

I Was Here

Episode 6: The CNE with Greg Scooter Koreg

Please Note:

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Introduction

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Cold Open

Scooter: You know it's just the sun shining, it's the end of summer, and people are having a great time and the midway is packed, and you're just clicking on all cylinders. There's a certain amount of excitement to all of that, well not a certain amount, there is a lot of excitement to all of that. You know, I guess that's the reason why I stuck around this business because I still get excited when that happens.

[music]

Interview

Catherine: You are listening to I Was Here, a podcast featuring older adults who have interesting stories about, or long histories with, spaces and places in Toronto. I am your host, Catherine Dunphy.

[music]

Catherine: In this episode, I am talking to:

Scooter: OK, I'm Greg Scooter Koreg. I'm the Vice-President with North American Midway Entertainment. I am now 58 years old, and I started on July 7, 1977 at the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede in our ticket office.

Catherine: Scooter is living the dream. Everybody's dream. In 1977 when he was 17, he ended up working for Patty Conklin, the man who ran the midway at the Canadian National Exhibition. The Ex. The biggest and the best fair in the whole country. Home to the Flyer. The Wild Mouse. Tilt-a-Whirl. Whack-a-Mole. The Food Building. Sideshowes. And rock and roll concerts that became music legend. If you lived in Toronto, you had to be there. If you lived in Toronto or even if you didn't, you were there. It was how you said goodbye to summer. Scooter is the Vice-President with North American Midway Entertainment. So he's still working at the Ex.

[music]

Scooter: You know that 35 million Canadians will go to fairs this year.

Catherine: I think we need to start right there with that fact.

Scooter: OK!

Catherine: As soon as they have us on. You know what? I didn't know that. That 35 million is all of us.

Scooter: It's every Canadian.

Catherine: That's everybody.

Scooter: Every Canadian is going to go to a fair from April until the end of October. 35 million people.

Catherine: 35 million people, which means that some people go to the fair, often.

Scooter: Absolutely.

Cathy: [laughs]

Scooter: Yeah, it's become a part of our culture here in Canada. You know, some fairs are 250 years old. There's the Hants County Fair in Nova Scotia that is now 252 years old. It's incredible.

Catherine: Really?

Scooter: Yeah. So it's long before they thought about putting Canada together that some of these people have been putting together fairs. And you know I guess the Canadian National Exhibition started in 1879.

Catherine: That it did.

Scooter: So, it's a real part of not only Canada, but I think of really the development of Toronto.

Catherine: Absolutely. Let's just go back for a second to that fact that 35 million people will go to the fair this year.

Scooter: Absolutely.

Catherine: Between April and October.

Scooter: Yup.

Catherine: Which means that we all go to the fairs. Why?

Scooter: Well, I think that it is part of the tradition of Canada. There's been an increase in fairs over the last five years. We have seen fair attendance grow by 11% which is a little bit over two percent every year and I think why that is because of millennials. Millennials are really engaged in fairs. You know, they are getting a lot of their sources of entertainment from their phones and from their computers, so fairs are often a real life experience, and not only a real life experience, but a social real life experience. You know, that's a real rollercoaster, and that's a real cow, and that's a real piece of pizza and that's really the Arkells up there singing on stage.

Catherine: And you think that the CNE has really been a huge contribution to what Toronto is.

Scooter: Oh absolutely! You know if you were to go to the CNE archives, they list a number of innovations that happened inside Canada. The very first typewriter was

introduced at the Canadian National Exhibition, and the very first black and white television, and I believe the very first coloured television, and the very first Edsel was shown in Canada at the automotive building. So, you know, Canada or the Canadian National Exhibition was really a place of firsts and a place where you could go see new techniques, new technology, and new ideas. And I have always liked the CNE because it's the kind of place where the ordinary human could celebrate life. You know they've always had those great competitions like horticultural competitions and quilting competitions. And those are events where a normal human could come down and celebrate who they were, of being a Canadian. It's been a very unique place and the Canadian National Exhibition still provides that very opportunity to this very day.

Catherine: They still have the best apple pie contest.

Scooter: Ah, I don't know if they have that or not.

Catherine: They did.

Scooter: Yeah, well they did. They hold a lot of competitions still and it's a way for us as Canadians to go out and show the fabric of our culture. And it's making fairs kind of relevant. I think the five reasons why people come to the fair today are free entertainment, food, and then the story around food, it would be the midway, the social experience, and then agricultural learning.

Catherine: OK, speaking of midway, that's where you come in because when you were a young man from Calgary in 1977, you joined the Conklin Shows. Tell us about that part and how you got to the CNE.

Scooter: Well, I graduated from high school when I was 17 years old. I was looking for some summer employment and I was actually enrolled in Ryerson that year to take a stage management course, but I thought I would go down to the Calgary Stampede and get myself a summer job, which I did. I really enjoyed it and then Karen Croft asked me if I wanted to come up to Edmonton with them for more work. I had some relatives in Edmonton so I went and worked the K-Days in Edmonton, Then, during the Edmonton K-Days Exhibition she asked if I wanted to come to Toronto with them which worked out pretty good.

Catherine: K-days begin Klondike Days?

Scooter: Yes, Klondike Days, we call it K-days now; it's been rebranded to that. I said yeah because I was going that way and it was pretty good work at that time. One day,

one of the concession managers said he had heard that there was somebody who worked on a farm and knew how to drive a truck. I said, yeah that was me. So he took me around the block two or three times to make sure I was capable of driving a truck and lo and behold the day after we teared down our show in Edmonton there's this truck with this huge 28-foot game trailer behind it. So somehow, someway, I made it from Edmonton to Regina and I've now been labelled as a truck driver. I played the Exhibition which was called Buffalo Days at that time and then we headed off to Toronto and I headed off in my truck. So early morning, maybe around 5:30 am, I pulled down the 400 onto the 427 and I pulled into the Canadian National Exhibition grounds and I parked underneath the Gardiner Expressway. That was the very first time I ever set foot on the Canadian National Exhibition grounds.

My uncle lived in Rosedale at that time and I was going to go stay with him. He was at work when we arrived so I had a day to kill so I walked up to the corner of Queen and Dufferin and I went to the McDonalds and little variety store there and bought myself a map and figured out how to make my way around Toronto. I got on the streetcar and I asked the driver to let me know when we get to Spa-di-na. So he's pulling his red rocket down Queen Street and he gets up to Spadina and he yells out, Spa-di-na! and I get off and I go and tour the city.

The next day I appeared at the Canadian National Exhibition grounds for my very first time. At that time, the Canadian National Exhibition was highly regarded as one of the best exhibitions in the world. They were constantly drawing 2.7 to three million people. It was a huge exhibition. To me, a Calgary type guy accustomed to the Calgary Stampede, the Canadian National Exhibition was a different thing. You know, it had this international reputation and it drew so many people down to the Lakeshore and it had all these fabulous buildings and there were permanent structures that were built just for Canadian National Exhibition, like the Flyer coaster, the Jumbo Jet coaster. It was a phenomenal place to be.

Catherine: So, you basically arrived when the CNE was at its peak. This was the place to be. People were coming from all over Toronto, from all over the province, from all over the country, to see this, our fair. It was the Canadian fair.

Scooter: Absolutely! It was everything. It was Canadian. It was national. And it was a great exhibition. You know, it was all those things wrapped up into one. And I guess that if you were to ask people who have been involved with the CNE they would say that the late eighties or late seventies were probably the heyday of the Canadian National Exhibition. It has changed today. I am going to say that the CNE is almost every bit as good as or better than that time period, but things have evolved so much over time.

Catherine: And people may have changed a little bit too, but let's go back to you arriving there looking around with your jaw dropping as you're talking about the permanent buildings. They are beautiful and old, and those were famous, those rides that you mentioned the Flyer, the Wild Mouse. Everybody wanted to be on them. Do you remember those?

Scooter: Oh, absolutely. Well, I will tell you that Patty Conklin, the man who developed Conklin Shows in 1927 in Vancouver, was a real showman. He scoured the world for the best rides because he wanted to bring the best attractions to one of the best exhibitions in the world. You know, in 1950 he developed a Flyer roller coaster which was a rickety old wooden roller coaster in every sense of the word and people would line up for hours to get onto this roller coaster. It was just one of those great thrill sensations. And in the fifties he also found that there were manufacturers out of Germany that had premiered the Wild Mouse roller coaster in Oktoberfest and he ended up buying two or three of them and he brought them to the CNE to overwhelming support. He had built himself the Jumbo Jet roller coaster, which was a steel roller coaster down at the south end of the midway, which was a real modern steel roller coaster of its time in every sense of the word. Conklin was dedicated to bringing some of the world's best attractions to the Canadian National Exhibition.

And I am going to tell you. To be part of all of that. To be part of this great tradition. To walk down Princes' Boulevard and see a hundred rides sitting there. Here I am a 17 year old kid from Calgary, Alberta and I am part of this whole thing. I guess I didn't realize it then, but I certainly do realize it now. I was part of this really big thing that was going on it was a really exciting time period.

Catherine: For sure, and perhaps most people didn't realize this, because I didn't realize it until I looked it up, but for instance, the Tilt-a-Whirl was created in 1926; that was even before the Conklin shows arrived in 1937, and that's when the Conklin shows joined forces with the CNE, right?

Scooter: Yeah, well Patty Conklin first started off in 1923, and he formed a company called Conklin and Garrett in 1927 in Vancouver. At that time, a midway looked like three or four rides. He would have a tilt-a-whirl, and there would be a ferris wheel, and maybe a whip ride. The rest of the fairgrounds would be surrounded with sideshows and games. That was a really big part of a way that a midway sort of looked.

Catherine: Tell me about the games. Some of the well known ones.

Scooter: Well, I guess how gaming really started in Canada, and especially at the Canadian National Exhibition, is that in 1919 the federal government was really supporting Canadian agricultural events and they decided at that point that they were going to support them less with their funding and to replace that funding there was now the opportunity to gamble at agricultural fairs in Canada. So at that point there probably were only two places where you could gamble. One would be at your local racetrack and the second would be during your local fair. So, we know everyone in Canada's appetite for gambling, and especially when it came only once a year to the Canadian National Exhibition for 20 days, you can imagine that gambling was a very substantial part of our gaming presentation.

Then, somewhere along the line the whole idea of playing a fun game for a teddy bear really took off. I've never been able to pinpoint how that started. Maybe that is a Coney Island type idea. I am not sure how that happened but it did. And so gaming became a staple of our midways.

For as long as I have been here, gaming has always been three parts: number one has been the operator making it entertaining for what you are doing, number two is the game which you are playing, and number three is the stuffed animal you are going to win for doing that. One of the most popular game at the CNE was the Birthday Game. It's a 14-sided block. You bet on a month, or Christmas, or New Years, and you put down your 50 cents. You then throw a block into the bin and if it lands on June, and you have your money on June, then you would win yourself a stuffed animal. I don't know if I have ever met a Torontonion who hasn't played the Birthday Game. Everybody knows the Birthday Game.

And we gave out some great prizes over the years. There was the Bavarian Bear in the eighties that lasted for seven to eight years, and of course there was the rage of the Smurfs which lasted a long time, and Pokémon lasted for three to four years; that was an extremely popular item. But, you know, despite the swings in the items, it's still three parts: the operator making it fun, the game, which is fun, and then the reward for when you actually win.

Catherine: And we can't let this stop without mentioning Whac-a-Mole, which has become a part of our lexicon. That game has to have started with you guys, right?

Scooter: Well, there is a guy out of Florida named Bob Cassada, and in the early seventies he came up with the idea of developing a space race that was also a water game. You would squeeze a water pistol, it would shoot at a target, and then the space racers would race up to the top. In and around the time, he started booking with Conklin

Shows and he was the developer of the Whac-a-Mole. He was the guy that came up with this idea and what an idea it was! He has a shop in Daytona Florida, where he still produces Whac-a-Mole and water guns. He's perfected the art and he sells them throughout the entire world. He started with a little garage operation in Florida and he turned it into this multi-national company. It's really a great success story.

And what Bob Cassada did for us was that he would use Conklin Shows as a testing ground. He would book equipment with us so he could bring it to the Canadian National Exhibition and test it. Then he'd go back and refine the game based on the player feedback. Then, the following year, he could bring it back out to make sure it's met with approval. From there, he could take the game to the international markets. That's a really great success story within Conklin Shows.

Catherine: So, can we say the Whac-a-Mole was bred in Toronto?

Scooter: It would have been part of its breeding for sure. Because Casada was mainly on our Canadian route so that's where he did most of his testing. So Toronto would have been one of the very first places that the Whac-a-Mole ever appeared on the international scene.

Catherine: And this water thing, was that at the Exhibition as well?

Scooter: Absolutely. Water guns?

Catherine: Yeah.

Scooter: Yeah. That was all his idea. And you know those all premiered on Conklin Shows' midways that came to the Canadian National Exhibition. And I've got to tell you that the Canadian National Exhibition turned out to be an incredibly good testing ground for him. He proved those games. He perfected them. He did very, very well.

Catherine: The milk bottles.

Scooter: Yeah.

Catherine: They are impossible to knock over.

Scooter: The tornado came through the fairgrounds and the only thing left standing was the milk bottles [laughs].

Catherine: You mean Hurricane Hazel?

Scooter: I'm just kidding [laughs].

Catherine: [laughs] Talk to me about the milk bottles. I think every Torontonians has tried, and failed, to knock over those milk bottles.

Scooter: So the way our gaming philosophy has always worked is that the harder the game, the bigger the stuffed animal that you're going to get. So, one thing I have to say about the Conklin Shows is that we have always presented games that you are always able to win at. There are some that are just a lot more difficult to win at and there are some that are easier to win at. So, the easier the game, the smaller the stuffed animal you are going to win. The harder the game, the bigger the price. The milk bottles is one of those harder games, but if you do win that, you get yourself a bigger stuffed animal. The milk bottles, that is a tough game. I don't think I can do that.

Catherine: Is it the toughest one?

Scooter: I am going to think that or the ring toss. The ring toss can be pretty tough because you are throwing the ring on top of the coke bottles.

Catherine: Yes.

Scooter: It looks reasonably easy, but that's a pretty hard thing to do.

Catherine: And yet, they are amongst the oldest aren't they?

Scooter: Absolutely. Yup. You know I guess the Punk Rack is up there too. That's the one where you throw the baseball at the little furry punks. That's been around for a long long time. And balloon dart games have been around for a long time too. Those were really made for a family experience because all you had to do was just break a balloon and that was great for little kids so they could win themselves a toy.

Catherine: Can you reveal now, for our listeners, what was the win to loss rate on those games?

Scooter: Well, ever since I've been involved, we've always maintained a 30% stock average.

Catherine: 30%?

Scooter: Yeah. So for every dollar that has come in we are giving back 30% in merchandise. And you know that has always been our formula. It keeps customers returning and gives everybody a really good shot at winning some prize, which keeps them coming back.

Catherine: And the harder the game the bigger the prize which is why we have seven foot teddy bears going out the Princes' Gates.

Scooter: Absolutely. Last year we had 21 tractor trailers full of prizes, so we've always treated gaming as a very important part of our business and guess what if the customer is going to come down and play we are going to make sure that there is a pretty good chance that they are going to get some reward out of that.

Catherine: I think the gaming is a huge part of the CNE because I know that if I say CNE I know people have a picture in their minds. They probably see some happy person walking by with a six-foot pink bear. Maybe dad carrying it and the kids trailing afterwards. It definitely is an iconic Canadian image and all part of the feel of the Exhibition. But at the same time what was happening at the CNE I think in the seventies and in the eighties when you were there was that it also became the centre for entertainment. Rock and roll came to the CNE. Did that help or hurt you guys, and tell me about that.

Scooter: That really helped us. You know, that was the real excitement about coming to the Canadian National Exhibition in 1977. There was this huge grandstand where the Blue Jays and the Argonauts played, and then at night the CNE would roll out this massive stage and they would put on these international rock and roll shows. You know some of these shows were drawing 70 and 80 thousand people and sometimes you'd get the same artist for two to three nights in a row. It was this spectacular thing. I can remember in 1977 or 1978 within a couple night period there would be the Eagles playing at the grandstand and they were the biggest name in rock and roll at that time, and then the next night Heart would be playing there, and then the following night Bob Dylan would be playing there. You know, there were some weekends where you could get an Argonauts football game in the afternoon and a big rock and roll show at night. It was spectacular. And then you would get six to nine Blue Jays games during the Exhibition, and that added to the whole entertainment package.

Catherine: And did you make a point of going to hear the music?

Scooter: Music has always been one of my very first loves. In fact, it is my very first love and I have seen so many rock and roll shows at the CNE it's unbelievable.

Catherine: Remember any in particular that blew the top of your head off?

Scooter: Well, I've never seen media frenzy like the Back in the USA tour that Bruce Springsteen put on. He put on two nights at the Canadian National Exhibition and that was such a big album and there was such big promotion behind it. I can remember that Bruce was coming from the Harbour Castle Hilton and the media was following him everywhere. He was coming down Lakeshore Boulevard in his limousine and the fans are swarming him on Lakeshore Boulevard and the show started 45 minutes late because he just couldn't physically get from Lakeshore Boulevard into Exhibition Place to do a show. So urban legend has it that the following night they took a carnival truck and put Bruce back in the sleeper and sent the limo as a decoy and the carnival truck drove in behind the limo and dropped him off into the show.

Catherine: Urban legend?

Scooter: Well, I cannot say that there is truth to that, but I heard that story a number of times, but I don't actually have first-hand knowledge that that actually happened.

Catherine: Reliable sources?

Scooter: I think pretty good sources, yeah. So, anyways that was exciting. I think that the media frenzy for that Born in the USA tour was probably the biggest. Then U2 did a pop mart at the CNE for two nights and that was an enormous show.

Catherine: Were you there?

Scooter: Yeah, I was there for both nights. Actually, I got a backstage tour with a guy from CPI. His name was Brian and I became good friends with him. He said, meet me backstage at two o'clock and I will give you guys a tour. So we did. When we got there Brian wasn't available and so it was U2's road manager who gave us the tour. He took us downstairs and we saw the lighting and the sound booths. Now at that time, U2 did Satellite of Love with Lou Reed every night from his apartment in London. How it worked was that Lou would start off the song via satellite and the band would pick up with him. So now we are downstairs, and they turn the satellite on and there is Lou making Kraft Dinner in his apartment in London. It was great. Then the road manager takes us up on stage. It was a teardrop stage that went way out into the crowd and I

clicked on the microphone, and I tapped the microphone, and through Exhibition stadium you could hear me tapping the microphone. Then I grabbed the mic and I sing, can't believe the news today, and I could hear people outside in the crowd outside the stadium screaming, it's them! it's them [laughs]. That was spectacular. That U2 show was the best show that I saw at the CNE and I saw both nights of it. And I've sort of been a big U2 fan all along and the whole visual spectacle of what U2 produced during that tour was sensational. That was the height of their career. That was as big as U2 got. That was right then. That was the end of the big stadium stage after Joshua Tree and Rattle and Hum and before Achtung Baby so it was a pretty amazing time.

And there was other performers that played there. The CNE was able to have this great attraction to draw some of the hottest names to that stage. I saw Elton John a couple times there. And at different times in his career you saw a different Elton John come on stage which was kind of neat. There was the flamboyant Elton John and the less flamboyant, and then there was the disco Elton John. There was a whole bunch of Eltons that showed up at different times. So those were some pretty big shows and they drew some fantastically spectacular names and usually at the heights of their careers.

Catherine: And did you always go to these shows because at this point you would be going there every year right?

Scooter: Yes.

Catherine: From 1977 and on.

Scooter: Mmhmm.

Catherine: And would you make a note of who was there and make sure you who were going to be seeing or did you just go every night?

Scooter: No, I didn't go every night because we were working. I had to pick and choose what shows I was going to see, but I have to tell you I saw a lot of really good shows there. One of the big ones was Frank Sinatra. He came and played the stage one night and that was near the end of Frank and it was a horrible rainy, drizzly night and the tickets were unheard of expensive. I can't remember how much they were, but it was an astronomical price for what he had up that night. It was pouring rain and Frank sang for 45 minutes. That was the end of him and people were so disappointed.

Catherine: Wow.

Scooter: Yeah, and you know I guess you know, another big show was Alice Cooper. He played at the CNE. A lot of Torontonians would remember this story for sure. Alice is delayed for some reason or another and the show is now well over an hour late, and I don't remember if they cancelled the show or if Alice is just really late, but a riot breaks out. There are people throwing chairs and there are fights and they are throwing people out into the midway and there are fights in the midway. That Alice Cooper concert changed concerts so that now chairs have to be tied together into rows.

Then back in the eighties, wrestling was really big. Vince McMahon was, as far as I am concerned, a marketing genius. Maybe one of the best of our times. He was producing these WWF shows like WrestleMania one, two, three, and four. Well, he had some incredibly huge evenings at the CNE once that grandstand was over. Vince was smart because he would start those wrestling matches at seven o'clock and then by nine o'clock he was wrapped up and then you'd have a fueled-up audience coming out of the wrestling match onto the midway. And those people would stay until two or three o'clock in the morning. It was spectacular. I hold that as some of my most exciting times, and I think we had three or four of them during my time at the CNE.

Catherine: And did the midway typically stay open until two?

Scooter: Well, that is one thing we are pretty good at. We're going to stay open if there are people there.

Catherine: Wow. So, but two o'clock would be about your end time?

Scooter: Mmhmm. Yeah. We had some great nights down there, that's for sure, especially after the wrestling matches.

Catherine: Tell me more about those great nights.

Scooter: Well, you know there is just something about this outdoor amusement business, which is great and it really particularly happened at the Canadian National Exhibition. During those heyday years you could get 140, 160, 170 thousand people to the grounds all in one day. Everyone would be just having a great time, and there'd be a great stadium show, and the midway would be packed. There would be this excitement in the air. You know, I can't describe it here properly, what excitement is there. You had to go and you had to live it to understand it.

Catherine: I am going to tell you that there would be the smell of cotton candy.

Scooter: Absolutely.

Catherine: And corn.

Scooter: Absolutely. Yeah. And you know, it's a great setting down there. It's a hot August night. There's the smell of brine coming off the lake. You know it's just the sun shining, it's the end of summer, and people are having a great time and the midway is packed, and you're just clicking on all cylinders. There's a certain amount of excitement to all of that, well not a certain amount, there is a lot of excitement to all of that. You know, I guess that's the reason why I stuck around this business because I still get excited when that happens.

Catherine: And I believe you hit your biggest jackpot. Well, Conklin Shows hit its biggest jackpot on September 3, 1989 where you brought in \$1,000,000 from one day on the midway. Talk about that. That's huge.

Scooter: Yeah, well when people ask me today when was the best time for our midway I always say 1987 to 1989. You know, the Canadian National Exhibition was clicking on all cylinders. We were booking incredible acts, we still had the Blue Jays and the Argonauts. We were going full throttle. And you know the Conklin group had really matured by that point and really knew what the paying audience wanted. So Jim Conklin and his son Frank were buying enormously big rides and presenting them at the Canadian National Exhibition. At that time, we also had a whole bunch of seasoned staff who were great at what they did. And, I think the combination of all of that, was why we did so well in 1989.

On the last weekend of the CNE, that Sunday and Labour Day Monday in 1989, we presented the Rolling Stones to a full Exhibition Place. The concert sold out both nights and there was dignitaries from all over the world that came to this rock and roll extravaganza. And remember at that time the Rolling Stones were pretty big. And it was then that we grossed \$1,000,000 in one day. We were the very first carnival in North America that had ever done that, and maybe the very first in the world at that point. We woke up the next day, and we were all exhausted because it was an incredibly wild day down there. It was people upon waves of people. And when the concert would let out there would be more people on the midway. But we were the very first ones to do it. When we closed that night we knew we did it. We knew that we got there, it just took us some time to validate all that, but we knew that we got there.

Catherine: Did you celebrate?

Scooter: No, we went to work [laughs]. It was Labour Day Monday and then we had to move on to Springfield Massachusetts after that so we just went to work.

Catherine: So, when the Ex closes on Labour Day, you literally, on the evening of Labour Day, you pack up.

Scooter: Yeah, we pack up and we move to Springfield Massachusetts, the Eastern States Exhibition. It is what we do. We are good at closing on Sundays and opening up Fridays somewhere else. You know, still to this day we play Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, we close on Sunday, and then we open on Friday at the Canadian National Exhibition. You know, that's 1,733 miles. That's pretty far away.

Catherine: And how many trucks and how many people are you hauling between Saskatchewan and the CNE gates?

Scooter: Well, our show now at the Canadian National Exhibition comprises of a travelling core of around 450 people or very close to that. And we hire another 500-600 people to help with operations in food or games or tickets. So, our workforce on any given day at the CNE would be around 800-900 people with 450 of those people being the core that travels with our show everywhere that we go.

Catherine: And I think people would be surprised of course to know that there are a lot of professional types in the back office running things like yourself. You have a title, it's Vice President, and you are making sure that things are working, but the people we see, and the people we remember, are the characters.

Scooter: Yeah.

Catherine: The guys luring us in. The barkers.

Scooter: Mmhmm.

Catherine: The talk.

Scooter: Yeah. Well, I have hand it to Jim Conklin and the Conklin organization and further on, the North American Midway, because we have really been trying to change that perception of what that North American Carnival worker looks like. You know, I guess when someone says the word, carnival worker, or the word, carnary that conjures up a certain image or stereotype. And I am going to say that we've worked very hard to

change the image of what that is, but that's going to take a generation to get there because people are just so accustomed to those stereotypes.

But not discounting this, we've had a lot of those characters throughout our career. We've had lots of people come work for us who got their start over at Coney Island. There was a man by the name of John Tillu, his father or maybe his grandfather, was the developer of Steeplechase Park in Coney Island. He lived and breathed the carnival all of his life. And he became a part of our operations and was with us a long long time. And he was a wealth of wisdom and knowledge, but also he was one of those great colourful type people that the minute you meet him you want to take him out for dinner because you want to hear all the stories he's got. And we're in kind of adverse working conditions so of course there are lots of great stories that come out of this. Stories like Bruce Springsteen coming to town and throwing him in the back of trailer.

And then of course we also had the sideshow which brought a certain amount of colour to us. You know there was the Zucchini family who were with the Conklin Shows for a long time. The Zucchinis were traditionally a circus and carnival family. In fact Bruno Zucchini was the very first human cannonball ever. And his family came with us and developed fun houses such as the Ghost Mansion and the Jungle Walk which people would be familiar with. But they've been in the carnival and circus business all of their life so they were sort of the colourful type human beings who came and worked for our show. From across the world we drew some of the best showmen and skilled craftsman out there. Jim Conklin hired Carl Blitzer, who was a master painter from Germany to come and paint for us because we had so much painting to do for carousel rides and scenery. Those are the types of people we brought all together in one place and they became our core staff that travelled with us wherever we went. They were a part of the colour of the show.

Catherine: But after hours they were fun?

Scooter: Always. I guess that is part of the attraction I liked to this business. We worked hard, but we played pretty hard too. In our spare time, now we didn't have a lot of it, but let me tell you we took advantage of it when we did. And I guess to a young man like myself the attraction was that I got to travel the world and go to all these exotic places like Miami and Springfield and Little Rock, Arkansas. And they were paying me pretty good so I had a few bucks in my pocket and there was girls [laughs]. And there were people my age that were traveling out there and having a great time just providing a different type of entertainment.

Catherine: But then you also get to meet the human cannonball.

Scooter: Absolutely. Yeah. And he was part of our travelling staff or a master painter or Dainty Dora, the 600-700 lb. woman, or someone from Coney Island that helped developed that whole experience.

Catherine: Who were they really? When they took off their workday mask, who were they?

Scooter: They were just regular people. You know, they were regular people with abnormally great life experiences. That's who they were. And they had so many stories. You know, they had great stories because they had seen so much. We're a very accepting society. Really we are. We are a very accepting society. You just become one of us. All you have to do to become one of us is just work hard. And if you can do that you can become one of us very quickly. If you can pull your own weight and if you can help for the betterment of what we are trying to do, then all of a sudden, you become one of us.

And also we're not judgmental people at all. We really like everybody. So it really doesn't matter where you worked or what you did we just liked you if you were a hard worker. And so after a very short time everybody from the guy who blew up balloons in the back to the guy who ran the Polar Express to Frank Conklin who ran the show, we were just one big family trying to do all this. And you know there was a certain camaraderie, a certain bond, that you really would try to help out your fellow employee if they were having problems. If someone is broken down, let's say your truck was broke down or your house trailer was broke down, you knew that you were never alone because there were 100 people behind you that were willing to stop and give you a hand. That's the type of people we were. So we didn't hold those distinctions between people who were human oddities or the guy who ran the show. We were just one big family trying to do one big thing.

Catherine: Travelling together.

Scooter: Travelling together. Trying to do all this.

[music]

Closing

Catherine: Special thanks to today's storyteller: Greg Scooter Koreg.

[music]

Catherine: If you enjoyed this podcast, please subscribe and leave us a review on iTunes. We are relying on listeners like you to tell your friends about these stories. You can also listen to and download the podcast, as well as, transcripts from our podcast website: ryerson.ca/ce/IWASHERE. On our website, you'll find a portrait series of each storyteller. These photos were taken by the talented Toronto-based photographer, Jessica Blaine Smith.

Credits

Catherine: Time for the credits. Project Supervisor: Darren Cooper. Audio Engineer and Producer: Matt Rideout. Coordinator and Producer: Melanie Santarossa. Our theme music was also created by Matt Rideout.

Finally, a very special thank you to Programs for 50+ and Community Engagement at the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education, Ryerson University, who supported us in our endeavour to give these storytellers a much needed platform and audience. I am Catherine Dunphy and on behalf of all the storytellers thanks for listening to I Was Here.

[music]

Last Words

Scooter: In my phone, every time I remember one of my stories, I call them 100 Bedtime Carnival Stories.

Catherine: You know what? That's a great idea.

Scooter: Yeah. They are pretty short, lots of them, but it would maybe make a book or something, I don't know

Catherine: You know that is a fabulous idea. It's better than what he had. The idea of bite size pieces.