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# TONS *of* FUN SHOWS

by Kevin Freese



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One of Ben Pfeffer's fondest childhood memories is of the day his uncle's Reverchon Screamin' Demon was delivered. The open-top Himalaya was a significant purchase for his uncle Patrick Imes who also brought along family friend and show painter Dennis Gilli to take delivery of it.

"The three of us went to breakfast before we saw the ride come in," recalls Ben. "The Himalaya arrived on a rollback trailer, and we watched them unload it. We took it to the first location and set it up with the help of a crew." Even though Ben was still a kid, Uncle Pat valued his opinion when setting up pieces for the first time. As the exciting new attraction's parts were laid out, Ben displayed his natural inclination for the mechanics of rides by correctly pointing to where things went. With his assistance, it didn't take long to get the Screamin' Demon up and running. "Dennis always loved to tell that story whenever I saw him in Gibtown," says Ben.

While Ben has many childhood recollections of the carnival business it would be fair to say that some of his best memories are yet to come. The young showman began a new phase of his career this year as he took over the reigns of his family's carnival—Tons of Fun Shows based in Douglassville, Pennsylvania.

"I've been the general manager for about seven years now, so becoming the show's primary owner has been an easy transition," states Ben. In his role

as GM, Ben oversaw operations, laying out the lot, and financing as well as other duties. He became more involved with committees over the past three years in preparation for this season.

Tons of Fun Shows was founded in 1991 by Ben's parents, David and Suellen Pfeffer. Both David and Suellen grew up in the industry and were familiar with the positive and negative aspects of raising a family on the road. They formed Tons of Fun with the idea of balancing family and career, maintaining a route that was close to home and focusing on quality in every detail of their business. Along with their children, David and Suellen have adhered to their business plan while expanding the scope of their midway through the years.

Within the last two seasons, Tons of Fun has grown to a 23-ride show thus boosting their lineup by about ten attractions. Customer favorites include the Zipper, Hurricane, Rock and Roll music ride, and Super Sizzler. A number of new pieces were acquired from S & S Amusements when the Swika family liquidated the show after the passing of Steve Swika Jr. A Cliff Hanger, Fun House, Loop-O-Plane, Red Barron, and Quadzilla were all among the S & S rides purchased by Tons of Fun. The rapid expansion of rides is noteworthy, but it is just the beginning for the carnival as they continue to grow heading into 2019.

A new amusement wheel from Czech Republic-manufacturer Bojux will be the latest ride for Tons of Fun when it joins the show in time for the new year. The one-trailer attraction stands over 80-feet tall and features 18 gondolas, A-frame towers, and all stainless fencing. "It's a gorgeous ride, and I can't wait to receive it," says Ben.

Tons of Fun Shows owned a 16-seat Nittany wheel when David started the company. The ride was cable-driven and had been in operation for several years when Tons of Fun purchased it. With the hopes of buying a newer, rim-driven wheel, David sold the Nittany. It took several years of searching for the right fit—during which time Ben contemplated building his own wheel—before fellow showman Rickey Moore of Moore's Greater Shows called one day. "Rickey represents Bojux and he saw their wheels while he was over in the Czech Republic at their headquarters," explains Ben. "He started sending me pictures of it right away because he knew I was in the market for a wheel with those types of specifications." Bojux was eager to introduce their product to the U.S., and Tons of Fun secured a deal for the major ride.

The Bojux wheel owned by Tons of Fun Shows is scheduled to debut

in Gibtown at the IISF tradeshow in February. Ben is currently finalizing his plans to decorate the ride with LED lighting—a project he has decided to take on himself. Weighing all his options, Ben is nearly as excited about the lighting package as he is about the wheel itself. “The advent of LED lighting and the beautiful displays possible on wheels has really brought that type of ride back into fashion,” he says. “Wheels are the centerpiece of the midway again.”

In addition to the new wheel, Tons of Fun Shows will premiere the Quadzilla in 2019. The show has been refurbishing it during the season, and Ben would like to book it in the south during the winter months since he will be in the region attending to the new wheel. “It’s really an exciting time for the show,” says Ben. There is no doubt that he contemplates his family’s legacy in the carnival business as he ushers in this new era for Tons of Fun.

On his dad’s side, it was Ben’s grandfather Otto Pfeffer that got the family started in the carnival business. As a boy in Pottsville, Pennsylvania, Otto used to watch with amazement whenever the circus came to town. He caught the showbiz bug early but

dedicated many years tending to his family before joining the industry. His father died shortly after returning from World War I, leaving Otto to take on a great deal of responsibility for his mother and sister. As the son of a widow, he did not go to World War II. Still interested in the amusement industry, it was with military spare parts after the war that Otto built his first attraction—a kiddie rocket constructed of P 51 Mustang external fuel tanks. More homemade rides came next and Otto’s Amusements was born. “He started out in Pennsylvania’s coal region, playing block parties at first,” says Ben. As the show grew, so did Otto’s ride lineup. A big fan of King Rides, Ben believes his grandfather owned just about every ride the manufacturer produced at one time or another.

Otto passed away in 2011, but Ben’s grandmother Harriet continues to operate Otto’s Amusements. She is assisted by her son Chuck as well as her daughter and son-in-law Donna and Ron Kramer. Two of Harriet’s other sons are also involved in the business.

After growing up on Otto’s Amusements, Ben’s dad left the show to join Amusements of Rochester for a period of time. He also traveled with the green unit of Reithoffer Shows before founding Tons of Fun.

Ben’s mom Suellen grew up on the show owned by her father, the late Warren Imes who purchased Oscar’s Amusements in 1979. He acquired the show from the family of Oscar McDougal, the show’s founder who had passed away at the time of the transition. Before entering World War II as an MP, Warren picked up milk bottles at a fair in Virginia one summer. He loved the game business and he decided that he should do something in life that he enjoyed after sustaining the stresses of war. He purchased a home for his family and about five games with the money from his GI Bill. Life was good for several years, operating games at county fairs across the region. “That all changed one day at the Bloomsburg Fair when the military picked him up and sent him to Korea,” tells Ben.

Warren returned to the industry when he got back from the Korean War, involving the entire family in the business. It was with his own recollections of that first job in a milk bottle concession that Warren created a new way to operate the game. Reducing the number of bottles from about eight to three, and shortening the customer’s distance from the bottles, Warren’s version of the bottle toss appealed to midway guests. It was such a success that he operated several units of them—sending his children to other shows where they would book in with the game. “That’s how my parents met,” explains Ben. “My mom travelled with Otto’s Amusements.”





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Along with Suellen, Warren’s other children have spent many years in the business except for son Michael who became a well-known artisan. Suellen’s brother Patrick now operates Oscar’s Amusements. Two other brothers—Steven and Joey—owned games but have now retired from the business. Her sister, Dee, married John Ketchum and they travel with Wade Shows. “All of Aunt Dee’s children are in the business, so there is a lot of family traveling within the industry right now,” says Ben.

Now in his thirties, Ben was six years old when his parents founded Tons of Fun. He purchased his first ride when he was still in high school and increasingly became involved in the family business with each passing year. “I truly love the industry,” he says.

And there was a lot to love in 2018. Ben reports that it was a good season for Tons of Fun, though it was tough work dodging rain throughout the year. For the first time in show history, Tons of Fun had a sponsor decide to teardown early—losing a Saturday—because weather forecasts were so dire.

“Ironically, that happened about four more times after that,” notes Ben.

Luckily, the show and their event partners recorded strong numbers prior to cancelled days. “I think a lot of people decided to visit us on Tuesdays and Wednesdays because they were looking at the weather,” suggests Ben. Thursdays have also become a very big day for Tons of Fun over the past few years, attracting some of the best gross numbers in the show’s history. Several new locations showed great promise for Tons of Fun and many of their longstanding venues held strong.

Ben attributes a lot of the show’s success this year to their investment in social media marketing. He says that Facebook has been a great resource for them and has helped him track data related to advertising much better than in the past. The show also purchased the C.A.T. software two years ago which has helped tremendously in keeping track of overall numbers.

As the carnival expands, Tons of Fun Shows will be staffing more employees in 2019. “We’re at a point where we

need to get on board with foreign labor,” says Ben. “We’ve signed up with JKJ Workforce, so we can get in the pool for workers.”

Tons of Fun Shows may be growing, but their values remain true to their founding principles. “My parents have always strived to offer a family friendly, wholesome operation and that’s the type of business I want to continue,” says Ben.

The show ended the season with an event that is close to their heart—a homecoming celebration organized by the Fleetwood Fire Company in Fleetwood, PA. Tons of Fun has provided rides at their larger, summer festival for the past three decades. The fall event is only one-day long and serves as the perfect cap to the year from Ben’s perspective. It is a chance to reflect on the memories created throughout the season and to anticipate the road ahead. There certainly is much more to come. ■