony, the most unlikely of people to be the loan shark was Jackson, a 75 year-old illiterate loggers' son from Nova Scotia who has been working the carnivals for over 50 years. He was also the sweetest and most popular fellow on the lot. Because of this, one of the most surprising scenes in the film is the one where we watch a young carny repay his loan to Jackson. It is also comical as Jackson explains his terms (\$0.25 on the dollar over one week), and the young man says, with a straight face, "It's a good deal." Then they both struggle to figure out the mathematics – this is after Jackson has already informed the viewer that he cannot read or write; "But I am a long ways from being stupid." Loan sharking has been and probably always will be a part of carnival life. One young carny told us how he had arrived at the barns in anticipation of work, but was not able to start for a week. In order to support himself during that time, he had to borrow against his future pay. He then started the season in debt and was not able to get out of the cycle. With readily available drugs and alcohol, and no one to monitor them, the young carnies fall into an unhealthy cycle of spending all their money in loan interest and other temptations. We can see this in the film, when immediately after paying Jackson, the young carny then pays a portion of his drug debt. The loan sharks - - there are several -- will only loan to the carnies on company payroll. There were a few exception to this rule (e.g., I know that Shorty was able to run a small debt with Jackson). I was not able to determine what might be the reason for the exception, other than that Shorty had good credit as an experienced hand and a top agent.

Adventure and the con

On a rainy day in Williams Lake, while we watched a half-dozen people mope about the midway from under the shelter of a joint awning, Ringo told a story about *Henry Morten*. *"We were in Port Alberni one time and Henry shows up. He set up a booth and he's got all these razors and he's showing them off. He's got a big stuffy and he starts shaving it all over. You can shave here and there, and around here (Ringo is miming the various places you can use a battery powered razor.) And he's selling them like hot cakes. Its busy, we are going like stink, and then we turn around and there's no Henry. Must of hopped the ferry and gone back to the mainland. Well no worry. Then two cops show up and asked for Henry. We said he's gone, why? Well it turned out that the only razor that had any guts was the one he used to shave the stuffie. All the rest were shells."* Ringo says, as we all laugh, *"Boy, I wish I thought of that one"*.

Elia: We were talking earlier about gaffed games.

Shorty: You shouldn't be asking about that (laughs).

Elia: Why not?

Shorty: Cause...no, there's no gaff on these games out here. But over the years, there have been gaffed games, games I can win at that nobody out here can win at. Now a'days these are pretty legit. Just people got to realise that people are not paying for the teddy bear, but for the entertainment, that's what it is. You are going to get the teddy bear. Back years ago you didn't have to worry about... like if you had game that didn't give out prizes, you didn't have to give them out. You could take a guy for a lot of money and not give them nothing. Now a'days, you have to give out 20% , 20 to 30%, at Conklin you have to give out 28% . So they spend a \$100 they get a big piece, that's the way it is.

Elia: Why was it that in the old days they didn't care?

Shorty: I don't have a clue. It's just back then, everyone was trying to save money. The more money you could make the more money you could save. That's probably what it was. And it is a better way of doing it, the way that they are doing it now, giving out so much percentage, because when you give out the percentage people will come back, because they are not being burnt out.

Elia: So people didn't care they were burning people out?

Shorty: Some of them did, it's all changed over the years. Back then it was like, everyone was there to make money, and big money. Now a'days it's run like a business.

[...]

Elia: What is the definition of an alibi joint?

Shorty: (laughs) An alibi joint? Ok, an alibi joint, it's because you can call them on stuff. You get certain joints, you throw the ball, that's a cross throw. You get it off the rim, that's a rebound, you can call them on an alibi.

Elia: And not give them a prize?

Shorty: And not give them a prize. But right now you have to give them a prize, that's the way its run. It's even hard to find an alibi joint. Depends upon the guy running the joint, you can make it an alibi joint, or you can give out the stock like you are supposed to.

Elia: Is the one ball an alibi joint? (The game shown in the film, where the players try to knock three milk bottle castings over with one ball.)

Shorty: Could be, if you had the right guy, if you had a guy who didn't want to give out stock. Well actually no, you could call them on all kinds of stuff. But we get legitimate winners all day, so it's not really an alibi joint. So say you were some guy who came up, maybe you could call the odd person on a rebound or something like that. But why do that? Just give them their prize, kick it out. It's not really an alibi joint. It could be, depends upon the operator.

Elia: The other term I've heard is flat joint.

Shorty: Flat store, that means that you run at zero percent stock, you don't give nothing out. That's a flat store.

My impression is that the tradition of the petty con has an affectionate resonance for carnies. There are many stories of the *graft* of carnival games and *grifters* who ran them (Mannix 1951 ; Crews 1976), and other stories that are essentially the same thing: people who are living off of small time con games that play on peoples' gullibility. By and large, the affection derives from it's relative harmless effects: *the mooches deserve it and furthermore they expect it anyways, so we might as well give them what they want to see.* And it's not as though the carnies themselves are immune to the same sly tricks. A friend of Jimmy King's would show up at all the rodeos to work his gambling *joints*²⁷. Like most of Jimmy's friends, he had a few stories to tell. Perhaps surprisingly, most of this man's punch lines ended up at his own expense. He told me a story about how he used to work with Ringo (who died in Westbank). One day he made a

²⁷ In BC, you can only operate gambling games at Rodeos and fall fairs.

small killing off of a bunch of cowboys and was bragging about it to Ringo. As he was about to head off to the bar, Ringo made him hand over half of his take for safe keeping. At the bar, he started getting drunk and bragging about how he conned the cowboys. Well, they were in the same bar, overheard him, and proceeded to beat him up and roll him for whatever money he had left. The following morning, Ringo handed back what was left of his money along with a 'told you so.' He also he told me how Ringo took him for a thousand dollars. Seems he fell in love with some woman mid tour and wanted two weeks off so as to marry her. Ringo started lamenting that he would not come back. Surprised that Ringo did not trust him to return, he proposed a bet on his outstanding pay (\$1000.00) that he would be back to stay for the rest of the year. Two weeks later he comes back, walks up to Ringo and demands his bet. Ringo says, "*No, I win the bet because you will not be around for the rest of the tour*". He says, "*I am right here*". Ringo says, "*No, you are fired*". I was a bit taken aback, but he told me how that was a big lesson for him to not take anything for granted, and that he was grateful to Ringo for teaching him. As Jimmy King says with a rueful smile, "the most gullible ones are the ones working, each one of them has been taken this year."

Another impression is that the carnies feel like the little cons are about taking a measure of control over their lives. Shorty says, "It depends upon the guy running the joint..." as to whether you can work the gaff of a joint. Diane talks about how in the carnival she is a valuable person. I suspect that the appeal in the con is that the carny is able to rewrite the rules and for a small moment beat the people that look with disdain on them. Shorty certainly enjoyed having

the knowledge of how to clean out a patron, and Jimmy King always included himself in this rarefied company of 'old hands' who could work a "live one." The younger carnies enjoyed the stories, and we all agreed when Ringo said, "I wish I had thought of that one." There was adventure in the stories he told. By being privy to the con, it allowed them to feel a sense of belonging to this community where only those knowledgeable are *with it*. In Joe McKennon's *Circus Lingo* book, this term "with it" comes with a "WARNING: Do not attempt to use this word unless you are been properly instructed in the manner by which to deliver it" (106). I personally would not have any idea as to the manner in which one was to deliver this term (in fact I never heard it specifically), but I did see and meet many young people who did wish to know how they might learn the attitude and behavior that would indicate *they* were 'with it'.

In a very real way, the carnival is an adventure. The carnival offers travel and a means of escape for people who do not have access to this. In Oak Bay, an affluent suburb of Victoria on Vancouver Island, one young carny from Terrace B.C. told me how being with the carnival had enabled her to see the ocean for the first time²⁸. I must have been staring in amazement, because she then told me how the first year she came to Oak Bay, she actually had been too busy all day in the *Cook Shack* to see the water. The second year was better because she was working in the ticket booths, and when she got a break she was able to walk down to the water's edge.

²⁸ While Terrace, BC is 1403 kms (877 miles) north of Victoria, BC, (and 1288 kms north of Vancouver) but it is only 124 kms (78 miles) east of Prince Rupert, which is on the coast.

As much as it may seem that I have focused on the problems that would appear to hinder an individual's life and work experience on the carnival, for these people the carnival lifestyle is a celebration, a means into a different life. It also offers them the chance to access and be privy to an insider community to which they learn the "secret" rules. Diane knows this, Shorty knows this, Jimmy King knows this: I saw it in their faces. I watched an agent working the *water racer*, while he celebrated after having made over a thousand dollars commission in one night. His mood reminded me of an actor or musician after having performed on stage. They were writing their own stories here: adventure stories.

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