

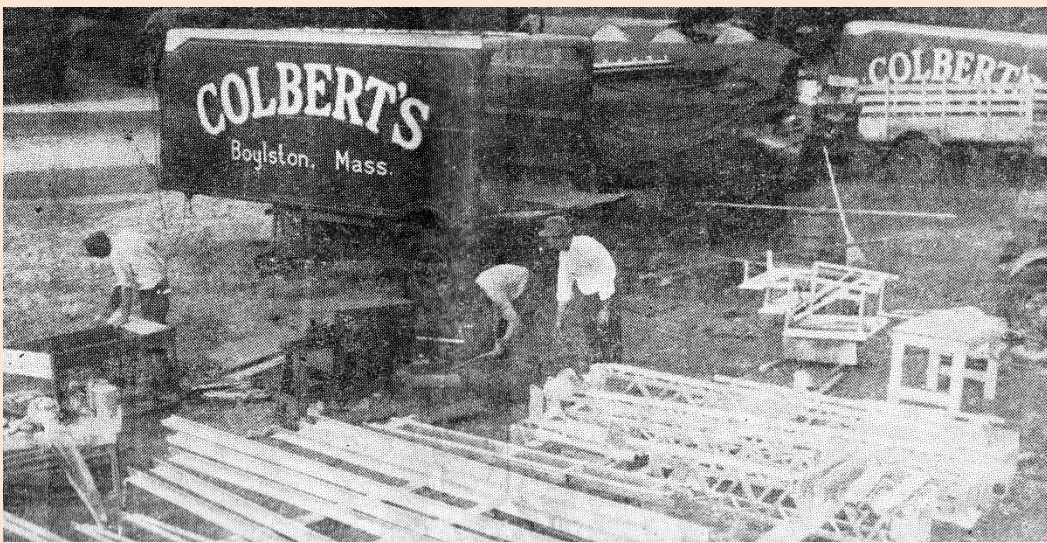
## Did you Know Boylston had a Carnival?

*By Judy Haynes*



September calls an end to summer. The pupils return to school and summer fun is over. It's time for the traveling carnival to pack up the big tent and put away the rides for the winter. In the 1940s and 50s if one traveled along Route 70, Main Street headed for Morningdale, you might have noticed in a big field several large green trailers and trucks with big letters announcing "COLBERT'S Boylston, Mass." As newspaper reporter Ivan Sandrof reported, "It looks like a carnival holed up for the winter. It is."<sup>1</sup> And it was! Sandrof interviewed Robert Colbert [ca. 1950] and learned he was 45 years old and had been in the fair and carnival business for 37 years. He and his younger brother, Denis "Bill" Colbert, joined him and they worked and learned all about traveling fairs and carnivals. Robert had been at it from the time he was eight years old, and Bill started at age ten.<sup>2</sup>

It began when a friend of the family, who ran a refreshment stand at a fair at White City, Worcester, needed help and young Robert started by slicing hot dog rolls at the fair. He enjoyed having a summer job and was caught up by the color and rides that a carnival offered. When more help was needed, his younger brother Bill joined him and the traveling carnival life became the profession of the Colberts. In the early years they worked for others, learning the business inside and out, but by 1940 the brothers teamed up to go out "on their own."



**Carnival Setting Up in Field on Main Street, Boylston, Massachusetts**

*BHSM Archives Collection*

Colberts Amusements had five rides in the early days, which consisted of the Merry-go-Round, a Ferris Wheel, a Kiddy Whip, a Roll-a-Plane, and sometimes a vaudeville act. There were no wild animals or girly shows, or shady 'con' men hawking wares. Those found to be dishonest were fired and word spread to others in the same business not to hire them. Colbert's ran a 'clean show' as their families lived and traveled the summers with them. They set an example for the children. It apparently worked since the children grew up and all had jobs with the show. In 1952 Bill separated from Bob and started Colbert's Fiesta with nine rides. Occasionally if Bill found he was on a particularly large site and needed more rides, his brother would join him.

Colberts did shows almost exclusively in Massachusetts so the various sponsors and towns got to



**Merry -Go-Round Family of Traveling Carnival Folks**

*BHSM Archives Collection*

know them and could plan for the next season. Over winter Bob and Bill would spruce up their equipment, paint where needed, and check the rides for safety. Meanwhile their children attended school. It worked like this, a group such as an American Legion or church group would 'sponsor'

<sup>1</sup> Sandrof, Ivan "Traveling Carnival Winters in Boylston," Telegram, n.d., ca.1950, BHSM news clipping collection.

<sup>2</sup> Sheikh, Betty Ann, "Believe Me, It Isn't Like You See on TV!" Telegram, July 23, 1967, BHSM news clip collection.



the show, set up ticket booths, refreshment stands and share some of the proceeds with the Colberts. It was a good fundraiser for the patron, and what child doesn't want to go to a carnival and the parents go with them to spend money on them. It was a win-win for the business and the fundraising group.

"The best season for carnivals, says Colbert, is warm evenings when people are walking and children are out of school."<sup>3</sup> May to Labor Day and occasionally into October; the worst time for a carnival is weather so hot no one wants to be out or weather with high winds that could knock down the big tent or knock over the booths. The worst was during the hurricane in 1938. But Robert Colbert knew what to lash down and when to strike down the big center poles so the loss was lessened.



**Pigmy Horse Event  
At Bill's Show in later years**  
*BHSM Archives Collection*

In the United States it is said that the traveling carnival had its roots in the 1893 Chicago World's Fair when technology and electrification were being showcased and advanced; thus cars, railway, and trolleys could bring the folks into the fairs where one might ride a Ferris wheel or a merry-go-round for the first time.<sup>4</sup> And rather than stationary, like an amusement park, the transportation over rails and trucks allowed for a carnival to move from town to town. Massachusetts also had its permanent amusement parks, for example Norumbega Park in Newton or Revere Beach near Boston. These kinds of permanent theme parks as well as the carnival had their roots in medieval festivals. The carnival, however, had the advantage of moving on wheels; thereby coming to your town to be part of a summer fair.

Robert's brother Denis "Bill" Colbert's Fiesta was still going strong on July 23, 1967 when the Sunday Telegram ran a several page article on his show and his life. By then he says his brother had died. Bob's sons still had a few rides and did join Bill on occasion if more rides were needed. Bill worked out of Westboro where the family lived when not traveling. By then rides and their home were on trailers with the rides easy to move, so gone were the days of putting up tents and breaking them down.

Most of us have wonderful memories of going to the carnival, but we would never have known about the carnival wintering in Boylston if it weren't for our Historical Society's collection of interesting news clippings. Stop by on Saturday or Sunday to browse through the Collection. We hope to feature other news events in future Friday's Fascinating Finds. If you remember Colbert's in Boylston, share those memories with us at [info@boylstonhistory.org](mailto:info@boylstonhistory.org).

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#### *Acknowledgements:*

Boylston Historical Society & Museum Archives Collection, Boylston, Massachusetts  
Editor, Nancy A. Filgate, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Director, Boylston, Massachusetts

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<sup>3</sup> Sandrof, 'Traveling Carnival Winters in Boylston'

<sup>4</sup> [www.carnival-legacies-the-birth-of-the-amusement-park](http://www.carnival-legacies-the-birth-of-the-amusement-park).