

Roy Wilsey and Kiddieland

By Grace Boyle

Shasta County Historical Society Scholarship

February 28, 2012

**BRING THE FAMILY
TO
WILSEY PARK
KIDDIELAND
IN THE
Northwest Corner of Lake Redding Park**

- MERRY-GO-ROUND
- FERRIS WHEEL
- BOATS
- AIRPLANES
- CARS
- TRAIN RIDES
- MINI-GOLF
- CONCESSION STAND

SUMMER HOURS: 2:00 - 5:00 and 7:00 - 9:00 P.M. Weekdays
3:00 - 9:00 P.M. Weekends
CLOSED MONDAYS

PARTIES BY APPOINTMENT

Owned and Operated by
THE RIDGING YIMINS CLUB
at the
Y. M. C. A. Building Fund

DESIGNED FOR CHILDREN - YOUNG OR OLD

Roy Wilsey and Kiddieland

Preface

As an 18 year old Senior at West Valley High School, one of my favorite things to do is to go to amusements parks with my family. Whether its Disneyland or Six Flags in Vallejo, I love riding rides with my friends and family. When I discovered that my great-great grandfather, Roy Wilsey, created and operated an amusement park in Redding many years ago, it fascinated me and made me want to find out more about Kiddieland but also about my great-great grandfather Roy Wilsey.

Roy Wilsey

Roy Wilsey as a young man



Roy Wilsey was born on December 5 1889, at the home of Eugene and Eliza Wilsey. His home was 20 miles east of Redding on Cedar Creek. When Roy was old enough to go to school, the family moved to Redding in the winter so he could attend the first grade in town. As Roy started second grade, the family had homesteaded the place on Cow Creek and so he then went to Eureka School on Highway 299E on the Lemm Place. As Roy grew up, he worked on his farm and also worked at the Terry Lumber Co. Flume for 3 years. Roy went to Willows in the spring of 1908 and worked there as a carpenter and at the post office. In the winter of 1909, he went home for Christmas and soon met a teacher named Lottie Sutton who taught at the French Creek School

and who also happened to be boarding with the Wilsey family.¹ As Roy was living in Willows they saw each other occasionally and kept in touch through mail. On February 10, 1912 they wed in the Sutton home in Orland. Roy and Lottie had five children, 4 girls and 1 boy. The girls' names were Charlotte, Eleanor, Phyllis, and Joan. Clarence was the youngest and only boy. Roy worked in the post office and also as a carpenter from 1913 to 1920. In 1920, the family moved to the Wilsey ranch to help Roy's dad, whose health was failing. When Roy's father died in 1921, Roy brought the farm from his mother and he ran it for 25 years. Roy and Lottie were active in community affairs. They were members of the Redding Presbyterian Church and had the responsibility of the Bella Vista Sunday School for many years. In 1930 Roy helped organize the Millville Grange and served as its leader for 4 years. Roy was active in the Gideons for 20 years and served as County Supervisor from 1954 to 1958.²

Tragedy struck the Wilsey family when Roy's only son, Clarence, died from an illness that stemmed from his time of service in World War II. After Clarence's death in 1946, he and Lottie sold the Wilsey Ranch, and moved to Redding. It was here, during his retirement years, that he opened up an amusement park named Kiddieland in which Lottie and Roy operated and worked for thirteen years. In 1961, Roy turned the operation of Kiddieland over to the YMCA. The YMCA operated Kiddieland for another thirteen years. In 1974, due to lack of funding and due to the condition of the rides, Kiddieland closed and all its rides and equipment were sold at a public auction. Lottie Wilsey passed away from cancer in 1966. Roy Wilsey was 91 years old when he passed away in 1980. They are both buried in the Redding Cemetery.

¹ *Wilsey File*, Shasta County Historical Society Pioneer Files

² *Ibid.*

Preparing for Kiddieland

When Roy Wilsey retired in 1946, he soon began to develop stomach problems. When he went to the doctor, the doctor informed Roy that he should stay busy in his retirement years with a hobby of his choice. It was also at this time that Roy and Lottie began spending a lot of time with their friends in Sacramento. In Sacramento, Roy and Lottie often visited William Land Park. This Sacramento Park consisted of amusement rides for children as well as animals. The more Roy and Lottie visited William Land Park in Sacramento, the more they became convinced they could build something similar to William Land Park in Redding.

As Roy began planning Kiddieland in his mind, he felt he needed a merry-go-round to get the Redding Park started. Roy found what he was looking for in Leavenworth, Kansas. Leavenworth was home to the world famous C.W Parker Carousel Company. Much of Roy and Lottie's life savings was spent on a 1917 C.W. Parker Carousel. The Wilseys purchased the carousel for \$10,000. Lottie Wilsey's diary³ describes the 1949 summer trip she and Roy took to go and get the carousel. The diary describes how Roy did business with Paul Parker, the son of C.W. (Charles Wallace) Parker. Lottie's diary also describes how Paul Parker took Roy and Lottie to visit Paul's mom, the widow of C.W Parker. By mid-June, Roy and Lottie brought the carousel back to Redding by truck. In an interview with the Record Searchlight in August of 1953, Roy Wilsey shared that when he returned from Leavenworth, Kansas, he was surprised when the California State Board of Equalization told him he would have to pay sales tax on the \$10,000 carousal even though they bought it in Kansas.

³ *Lottie Wilsey Diary*, June 1949

The final thing that Roy Wilsey needed to do before he opened Kiddieland was to negotiate with the city of Redding. The city decided to take up Roy's offer to turn over 5 percent of his gross revenue from Kiddieland in exchange for a lease of the Kiddieland property in the northwest corner of Lake Redding Park.

1960's Advertisement for Kiddieland

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Kiddieland Opens

Roy Wilsey opened Kiddieland in the summer of 1949. During its first summer, Kiddieland was basically the merry-go-round, some exhibits and concessions, and a few live animals for viewing. By the following summer, Roy had added three more rides as well as a train with an 1/8 mile track that encircled the Kiddieland Park. A miniature golf course was also added a few years later.

Roy's daughter Eleanor and her two children, Shirley and Kenny, lived on the Kiddieland grounds and served as caretakers of the park. Kenny Williams, who is 72 years old and currently lives in Calipatri, CA, fondly remembers his teenage years working for Grandpa Roy.

“Kiddieland was our life and our income. Grandpa (Roy) paid my sister and me \$10 a day to clean the animal cages and be caretakers of the park.”⁴

Kenny also remembered that his Grandpa Roy could build and fix anything. When Wilsey decided that he that he wanted to add more rides, he, at first, shopped around and found an airplane ride which cost \$1,550. Roy thought that was a little steep so he got plans and built the ride himself. Roy ended up building the car ride and the boat ride as well. Kenny Williams remembers many trips to Sacramento with Grandpa Roy to get World War II scrap and surplus pontoons. Wilsey made the boat ride out of these pontoons and he also put the names of his grandchildren on each of the boats.⁵

The biggest money maker of Kiddieland was the merry-go-round, but the most popular ride was the airplanes, which didn’t have as many passengers as the merry-go-round. Kenny Williams remembers days in the summer where there was standing room only in the park. The busiest day at Kiddieland was the Fourth of July. In 1953, the Fourth of July saw the rides take in \$350.⁶ With the rides being just 10 cents a piece, it made for a busy day for the ride operators.

Kiddieland Airplane Ride (Photo 1970)



Roy also had many varieties of animals in Kiddieland. People sometimes even brought in wild animals to be part of Kiddieland. Most of the animals were kept at the park year round. Wilsey loved to show off the animals to the children because he felt many of the local Redding children would not get to see these animals in the wild.

⁴ Kenny Williams, interview by author, January 29, 2012

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Redding Record Searchlight*, August 18, 1953

The animals included ringtail doves, raccoons, coyotes, a goat, a badger, a ringtail monkey and a spider monkey named Jocko. Jocko was a family favorite. When Roy Wilsey bought the monkeys from Florida, he knew the kids would especially enjoy the spider monkey so he had a contest to name him. Jocko was often seen out of his cage and running across a guide wire about 10 feet off the ground. One day Jocko got off his chain, climbed up a power pole and touched the electric wire. Unfortunately, that was the end of Jocko.

When Wilsey decided the park needed a miniature golf course, he built himself. He proceeded to design it in his head and make the windmills and traps out of whatever he could find. When he built the big train, he put a Briggs and Stratton engine in it and he had enough train cars to hold up to 30 people on each train ride.

Concessions were a big part of Kiddieland. Kiddieland served a variety of food items including cotton candy, candy bars, soda, and hot dogs. All of the food was sold at a very inexpensive price. There were also little toys that sold well such as glider balsa wood airplanes. Near the concessions, there was also a little amusement/exhibit area which had a pond with ducks and a miniature train.

Magical Place for Redding Families

There were many people in the town of Redding that enjoyed the wonders and works of Kiddieland. Penny Bartsch, a teacher of Shasta Lake School, was one of them. In her article to Shasta Historical Society⁷, she writes that, "Kiddieland was a magical place for me and my three brothers, who grew up at Lake Almanor." She remembered that the kiddie boats and airplanes,

⁷ *Kiddieland File*, Shasta County Historical Society

the merry-go-round, little train, the cotton candy, kettle corn, and snow cones were the Redding equivalent of Disneyland, which her family couldn't afford to visit. "I especially remember the carousel/merry-go-round....the excitement of getting on and off while it was still in motion." She also mentions that her dad would take home videos of her and her brothers with his father's



Kiddieland Carousel (Photo 1970)

movie camera, while riding the merry-go-round and the boats and airplanes.

One of the biggest reasons that Kiddieland was so special to so many was because of the hospitality of the Wilseys. Always seen wearing his long sleeve, blue, cotton shirt, Roy loved playing host to

Shasta County families. Kenny Williams remembered that Roy and Lottie knew most all of the families in town. Parents trusted Roy and his family to leave their kids in the park for hours or even half the day. Kenny also remembers that Roy and Lottie developed a close relationship with the Limm Family of Redding as the Wilseys would eat at Limm's Café every Saturday morning before heading off to operate Kiddieland.

YMCA Takes Over Operation

In 1961, Roy and Lottie Wilsey turned the operation of Kiddieland over to the Shasta County Y.M.C.A. Due to health concerns, Roy and Lottie Wilsey decided they could not continue managing Kiddieland. In a contract dated March 6th, 1961, the Wilseys agreed to transfer ownership of Kiddieland to Shasta County Y.M.C.A. in exchange for yearly payments of \$1,200.⁸ These payments were to continue as long as either Roy or Lottie was still alive.

⁸ *Kiddieland File*, Shasta County Historical Society

The Y.M.C.A. desired to continue to offer family-oriented entertainment at a reasonable price. The Y.M.C.A. continued to charge just 10 cents a ride. They also enhanced Kiddieland in the mid 1960's by adding a small Ferris Wheel as well as other rides and exhibits. Shasta County Y.M.C.A. placed the proceeds they received from Kiddieland into its building fund. Ed Reed, president of the club in the mid 1960's, said that Kiddieland is part of the YMCA's effort to encourage Christian relationships among young people and to provide a good healthy atmosphere for relaxation and entertainment.⁹

Kiddieland Rides Away

It was a sad day in Redding when the Y.M.C.A. decided in 1974 to close Kiddieland Park and put all of its rides up for sale. The Record Searchlight article "Kiddieland Rides Away to Greener Fields" by Glenn Hassenpflug goes in depth and insight of the closing of Kiddieland. The writer mentions the blissful memories of what Kiddieland had to offer for children, "...pictures of laughing faces sticky with cotton candy and of flying hair and the flush of their cheeks." It gives you a melancholy feeling when the writer says that Kiddieland will "leave behind a silent, battered superstructure of bolts and gears, peeling paint, and cast-iron horses."

As upkeep costs rose, the park's use gradually dwindled and the miniature golf course fell into disrepair. The small zoo closed in 1966 due to amid complaints about the condition of its animals. The raccoons, monkeys and birds were sold and the bobcat returned to its previous owner. Arl Anderson, club treasurer of YMCA in 1974, recalls that people stopped coming to

⁹ *Shasta County Y.M.C.A. Newsletter*, May 15, 1976

the park as “the train didn’t run anymore, plus teenagers were gulping beer and cruising the park road in pickups and otherwise using the park as a cosmic drive-in parking lot.”¹⁰ The heavy destruction of the park set in the spring of 1973. Teenagers would climb the fence smashing several airplanes together and they would break off their propellers and tails.

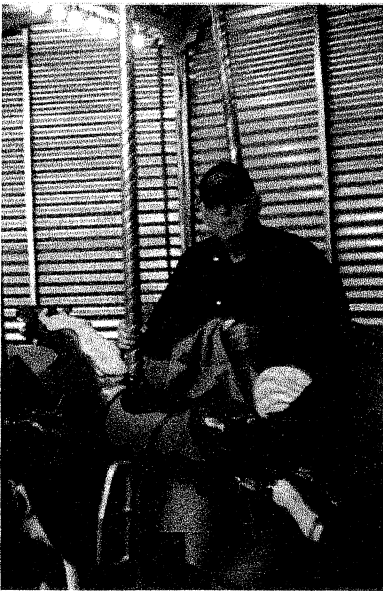
Kiddieland’s rides and equipment went up for auction on May 18, 1976 with all of the proceeds going toward the Y.M.C.A. Building Fund. The Y.M.C.A. received \$1,950 for the train, \$400 for the Ferris Wheel, and \$250 for the airplane ride. Instead of selling the merry-go-round as a whole, the merry-go-round horses were sold individually for \$100 a piece. All but six of the merry-go-round horses were sold. Folks came as far as Alaska and Los Angeles to bid on the Kiddieland equipment. In all, the Y.M.C.A. made over \$6,000 from the Kiddieland auction.

The Legacy of Roy Wilsey and Kiddieland

Even though it’s been 37 years since it closed for good, Kiddieland’s centerpiece ride still exists and is in operation. The 1917 C.W. Parker Carousel is now part of the Museum of Historical Rust here in Redding. Jim Beursken, the owner of the museum and carousel, bought the carousel from a Mr. Harris in Mountain Gate where the carousel had sat for years. Beursken restored it to working condition and decided to put it to use. Even today, Jim hosts youth events and parties at his private historical museum. He even fires up the old 1917 C.W. Parker Carousel and in a small way, Kiddieland still exists for Shasta County’s youth.

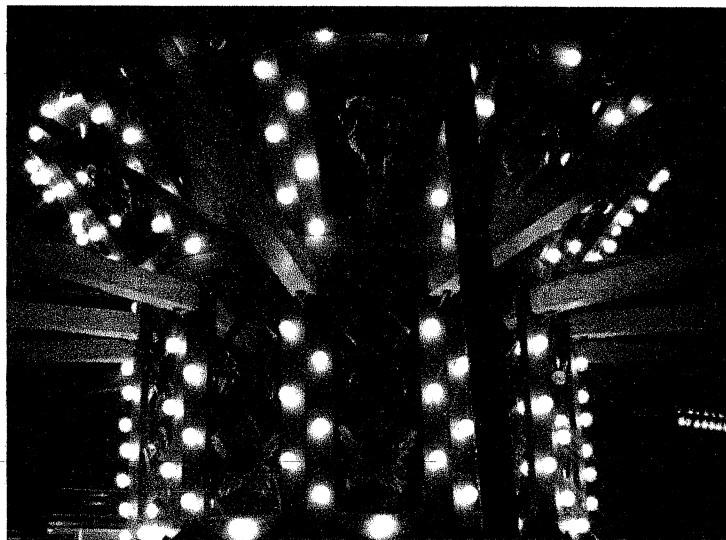
¹⁰ *Shasta County Y.M.C.A. Newsletter*, May 15, 1976

Jim Beursken, owner of Museum of Historical Rust,
with restored carousel horse



Roy Wilsey and Kiddieland will always have a special place in heart of many Shasta County residents. Many fondly remember the sounds of the Merry Go Round, the smell of popcorn, the sight of monkeys, and the sound of the Kiddieland train whistle. Kiddieland was the central meeting place in Redding for birthday parties, school events, family reunions, and good old fashioned fun for close to three decades.

Roy Wilsey loved bringing family entertainment at an inexpensive price to the families of Shasta County. He will be forever remembered as the quiet man in the cotton blue shirt who brought Kiddieland to Lake Redding Park.



Inside Artwork and Light of the 1917 CW Foster Carousel

References

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Wilsey File, Shasta County Historical Society Pioneer Files