

# XVI

## DRIVING AND DRAFT HORSES



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

*Marged Harris and pair of Hackneys*

*"Driving horses really have to trust you – much more than ridden horses. That's the biggest thing I get out of it – the relationship. They don't have time to question you, they just go.*

*It's so subtle, more like playing with a marionette than a hand puppet."*

—Muffy Seaton, National Champion in Combined Driving with Ponies.

## DRIVING AND DRAFT HORSES

Driving and draft horses today are gentle and colorful vestiges of the time when the horse was a central factor in life everywhere. To develop some historical background I turned to the National Sporting Library. Their "Coaching" collection consists of about 170 volumes, of which many were printed in England.

This British tilt is logical. The great days of horse-drawn vehicles – leaving ancient chariots aside – could begin only with the availability of well drained hard surfaced roads, and had to end with the ascendancy of the railroad and the motor car. Those chronological bookends define a period from 1750 to the beginning of the Great War, 1914. Within that time frame, the period from 1780 to 1850 was "The Golden Age of Coaching."

England was a well developed and tightly knit country, with a structured society in which well-to-do people could indulge in owning classy carriages



*Antique English "Park Drag" coach, lovingly restored*

PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR



drawn by stylish horses and staffed by liveried servants. The engineering genius of the Scotsman John MacAdam (1756-1836) developed hard-surfaced roads of crushed stone (later bound with asphalt), a network that tied English society together.

During the same period, back from the seacoast, America was a sprawling collection of small rural settlements linked by forest paths and muddy roads, difficult even for ox-drawn wagons. Outside of its few cities and a scattering of hard surfaced turnpikes, fast travel in America was either by ship or on horse-back. American society consisted mostly of farmers, artisans, and merchants, people with independence of spirit but not yet much accumulated wealth.

The nation was well into the nineteenth century before driving evolved beyond utility to a means of displaying one's taste in horses, vehicles and skill in handling them. And, in a country of farmers, there was much interest in the multi-purpose animal – one that could be ridden, driven, or even hitched to a plow. Uniquely American breeds such as the Morgan and the Conestoga were developed in response. By the end of the nineteenth century equine-drawn vehicles had been designed for almost every conceivable purpose, and specialized breeds of animals developed to fit them.

In England there was a hiatus. In 1914 many coachmen had joined the colors. Those that came back in 1918 often found themselves chauffeurs instead of horsemen. The Depression and another war followed. It was not until the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1952, an event calling for a parade of carriages, that English interest in driving was rekindled.

Today in America the use of working draft horses is limited to groups resistant to modernity, such as the Amish, and to situations where a horse can perform as well as a tractor. But he has not been forgotten.



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

*A pair of Belgians haying in Maine*



MISCHKA FARM PHOTO

*One of the Shires fom Ayrshire Farm*

Driving – as a sport – is making a strong comeback in Virginia; some dedicated horse people are recreating the world of their forebears, and falling delightedly back into it through breeds of horses and antique vehicles or reproductions thereof. If the lure of foxhunting and its more extreme extension, steeplechasing, includes exhilaration and risk, the comparable words for driving are "tradition" and "elegance."

In the United States interest is widespread. The first 345 US names listed as members of The Carriage Association of America show at least one in each of 45 states, with over 10 percent living in Pennsylvania. An area of similarly concentrated interest, per capita, is New England. For those statistically inclined the Virginia contingent in this crude sample is 9 (2.6 percent), about proportional to the Commonwealth's share of the nation's population.

Driving requires one to assemble vehicle, horse and driver skills into a "system" that can deliver what the owner wishes, be it pleasure driving, competitive combined driving, carriage shows, or a show case for his horses.

There is, I think, a parallel between serious driving and antique collecting. In both, one starts with an artifact from a bygone era (and, in the case of driving,



a breed of animal as well as a vehicle), often of great beauty, with historical significance, and threatened with irrelevance by the innovations of the present. The connoisseur becomes immersed in the history and customs of the period represented by his collectible. The driving enthusiast is interested in the origins of the breed he favors and the design and provenance of his vehicles. He treasures these expressions of the past, and allows them to carry him back in time to the pleasures of an earlier age. Caring for them becomes as meaningful to him as using them, or so it seems to this collector of Americana.

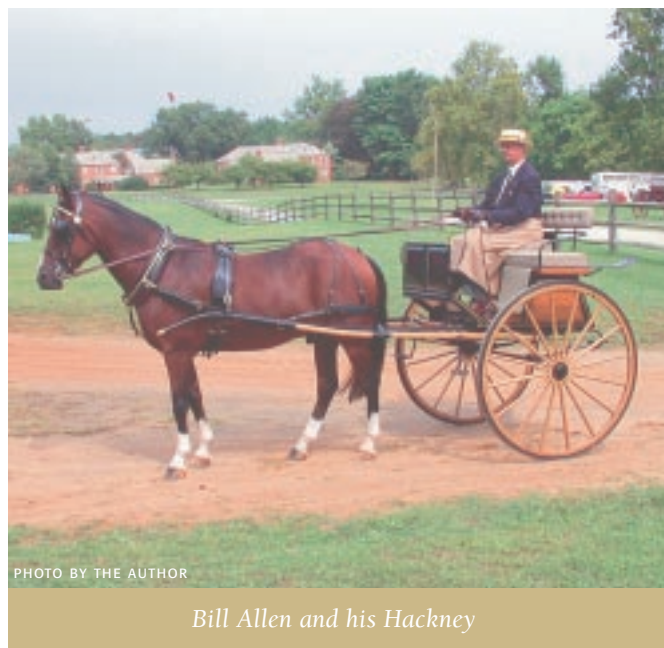


PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Bill Allen and his Hackney

### - A Sunday Outing -

One August Sunday I passed a pair of ponies pulling what I later learn is a scaled down Brewster Coleman Phaeton, carrying a lady and her husband (she holds the whip) along Rte 719 near Newstead Farm. Behind them is a boy on a bicycle, serving as groom and outrider to caution approaching traffic. They thank me as I slow, and I turn my car around and follow them to take their picture. They suggest this would be easier if I wait 'til they turn into Newstead Farm. In Newstead's back driveway the lady calls out:

*"You know this is private property?"*

*"Yes, it's OK. The Firestones are friends – I've just been there taking pictures of Genuine Risk."* She points ahead...

*"You can take the photo as we come towards that bend in the road."*

I pass her, park and try to comply, running to keep enough in front of the trotting ponies. I'm panting – *"Can you stop 'til I get set?"*

*"Well, no. One pony really doesn't want to stop, it gets nervous and fidgets."*

So I race ahead, set myself, and shoot – two misses and an acceptable hit as they pass. I call out my name. The over-the-shoulder response is...

*"Are you Edie Smart's husband?"*

*"Yes," I say. As they disappear I hear:*

*"I'm Flora Hillman, live across from Sally and Verne Hosta."*

Then, referring to the man in the back of the vehicle:

*"This is Owen Snyder [her husband] with me."*



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Flora Hillman and her Welsh ponies

That evening I call up my new friend to explain why I wanted the picture. She seems glad to fill me in:

*"That boy on the bike is our son, Tim. He's 14, and he's my groom. I pay him. Today we went about seven or eight miles, two and a half hours. We take it easy, just a quiet jog/trot."*

*"How did you get into driving?"*

*"I'm an endurance rider, have done some foxhunting. Twenty-five years ago I had an event horse..."*

*"You were eventing then?"*

*"Yes, it was cheaper, you could do it for 25 bucks. My horse got navicular, and I retired her from foxhunting, and decided to teach her to drive. We got a book about driving, and it said to start by hitching her to a tire so she could drag it around. Well, we did that for a couple of rounds and she was fine, so we harnessed her to a vehicle and drove off on the road, just like that. The gods were forgiving, she'd never been driven before. The next time we were more careful. We tried it on a foxhunter – gave him three days with the tire, and he was wonderful. His picture ended up on the front of The Maryland Horse."*

About this time I conclude that Flora establishes psychic confidence in her horses, which would explain this smooth transition to a strange discipline. (Later Edie tells me about her mother's similar attempt with Lady Go Lightly, an ex-steeplechaser: *"She hitched her to a breaking cart and she took off. It was a breaking cart all right, she broke it!"*) Flora continues:

*"I fell into driving because you can take a non-rider with you. My husband*

