

# Officials hope carousel at former SIDC can be saved

By **SHERY BOSCHERT**  
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Seen from a distance, the 18 brightly painted horses stand out so distinctly, they seem ready to jump over the chain-link fence surrounding the carousel on the grounds of the former Staten Island Developmental Center (SIDC), Willowbrook.

Up close, however, one sees chipped paint on the weathered metal. Rust coats the edges of the merry-go-round's frame, tall weeds push up through the center and light sockets are bare.

Immense, empty buildings loom nearby. They are memories of another era when as many as 6,000 mentally retarded people were warehoused in what was the Willowbrook State School. Until media investigations in the 1970s sparked moves to dissolve the center, people passing by saw only outer calm and the cheery sight of the carousel going round and round.

The carousel has been still for

at least three years as SIDC has been closed down and most of the land transferred to the College of Staten Island.

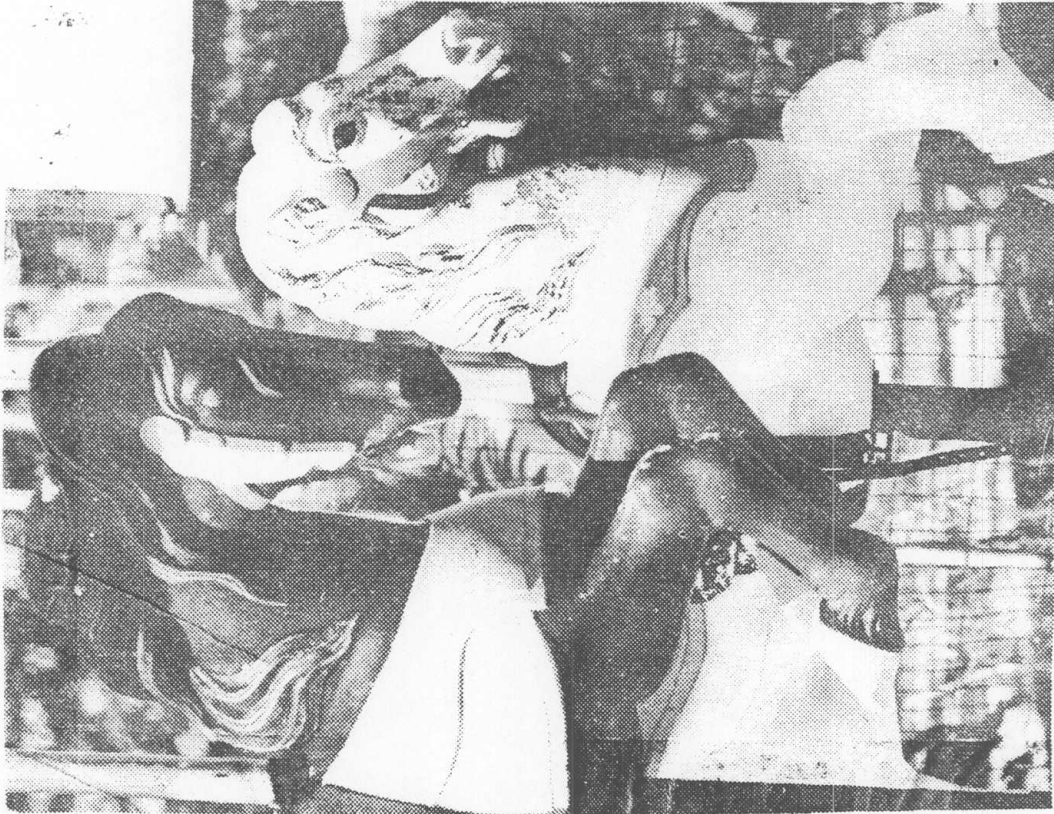
But there may be life in the old horses yet.

The state Developmental Disabilities Services Office (DDSO) still owns the carousel and will be inspecting it to see if it's in working order or repairable. It could be moved to a site on the 175 acres retained by the DDSO as its Richmond Complex, where small group homes and a resource center still serve the mentally retarded.

"I'm hoping by the middle of July I'll have figured out if we can utilize it," director Robert Witkowsky said. "I think I will definitely find a place for it, if it's in working condition."

Witkowsky said several upstate DDSOs have requested taking the carousel for use by their clients, but shipping the machine that far

(See CAROUSEL, Page A 12)



ADVANCE PHOTO/FRANK J. JOHNS

The paint is peeling off the horses in the carousel at the former Staten Island Developmental Center.

# Carousel

(From Page A 1)

may not be practical. One of only two carousels remaining on Staten Island (the other one being at South Beach Amusement Park), the details of its history are largely lost to the past.

According to members of the Benevolent Society for Retarded Children, a parents' advocacy group, the carousel is the second to be used on the site. And it's only a shadow of its predecessor, which members say was not protected by the state from the corroding

effects of weather and ended up in disrepair.

The original, a larger carousel with colorful wooden horses and music that played as it turned, was bought 35 years ago by the society for \$25,000 and donated to the state, according to Anthony Pinto, past president of the group. Unprotected from the elements for decades, it broke down in the 1970s.

A man from Virginia offered to replace it with a working one, said Pinto, and the state agreed. Genevieve Camen, now president of the society, recalls that she mentioned the swap to members in a meeting, and no one thought twice about it.

Little did they know that folk art collectors were just beginning

to "discover" carousel figures, especially the early wooden ones. "We had a joke played on us," bemoans Mrs. Camen. "I never thought anybody would rob us. I understand that each horse that could be fixed up would be worth up to \$3,000 each, maybe more."

Although some wooden carousel figures are now considered pricey, the DDSO's present merry-go-round with its smaller, metal figures is not considered a collector's item, according to Fred Fried of the Museum of American Folk Art in Manhattan.

"It's a carnival-type machine. It's not what we call a valuable machine — it's a reproduction type of thing. If it were put up for sale as a single item, I don't think it would bring the price that a

wood horse figure might," he said. Mrs. Camen said she is saddened that the state has let this carousel, like the earlier one, rust and deteriorate. "It was never covered, never babled like it should be."

To some who have seen it, however, the carousel holds great sentimental value.

"I love merry-go-rounds," said Nancy Burri, principal of PS 37, Great Kills. "As I travel up and down the East Coast, when I hear there is one, I go and look at it."

Several years ago, Mrs. Burri considered trying to move the carousel to PS 37 for use by the school's developmentally disabled and emotionally disturbed students. "We even paced off the fence around it to see if it would fit," she recalled.

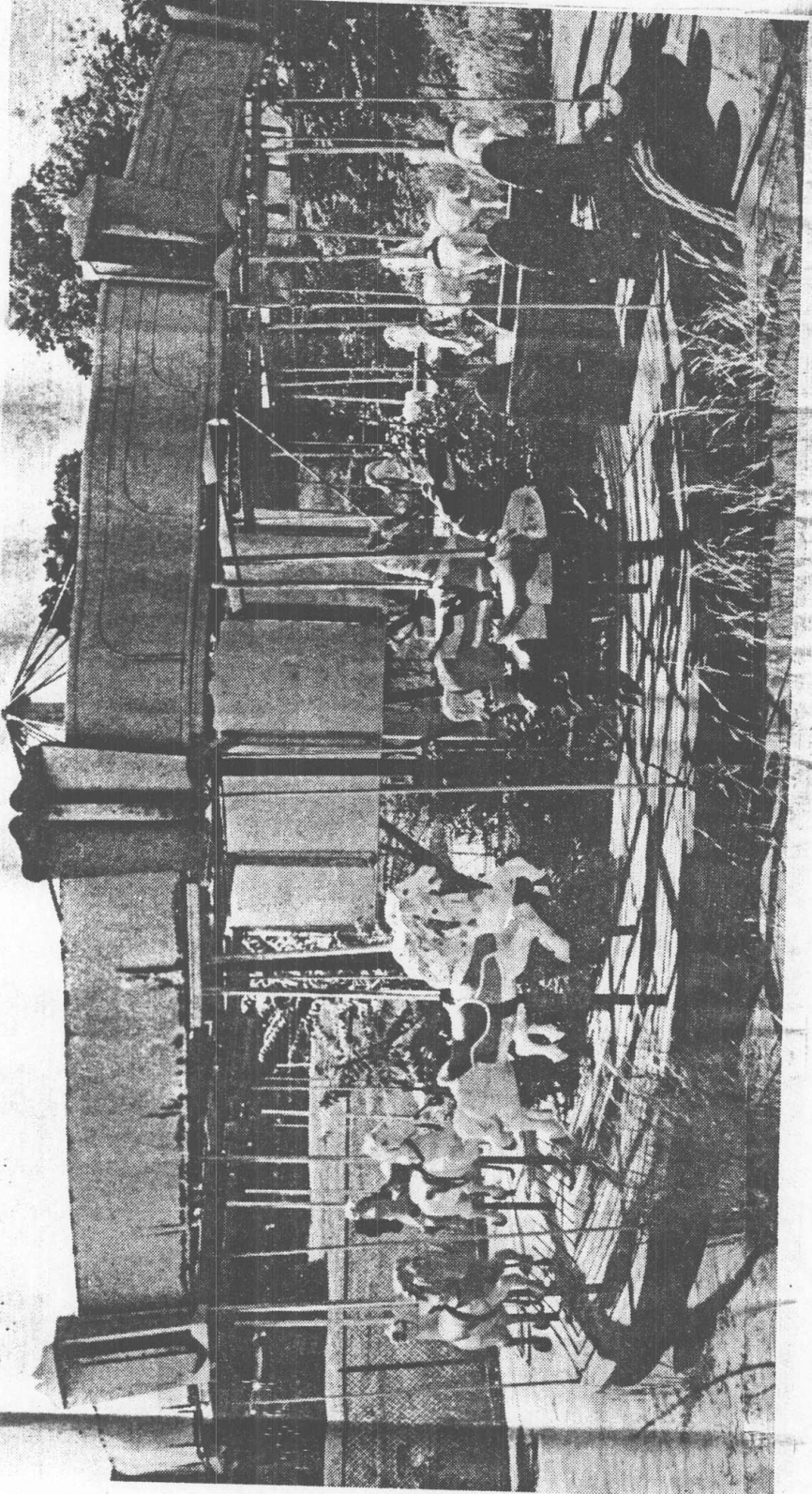
Finally, she decided the carousel could not be protected from vandals even if it fit on school property and abandoned the idea. She has not forgotten about it, however, and is encouraged to hear it might be used again.

"Under the supervision of our licensed industrial arts instructor, our program might be able to undertake refurbishing the animals," she said.

If the DDSO does not use it, she hopes the carousel might be relocated elsewhere in the community, such as Snug Harbor Cultural Center.

Although Mrs. Camen is pessimistic it can be salvaged, she, too, would like to see the DDSO get the carousel going again. "If the kids can use it, great. Our hearts are on the kids," she said.

Page 2 of  
3 Pages



ADVANCE PHOTO/FRANK J. JOHNS  
The carousel on the grounds of the former Staten Island Developmental Center is surrounded by weeds and looks weathered; officials are hoping that the ride can be moved and used again.

Page  
3  
of  
3  
Pages