

Carriage Driving in Central Park

Written by Elaine Juska Joseph

February 2010 Edition Horsemen's Yankee Pedlar

Discover a Timeless Tradition

The borough of Manhattan is the most densely populated county in all of the United States, with more than 1,600,000 people living in what amounts to just 22 square miles of land area. It is estimated that an additional four million people come and go through Manhattan on any given day, including over 109,000 tourists.

The human population of this city has, over the centuries, learned to sprawl skywards to live like canopy dwellers in the rainforest above the street. Among them are more than 220 carriage horses, in five multi-story stables that occupy a 15-block area in what is referred to as Hell's Kitchen on the west side—reaching from 37th Street to 52nd Street, between Tenth, Eleventh and Twelfth Avenues. Included in the five is a stable that has stood for 158 years as both a horse and sheep barn—New York peddlers boarded their working horses here, when they still made deliveries of every imaginable commodity through the city with horse and wagon.

In the 1950s and '60s this building on West 48th Street known as Chateau Stables was owned by Fred Birkner, a wrangler who rented animals—dogs, cats, birds, and a long list of equuids—for live television shows such as The Ed Sullivan Show, The Jackie Gleason Show, and The Price Is Right. Besides the television industry, Fred Birkner had a steady contract with an enterprise known as The Cattleman Restaurant, shuttling steakhouse customers from the restaurant to Broadway shows via horse-drawn stagecoach. “My Mom, Gloria, started working for Fred Birkner in late 1950s as a receptionist,” says Anita McGill-Gerami, the current owner of Chateau Stables. “When the live TV rage declined, Chateau started to use the horse-drawn cab licenses it had to give rides in Central Park.” In 1967 Gloria and her husband, Buster, a carriage driver for Fred Birkner, purchased Chateau Stables and the business. Now owned jointly by her daughter, Anita, and her husband, Alex, it has been in the family ever since.

Traveling east on the relatively quiet 48th Street to Eleventh Avenue, Chateau's carriages must head north on Eleventh, past car dealerships with Lamborghinis, Porsches, and Bentleys in their showrooms, to get to work every day. A horse and carriage making its way to the park from any of the five stables will encounter hissing buses, honking horns, sirens from police and emergency vehicles, red lights, slippery man-hole covers, police barriers at worksites, steam from underground vents, detours, and jaywalkers. Eleventh Avenue in this district is not considered a particularly congested thoroughfare, however. The real congestion comes as the carriages turn east into mid-town Manhattan toward Central Park South.

Central Park is a beautiful oasis in a vertical desert of concrete, steel and glass. It was created between the years 1858 and 1871 at the cost of over \$14,000,000. Designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, winners of a contest for the purpose, they envisioned a pastoral and picturesque landscape complete with formal gardens, ponds, and carriage paths to be enjoyed by the city's residents. It was no easy task to create. The soil was of poor quality, so over one half million cubic feet of topsoil was carted from New Jersey by horse and wagon to enrich it. Natural swamps and rock outcroppings forced workers to manually dig up the earth and blast away at the rocks with gunpowder. The debris, more than ten million cartloads, was taken out by horsepower and dumped in area farmland communities. The end result was over 843 acres of woodland and lawns, seven bodies of water, a castle designed as a viewing pavilion, 36 bridges and arches, and tree-lined pathways, bridle paths and roadways for joggers, bicyclists, and horse-drawn carriages. Central Park is home to a fabulous zoo, a historic carousel that was once turned by true horsepower, and amphitheatres for theatrical performances and concerts. Tavern On The Green, a popular restaurant in the shadow of John Lennon's apartment building, the Dakota, occupies Central Park West and 67th Street and is one of the park's official carriage stands. The park's perimeter, including the carriage stands at Central Park South, abuts some of the world's most expensive real estate. To this day, the result of this massive urban project is nothing short of glorious, and New Yorkers are well aware of the value, historically and spiritually, of their city's gem.

“Central Park carriage rides have been around since the 1880s,” explains Anita, “because horse-drawn carriages were an elegant way for the wealthy to enjoy the park and show off their fancy horses.” Before long, people without horses would hail down the carriages, offering to pay to be able to ride in the ornate vehicles. “It developed into a New York City landmark that people wait in line to do. Over the decades, the carriage companies evolved to more private owners who may own only one or two horses,” she says. “Some may own several carriages and horses,” hiring drivers. In order for a carriage operator to legally have a carriage on the street, they must procure “medallions,” or licenses, from the city’s Department of Consumer Affairs. The carriage is tagged with a plate like an automobile—the horses are registered with the city and are required to have their number branded on a front hoof, and are required to wear a brass tag at all times with the same number on their throatlatches. “There are 68 carriages that are operating and housed at the five stables throughout the city, and they need to renew their medallions every two years,” explains Anita. The process of staying in business in this industry in this city is arduous at best. The license “is inspected by the city at least four to six times a year. They check rate signs that are posted on the carriages. They dictate the charge—currently \$34 per half-hour ride. They check that an inspection has been made of the carriage and that the inspection card is posted visibly on the carriage. The drivers must have a trip card, which includes documentation for every ride made, including number of passengers,” she says. All drivers must punch a time clock before leaving the stables with their horses, and upon returning. No horse is allowed on the street for more than nine hours each day, which includes the commute time to and from the park. Horses are not allowed on the street in temperatures above 87 degrees or below 19. The driver must have a driver’s license, and must have a copy of the horse’s health certificate on his person and available for inspection while working. A New York City certified vet must examine the horses and fill out a form issued by the health department, and the original health papers must be posted on the horse’s stall for inspection. “Stables in New York City are open for inspection 24 hours a day, seven days a week,” says Anita. The Department of Health and the ASPCA make unannounced visits to the stable, sometimes on a monthly basis, sometimes as often as weekly. “They inspect the logbooks, horse licenses, and stable permit. They document inventory of hay, grain, bedding, vermin and pest

control, and they photograph each horse and document dental and farrier visits. Every stable has staff on the premises 24 hours a day, to maintain and upkeep the horses.”

Chateau Stables has four carriages that go out to the park each day, and a huge collection of finer carriages, hearses, and antique conveyances that are hired privately for weddings, funerals, theater, movies and television. “We house 18 horses in the city,” says Anita, “mostly Belgians, Percherons, Standardbreds and Spotted Drafts. Our horses are rotated regularly to our family farm in Pennsylvania, to give them rest from the city.” This practice serves Chateau well. “We want a horse that is quiet, laid back and gentle,” explains Anita. “Once we find that horse, he becomes a part of our family. We find that the longer we have our horses, the more valuable they are. They develop a street sense, where they can walk along next to anything —cement mixers, hot dog carts, you name it.” She continues, “We have had passengers take a ride and offer a tremendous amount of money to buy the horse they rode with, and as the owner of a herd of these horses, no dollar amount could ever be enough.”

It’s the hustle and bustle of the city, its many obstacles, loud noises, smells, and dangerous traffic that has animal rights groups up in arms about the industry. They believe the horse and carriage is antiquated, archaic, and no longer belongs in a city such as New York. In truth, many of them also believe that horses should not be harnessed or saddled anywhere, but should roam free. The city has made every effort to see to the humane welfare of each horse on the island, but Anita thinks more can be done for the sake of safety and comfort. “I would like to see the Central Park Conservancy put up awnings at the carriage stands, to help shelter the horses from the sun, wind and rain while waiting for passengers.” There has been talk of housing the horses in stables in Central Park itself, so that the horses never have to be on the streets, “but the conservancy has openly said many times that they have no plans to house all the carriage horses within the park. We are very happy with our building,” continues Anita. “We are equipped with sprinkler systems for fire safety, automatic waterers in every stall, skylights, windows, and exhaust fans. Chateau Stables is the oldest operating stable, and the only family operated stable, left in Manhattan,” concludes Anita, “Chateau and the horses brought this family together in the first place! We adore this stable!” To learn more about Central Park, visit their website at www.centralparknyc.org.

