

# When the Fair Arrived by Train

by Troy Vollhoffer

It has been 28 years since the red, yellow and silver train hauling the “World’s Largest Midway” rumbled to a stop on the weed-grown rails of Regina’s Exhibition Park -- the last stop on the show’s summer tour across Canada.

“Between the dates, the long train rides were for social times and rest,” says Laura Sedlmayr, heir to the fallen midway.

Laura, who lives in Tampa, Fla., fondly remembers the summer trips to Canada and of course, Regina’s Buffalo Days, where in 1975 her father’s empire began its 24-year slide from world’s largest midway to a fair buff’s memory. She said the demise of the carnival had many reasons but the primary cause was personnel.

“We lost a lot of key people after we dropped the train, people who had been part of the show for most of their lives. You just don’t replace those folks”

Like the slogans on the sides of its passenger cars barked, Royal American Shows (RAS) was indeed the “world’s largest” touring midway in North America for much of the past century, residing atop the carnival heap from 1924 through the mid 80’s.

At its peak, RAS boasted a 96-car train -- transporting the carnival staff, carnival equipment and the presidential cars for the owner Carl Sedlmayr Jr, and his family. This method of touring gave the carnival the upper hand on show movement, keeping down travel costs by capitalizing on the fuel efficiency of train travel.

Though most railroads gave the train a third-class rating, making it take a siding for all other traffic, RAS made up the time on the road by assembling and dismantling the show with a well-rested and fed crew.

“The fastest I think we ever built the midway from unloading the train to being in operation was five hours. We had a very tight schedule between Edmonton and Regina when we closed at 12:00 am Sunday, morning, in Edmonton we had to be fully operational in Regina by 9:00 am Monday morning for Kids Day. The train enabled us to get good rest between cities to enable our staff to perform with this kind of efficiency,” explains Michael Sedlmayr, Laura’s brother.

Jack Swain, a former member of the Regina fair board, says a midway transported by truck can’t compare to one hauled by train. By truck, the midway arrives in pieces, truck by truck, over a period of several hours. By train, the midway arrives all at once. “In the 40s and 50s, it was quite an incredible thing to see when it came to town,” says Swain, adding the excitement was even greater then because children weren’t consumed by TV and video games.

Gord Staseson, a past president of the Regina Exhibition Association and longtime member of the fair board, says it was quite a sight to see Royal American unload the train. Small tractors rolled around the fairgrounds, pulling bright red and yellow trailers here and there. “It was like something out of movie,” he recalls of the buzz.

Ron Northcott, another former member of the Regina fair board, says he vividly remembers all the commotion Royal American caused when it pulled into the city. “It seems like there was more kids watching the load-in, than there would be at the fair some days,” he says.

In 1982, RAS toured for the first time without the train and by

1999 the midway was out of business, its assets auctioned off at the show’s winter quarters in Tampa.

The Western Canadian ‘A’ circuit -- which included Winnipeg’s Red River EX, the Calgary Stampede, Edmonton’s Klondike Days and Regina’s Buffalo Days -- was and generally remains a lucrative run for carnival companies. The fairs are long affairs by carnival standards, at least one week or more, and attract thousands and thousands of people. In the 1920s, most midways simply stopped in a city, set up, played for a few days and then left. Surprisingly few were featured attractions of fairs.

Royal American was awarded the Western Canadian ‘A’ fair circuit in 1934 with a hiatus from 1941 to 1945, when Canada’s Conklin Shows took over during the Second World War. Once the war was over, RAS hit the road with its famed 1946 victory tour and regained the Western Canadian ‘A’ circuit. The 1946 tour, under the guidance of RAS founder Carl Sedlmayr Sr., was greeted in Regina by the Western Canadian Fair board and honored for its return to Canada at the Hotel Saskatchewan.

That year’s version of the carnival could not be compared to any other. Sedlmayr Sr., known as the “King of the Carnival” by then, was in fine form, appearing nightly at the grandstand show’s conclusion, pitching his attractions on the midway to make sure no one left the Regina fair without a swing through the rides and games of chance. Sedlmayr Sr. also introduced Regina and Western Canada to some of the best side shows in the business. The all-black “Harlem in Havana” was a musical revue with choreographed dance and song, performed by women clad in very little clothing. The Motor Drome, a motorcycle show, featured a lion driving a motorcycle confined in a 30-foot x 30-foot cylinder.

Royal American prided itself on its headline talent. The Western show featured Lash Larue, star of film and stage in the 50’s and Gypsy Lee Rose and Sally Rand, the most sought-after exotic dancers of their time. RAS even gave Colonel Tom Parker his start in show business. Parker, of course, would later become famous as Elvis Presley’s personal manager.

The side shows of the smallest man in the world, the world’s largest woman and “The Gorilla Girl,” all played on the midway, with their own “barkers” who would sell the shows to fairgoers with the most exotic verbiage imaginable. Front banner lines painted in vibrant colors and neon lights spelled out the wonderful attractions inside the canvas tents.

Staseson says Royal American represented “the greatest period of outdoor showmanship. It was the classiest midway show that ever came to Canada.”

This type of showmanship was the difference between a great midway and a good midway, says Laura Sedlmayr. “My grandfather was the ultimate showman he was always in search of new attractions worldwide to implement on the midway. He was very concerned with operating a carnival that did not take advantage of the patron. He always had time for his staff and no matter how tired he was his door was always open.”

Swain says Sedlmayr Jr. kept the side shows long after they were making the midway money. “He kept them on the midway because they added class and prestige. It made Royal American different

from any other midway.”

The rides on the midway also set RAS apart. The Second World War created more technology in mechanics and Royal American was quick to embrace new rides. It was the only carnival of its kind to tour with four Ferris wheels placed side by side. The Seattle Wheel was a yearly attraction. Originally featured in the Elvis Movie, At the Worlds Fair, this custom-built RAS Ferris wheel was one of only two ever built. The Turbo, Super Loops, Sky Diver and the Sky Wheels -- two double Ferris Wheels that ran at the same time parallel to one another -- all made their original debuts on Royal American.

Laura says her father, like her grandfather, took great pride in his carnival's presentation.

“If it was muddy coming out of the last spot, the entire carnival was washed before opening in the next city,” she recalls. “He was very proud of having his equipment look like new at every spot and you would never find a light out on any of the rides or attractions, we had a paint crew who toured with the carnival and the painting was a never-ending job.”

Northcott, who spent two summers working for Royal American, says the American midway was a clean and safe operation. “I can't remember any major incidents concerning safety,” he says.

The rails in the south end of Regina's Exhibition park are long gone, not needed since 1975, the year Royal American made one last, tumultuous visit to Canada. The Sedlmayrs will tell you they had Western Canada wrapped up because they offered a superior carnival -- a clean, efficient marvel like no other -- but Canadian authorities believed something more sinister was going on. RAS management had always been quick to hand out gifts and trinkets -- key chains, ash trays, radios, almost anything with the tasteful RAS coat of arms on it. Southern businessmen of the gentlemen sort, the Sedlmayrs believed it was simply good business to share some of their largess with men of some influence. “In 1966, mom redecorated the entertainment coach and car 60, mom and dad's personal coach, to the tune of \$150,000.00,” Laura recalls, adding the two rail cars were often used for entertaining guests.

Revenue Canada and the RCMP, however, had been tipped off to the possibility of larger gifts -- brown envelopes with thousands of dollars in cash stuffed inside, anonymously left on the desks of fair directors across Western Canada.

Unbeknownst to the Sedlmayrs, Revenue Canada and the RCMP began a joint investigation in early 1975 into whether the Tampa-based carnival was paying kickbacks to fair directors in Western Canada. Plain-clothed officers followed the fair that summer, secretly gathering information by spying on the fair's management in Winnipeg, Calgary and Edmonton. Regina was the last stop on the tour, before the carnival headed south to Milwaukee, Wisc. It was time to make a move.

During their surveillance, the undercover officers had failed to witness any direct kickback payments to fair officials. But what they had witnessed in every city, over and over again, intrigued them even more -- the fair was raking in cash by the bundles and the police were sure Revenue Canada wasn't getting its fair share.

With the help of the Regina City Police, RCMP and federal agents raided RAS offices at Regina Exhibition Park on the basis of suspected tax evasion. Sedlmayr Jr., who had taken over the carnival from his father in 1966, was arrested and taken to jail. Many of the games of chance were confiscated and later sold at auction. Sedlmayr Jr. was later released, successfully arguing that he was taken into custody unlawfully. RAS paid its outstanding tax bill of

\$13,500.00 -- much less than the authorities had presumed -- and left town for Milwaukee and the Wisconsin State Fair.

Fair buffs didn't know it then, but it would be the last time the red, yellow and silver train would ever stop in Regina.

In the fall of 1975, charges were filed in Edmonton against Sedlmayr Jr for bribery of a municipal employee, the fair manager. The bribe cracked up to be a transistor radio, dining plates with the RAS logo and a colour television. The rumoured envelopes of cash were never found.

“It was not Royal American that was the problem,” says Swain. “It was the independent games concessions who were causing the problems.”

The Regina raid opened the door for Canada's largest carnival, Conklin Shows, to take over the Western Canadian 'A' circuit. Swain recalls other large American midways bidding for the circuit -- including the only one left that travels by train, James E. Strates Shows -- but Conklin was given the nod in part because it was Canadian.

It turned out to be a monumental break for Conklin as it has now taken RAS's place as the largest touring carnival in North America. In addition to the western 'A' fairs and the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto, Conklin has added three B fairs in the west and seven major fairs in the U.S. to its yearly itinerary.

Its outstanding tax bill paid, Royal American could have tried to again stake a claim in Canada in 1976, but Sedlmayr Jr., stung by the undercover investigation and ensuing raid, vowed never to cross the border again. “The embarrassment was too great, I think,” says Swain.

Laura agrees. “Dad felt the business (in Canada) was a loss,” she says with a hint of regret. “But most of all dad missed all the friends he had made over the 30 years of his annual tour of Western Canada.”