Saddle Up!

By Linda O'Connell, St. Louis, Missouri

Dad barely made a living doing odd jobs, in the 1950s, so my brother and I rarely had a dime to spend.

Before air-conditioning, we spent muggy summer evenings seeking a cool breeze atop the Mississippi River bluff at Chain of Rocks Park, near our St. Louis home.

At the far end of the park, calliope music enticed generations of local children through the large gates into a carnival atmosphere of amusement rides, mirrored fun houses and the tunnel of love.

The amusement park was open daily but drew its biggest crowds with school picnics when throngs of students celebrated their much-anticipated event.

"Please, Dad, please?" we begged him, every summer evening.

"Sorry, I'm broke," he said, and pulled just a handful of pennies from his pocket to prove it.

My little brother and I chased fireflies and each other until dusk while our parents rested on a blanket. When it was time to head home, Dad sneakily tossed a few pennies on the ground as we ran to the car.

"I found another one!" my brother and I squealed, and dropped our great find into Dad's calloused hand. Once in a while, at Mom's coaxing, Dad tossed a dime, and we were breathless with excitement when we discovered it.

"That was a good find. Saddle up for a pony ride," Dad would then

announce.

On those spectacular evenings, as he drove down the road toward the big, ornamental iron amusement park gates, my heart raced with excitement. The bright lights, the click-clacking old, wooden roller coaster and the aromas of popcorn and cotton candy aroused my senses.

Dad heaved my brother and me onto the saddles of magnificently painted carousel horses. We held the leather reins and galloped off into fantasyland at sunset.

Such were the evenings of my childhood, in the early 1950s.

Today, my pace and pulse still quicken when I see a dime on the ground. Each 10-cent discovery takes me on an imaginary carousel ride that evokes the sights, sounds and aromas of a bygone era.

I can almost hear Dad's voice saying, "Saddle up, baby. That's a good find."