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Skinner's Amusements-Celebrating 110 Years of Family Owned and Operated Fun

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Pat Skinner, the matriarch of the Skinner Amusements company, is certainly proud of her family's accomplishments in the carnival industry over the last 110 years. The company began in Crystal Lake, Illinois in 1910; her husband Doug's grandfather, George, started it all. He was a farmer in Indiana who lost his arm in a shredding accident. Unable to farm due to this incident, he looked around for a new way to make a living. He saw a Merry Go Round at an event and this sparked his interest. Soon after, he purchased a steam engine Merry Go Round to put up at various events. Skinner says she learned the origin story from her father-in-law; back in George Skinner's day, he would bring his steam engine Merry Go Round to events similar to large picnics. "He certainly turned a tragedy into a great opportunity," says Skinner.

As time went on, George acquired more rides and moved around the state a bit. Fast forward to present day and you'll find 5th generation Skinners out on the midway; "we are in our 5th generation of the show. It's complete family owned and operated," says Skinner. Skinners Amusements is considered a 40-miler by people in the industry. This means there are no large jumps from state to state and Skinner as well as other members of her family, are able to go home at night if they so choose. "Our employees are local people to the area, we also have a lot of high school and college kids work for us in the Summer," says Skinner. While most of their employees head home at the end of the day, Skinner Amusements also offers bunkhouses. According to Skinner, the family is happy with their route and there are no immediate plans to expand. "We tried to venture out of Illinois years ago but the bottom line got weaker and weaker so we stick with what we know," says Skinner.

Doug Skinner grew up on the midway, he would spend his summers out with his family working and would pick up different jobs, like construction gigs, in the wintertime. As the company grew, maintenance was required year-round so he no longer had different jobs in the winter and focused all of his attention on the show. Pat Skinner did not grow up in the carnival industry, she met her husband at an event when he was running the Ferris Wheel. In their current positions, Pat coordinates the locations for the route while Doug and son, Doug Jr., manage the employees and maintain the equipment.

Currently, Skinner's Amusements' midway is comprised of about 35 rides as well as some food stands and games. Pat's daughter-in-law, Renata, owns some of the food stands and games, and her grandson, Jered, is getting into the business with some games as well. Skinner says they play about 25 events a year starting May 1st and running through the middle of October; the family plays three county fairs and the rest of their spots are festivals and other special events. "We put up at least 20 rides a week in our season and grow to about 30 for our county fairs," says Skinner. Many of Skinner's Amusements locations have been on their route for 40 years or more but there is always new interest in their carnival, "we've built up a great reputation for ourselves in the area. Our phone rings off the hook," says Skinner.



Skinner Family (left to right)- Doug Jr. & Renata, Doug Sr. & Pat; Amy & Jered Skinner

While the Skinner family is happy with their current size and status, Pat is careful to “never say never” when asked about expansion of both a route and inventory. “We buy some new piece of equipment just about every year,” says Skinner. Last year, they purchased a new generator and may be interested in another this year. Skinner Amusements will be attending the 2020 IISF Trade Show to take a look at some new pieces.

Being in the business for so long gives Pat the opportunity to reflect on changes within the carnival industry, especially technological changes. Skinner remembers relying on the electric utility company ComEd to help wire their rides using a transformer to keep the rides operating. “Back in the day, rides were operated using gas and now everything is electric,” says Skinner. She believes there are great benefits to new technology in the industry but certainly some challenges as well.

When asked about plans to celebrate their 110th anniversary, Skinner mentioned they had a large celebration for their 100th year and earlier this month hosted their committees to celebrate the longevity of their company with food, drinks, and great music at the Illinois Association of Agricultural Fairs convention in Springfield. As the 2020 season approaches, Skinner adds, “weather is our partner and we really hope the guy upstairs works better with us this year because we had a lot of rain in the Spring of 2019.” Pat Skinner and her family look forward to another strong season together.



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