

Horse and Carriage

‘Oh what fun it is to ride in a one-horse open sleigh.’ I thought of the lyric as I was admiring horse carriages at the Lorenzo House Carriage Barn in Cazenovia, NY in December. Few have the pleasure of riding in a one-horse open sleigh now because most of the sleighs are seen only in museums. The horse-drawn sleighs with their buffalo robes are a thing of the past and even the words that describe them are forgotten unless you come across them in a 19th century novel or Christmas carol. Phaeton and brougham, two types of horse-drawn carriages, aren’t heard anymore nor is thill. Instead of defining that word, I will recount an article that was in the newspaper in 1907 and you can picture the thill.

‘While unloading milk at the Mt. Upton condensary, Maggie, Walt Jewell’s horse, took fright at the 7:00 whistle and jumped the iron railing of the driveway which was about twelve feet high. As the railing stopped the wagon and the harness held, the horse was left hanging head downward. The condensary hands procured ropes and the horse was hauled back over the railing when the most serious part of the accident happened. Because of the violent struggles of the animal, a thill broke at a tremendous tension, one end of which struck Walter Nearing a terrific blow on the top of his head, dropping him in his tracks as though hit by a pile driver. He was taken home and although unconscious, the doctor said there was no fracture and Walter should be all right in a few days.’

At one time, the world of horses and all their trappings and care were a very important and necessary part of life in Greene. As villages became bigger, we found a need for more transfer of goods and services and people. Imagine what Greene was like with all the activity. There were stage coaches coming in from the Catskill-Ithaca Turnpike; passenger buses taking people to and from the depot or to the Riverside Agricultural Fair across the river; milk and mail routes; farmers bringing their produce to market; people coming in to do their shopping; students riding to town in buggies to attend high school or perhaps on their way to a nearby town for a football game; pure pleasure rides with some excitement thrown in.

I found references to all of these activities in the old Chenango Americans from the 1870s and 1880s or in interviews . So read the following and put yourself back in time and enjoy the ride.

‘A.N. Wade has purchased an old Broadway bus to convey passengers to and from the fairground. Around the top is “Broadway, 5th Avenue and Fulton Ferry.”’(It didn’t last too long. The next year he sold it to someone in Binghamton.)

‘A. W. Taft has a new 10 passenger vehicle to carry passengers to and from the depot. Cost was \$350.’ (A.W.Taft had a livery business.)

Chenango American 9-Dec-1878: ‘When “Doc” Cowles delivers milk, his horse wears an old fashioned string of sleigh bells.’

‘M. Birdsall has a set of new Russian sleighbells attached to the harness of his double team. The silver arches contrast beautifully with the jet black of the horses.’

‘An unusual sight: about noon 63 cutters and sleighs counted in our streets at one time, and only 5 wagons.’

‘So many horses, ridden and driven, circled around the Band while they were giving their concert Sat. evening, that the boys were nearly choked with the clouds of dust they raised and were obliged to quit playing.’

Lillian Harrington said that she and her sister would take their horse and buggy and drive into town for high school. They would leave the horse in the shed in back of the Central Baptist Church, walk to the North Canal St. school and then at lunchtime would have to walk back to feed and care for the horse. She remembers it being a big nuisance because it cut into their lunch time.

In 1908 there was a lively runaway in the morning on Genesee street which caused the breaking of a large plate glass window in R.E. Elliott’s clothing store (where John Rosekrans’s law office was), in the post office block and demolished a fruit stand in front of the grocery store. The team had been left in front of a residence on Franklin Street. Somehow they had become frightened and began a lively run down Genesee Street. They tried to turn into Driscall Avenue but they were going too fast and ran onto the walk in front of the post office. The nigh horse slipped and fell, his head striking the large window in Elliott’s store. Had the runaway occurred a half hour later, there was no telling what might have been the result as that hour the street was usually full of pupils going to school. This particular place where the team struck the walk was one where students usually congregated on their way to the High School building.

In an interview with Mildred Folsom, Harry Rogers tells of playing football and then coaching the team in the early 1900s. The boys had to buy their own uniforms and organize their own teams. They made their football shoes by nailing cleats on to the soles of an old pair of dress shoes. Some fellows never owned more than one pair at a time so if they wanted to attend a dance after the game, they just took a hammer and wrenched the cleats loose. Button shoes were the fashion and many a pair 10 buttons high could be seen on the field. They always played Saturday mornings with the boys arranging the matches. To reach their destination, the boys chipped in to hire teams and rigs from the livery, usually 2: a 3-seater and a 2-seater.

One sad item is included:

3-Jul-1879: ‘Orrin Carter was fatally injured in vicinity of Wm. F. Russell’s residence (now Water’s Edge B & B) when he and his wife were on their way home. (They lived at the very end of Cherry Street in the house that now stands in ruins.) The horse became frightened at the cars and ran, tipping the carriage over and throwing the two aged occupants out. Mr. Carter died of internal injuries.’

I found the accompanying photo of a funeral procession turning onto Genesee Street going to Sylvan Lawn Cemetery in 1897. Even though it is not the funeral of Orrin Carter, it would be a typical example of the drive to the cemetery. The first vehicle is carrying the family of Curtis Palmer. Then look at the line of horse and buggies; it seems endless. The men in line are Masons and are wearing their white aprons, a symbol of service to others.

The other photo is of Wheeler Corbin in his pony cart, taken around 1908 when Wheeler was 11-years old. It was taken near 16 South Chenango Street.

1903: ‘An old-time coach and four drove up to the Hotchkiss House (Oxford) Thursday eve. It

contained a jolly party of 9 young people returning to Greene after a visit to the circus at Norwich, and they halted here to escape the hard shower that broke as they reached town. 30 or 40 years ago a 4-horse coach would not have attracted much attention in front of the old Stage House, but today that sort of vehicle is a novelty to many.'

If it was a novelty in 1903, it's hard to even picture one hundred years later! People are still thrilled to see horses beautifully groomed with all kinds of rigs. I found a write-up about the horses and their owners' presentations in Greene's Bicentennial Parade in 1992. I don't know who wrote the article but clearly it was a horse-lover who felt they had been slighted in the Bicentennial publicity. There were several saddle horses, Belgians pulling a covered wagon, wagons pulled by ponies, a cart pulled by miniature mules, a Page Seed Company float pulled by a gorgeous pair of black Percherons. It was a wonderful evocative article.

And so it's 2018 and the one-horse open sleigh is just a memory for most of us. It seems to epitomize the whole range of carriages. Yet the picture of it remains with us even though we may never have had a sleigh ride. "O'er the hills we go, laughing all the way!"



Funeral of Palmer A. Curtis 1897



Wheeler Corbin and Pony Cart 1906