

Drollinger's Rides and the Flood of 1993

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Editor's Written Story

Drollinger's Rides is a well-known children's amusement park in Iowa City, started by Charlie Drollinger in 1952. For that year's Fourth of July celebration, old Charlie brought in a miniature train and a merry-go-round into City Park. Everyone loved it, and instead of putting the stuff in storage, the City said 'please, please don't take the rides out.' Well, Charlie didn't. He ran the park on weekends. My dad, Charlie Jr., took over in 1970, and now I run the place. I have always been really proud of my family owning a carousel and giving rides to children and grandmas and grandpas and mom and dads.

The biggest challenge we faced was, by far, the flood of 1993. The river flooded its banks and our park was covered by six feet of water. When the river receded it left a four-foot-high sandbar right in the middle of the park. The flood devastated the ride area, and ruined all the gears and motors on every ride.

It was going to take a lot of work to get it all working again, and be safe as well. My dad started talking about not reopening after the flood. I had to really think about closing the park. And in the week after the flood, Dad sold off the park, ride by ride, to different people—one from Texas, another from Cedar Falls, and so on.

I wasn't ready to face the fact that there was not going to be a merry-go-round in Iowa City again. Sure I knew what the work was like, 12 to 14 hours a day, seven days a week. But I wasn't sure I was ready to give up the park. I thought, we aren't the Drollingers if we don't have a merry-go-round to run.

So, I personally decided to save the park. I went to the bank and borrowed a bunch of money. I talked to each person who bought one of the rides. I agreed to give back the money they paid for the rides. In this way, one by one, I bought back the amusement park. It was very nice of all these people to sell me back the rides. In talking to them, they became aware of the importance of the park for the community.

There was only one person—the one who bought the miniature train—who wanted to make a profit on the deal. We paid him and got the train back. Then the cleanup began. We removed everything from the lot and scooped up tons of sand with a bobcat and backhoe. The city brought in gravel and repaved the lot. We put the towers back up and rebuilt everything.

It was a labor of love. If you spend any time in the park with me you can see that it is real important to the kids. Drollinger's Rides is a little place where families can spend time together. It does tug at your heartstrings even when it doesn't make money, because it makes you feel like a million bucks.