

Another Show On The Road

by Leighton R. Scott, Jr.

When the first good suns of April burn away the winter gloom from the Back Mountain sky, a line of bright-painted trucks thunders out of a hollow near Lehman and down Route 118 toward New York carnival grounds. The show is on!

Reithoffer Shows of Dallas is one of the biggest truck-transported shows in the East. Local residents know the enterprise chiefly through its owner, Pat Reithoffer, Jr., former Dallas School teacher and Episcopal churchman, and his lovely wife, Bette, who sees the kids through school here before heading for the midway.

Residents of up-state Pennsylvania and New York know the show by the fine job it does in American Legion carnivals, church bazaars, and county fairs like Bloomsburg and Watertown, N.Y.

In its March 16, 1956, issue, The Post told of the beginnings of the Show, and how three generations of amazing Reithoffers, from Grandfather Julius who started

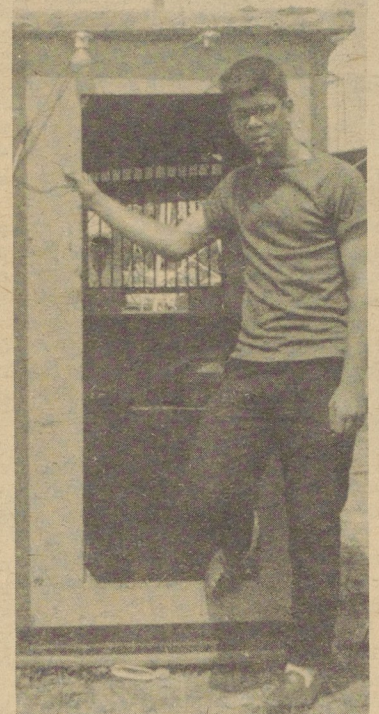
main unit, has been with Reithoffer's since he was a kid. He is highly respected by the men, and maintains a heavyhanded method of getting jobs done when necessary. Donis Chief Mechanic, makes individual things run while helping Al run everything as a whole. He has a quiet, strong sense of humor, and has learned to get along quite well without any sleep at all.

America was, at best, colorful thievery, mystery and romance. The twentieth century has slipped mechanization and virtue of reputation in under the tent-flap. If a man drinks on the job, or attempts to promote his own good-will with lady-customers, to a point beyond exchange of pleasantries, on company time, he is subject to immediate dismissal or severe discipline by

now and again is: "Carnivals went out with the horse." This is not so. Carnivals like Reithoffer Shows have simply evolved into impressive business-like operations, feeling out modern needs for entertainment. Pat discovered the thrill-starved "development" areas of Long Island, where thousands of moderately well-off families want to let off steam and money. Churches and veterans' organizations sponsor small carnivals, and Reithoffer's enjoys a reputation on the Island for reliability. Various of the Show's units operate carnivals all over the Island, and a few places in lower Pennsylvania, at the same time. And the County Fairs continue to be great attractions.

There are, as I have said, usually several young men from the Dallas area who are "with it" every season. One of the first things they learn is how to be amiably tough, which means that they have to show they can do things that they don't know how to do. This is accomplished through trial and error. If a man tries to talk his way around a job, he is a "prima donna", showing that he is well on his way toward establishing himself as a "yo-yo". A good carnie becomes versatile through experience, and he may get some bruises in the meantime.

I have walked down many a main street, my image mirrored in the fearful eyes of the gentle townspeople who hide their babies and mutter to each other: "Beware of the carnie". I exaggerate, but you get the point. Reithoffer Shows is a good show, with safe rides, and in order to keep them safe, the men get a little dirty with grease, etc.. Sometimes there is not time nor convenience to shave. Once in a while a lot will have no water, and if a trailer has no room for another occupant, one sleeps between the Merry-Go-Round horses. So a ride-man gets a little brutal-looking now and then. But it is the customer who causes trouble--the one who comes to the carnival or fairgrounds with a pocketful of cash and a pre-con-



The author tests rigidity of ticket-booth.

ceived notion that he is going to get fleeced. The Reithoffer ride-man's instructions under such a situation is to try to satisfy the customer fairly and quietly. The infamous "Hey Rube" is practically unknown.

The hardest part of the showman's week is tearing down and moving to a new spot. Saturday is generally the last day for a Fair, and invariably the busiest because so many people have time to go out only on that day. Often there is time only for a cold sandwich and a cup of such rare potables as "Mother Glynn's Complexion Juice" before running back to help your partner handle the long lines of delirious customers. At the stroke of midnight Cinderella's coach turns into a big snorting semi-trailer rig, and the show folds like a road-map. Pat's big diesel power-

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The "squat" starts to take shape.

with one Merry-Go-Round to Pat, Jr., who now runs the show, weathered the Depression and the obsolescence of early motor vehicles to make the enterprise what it is today. Since that issue of 1956, in 1960 to be exact, this writer travelled with Reithoffer's as a ride-operator. His experience is, we feel, fairly representative of the experience of Dallas showmanship on the road—how people respond to a carnival, and how the carnival responds to the people.

Reithoffer Shows has well over 50 rides which divide into units for carnivals. Most of these units come together for the larger fairs. All equipment is transported by truck. A truck-show has considerably more mobility than a railroad-show. Fairly ordinary-looking trailers open up into immense rides and fun-houses, and some of the most ingenious ones were designed by Pat Reithoffer, Jr., and executed in the Dallas winter-quarters. In addition, there are countless concessions, cook-stands ("grab-joints"), and shows. There is even a rock

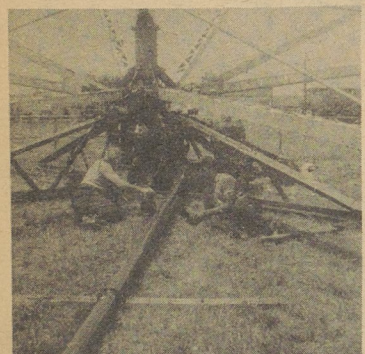
A certain contingent of area people travels with the show every season. Many have been with the outfit since the thirties. The younger ones, though, usually leave after a

the Chief himself. Pat taught in the Dallas Borough-Kingston Township School System, and knows how to handle big kids.

A quote one hears on TV every



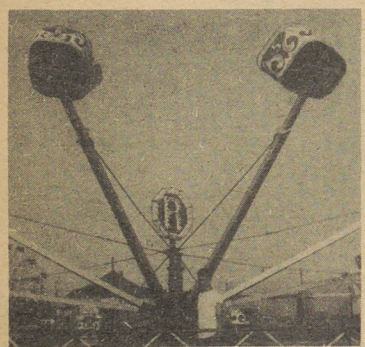
"Brylcreem" makes its nationally known well-groomed-couple-on-Ferris-Wheel TV ad, using one of the mighty Reithoffer Wheels.



Showtime finery for the Octopus.

and roll show, which drives the youth of towns along the way into wild fits.

The atmosphere of a travelling show is anything but lighthearted and fancy-free, and O-for-the-Open-Road. Ask anyone "with it", and he'll tell you he's not coming out next year. About the only worries that you have that carnival families don't have is door-to-door salesmen and rats in the cellar.



The show ready to roll, the "Ock", all spit-and-polish, stands at attention for review by her master (in clever disguise).

Two area men, Don Hoyt of Dallas and Al Besciglia, Orange, are the motion department of the show. Al, Ride-Superintendent for the

season or two, as show business—often a matter of rain and stale hot dogs—tends to weed out all but the most restless minds.

Carnies, that is, people who work in any capacity for the show, divide roughly into three categories: Ride-help, concessionaires, and superintendents. When the "joint"-operators finish the season with Reithoffer Shows, they go south with their concessions to other shows. Although most of the ride-men are transient, often disappearing from the face of the earth for years at a time, some of the regulars stay on with the superintendents at the winter quarters in Lehman to make repairs on the rides and to paint them.

I held a position with Reithoffer Shows as "Second-man" on the Octopus. Other standard rides, each with average crews of two or three, are the Scrambler, Chair-o-Plane, Tilt-o-Whirl, Bumper Cars, and the old favorites, the Merry-Go-Round, and the Ferris Wheel, all trimmed with various colored lights. In the background of all these things going around and around is recorded calliope music playing at full blast, a laugh-house or two which belches forth continuous recorded hysteria from several speakers, and the strange grey sound of thousands of people having a good time.

Reithoffer Shows, like all shows, is a business. Unlike other businesses, a carnival's function is to dispense pure pleasure to people who come to the midway for pleasure. This may lend to the guy who hands you three darts for a quarter or takes your ticket for a ride more of the aspect of the devil than you find in a commuter's face, but he's just a businessman at heart.

In order to maintain the business at top efficiency, and in an endeavor to give as high a quality show as possible, Pat keeps iron discipline among his men. Gone are the days of the dog-eared gypsy bands of little shows whose reputation in small towns all over Europe and

Showpeople unhitch themselves from their work momentarily for The Post's camera—managers, riders, baby carnies, and ambulatory restaurateurs. Many are Back Mountain area folks.

