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A Letter From America

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Dear Family,

I’m back from Middleburg and it was quite an occasion—with coaches, horses, parties, and people! New Bolton Center had been asked to lend two Kladruby driving horses to make up a four-in-hand for a gentleman, who in turn was asked to loan a road coach to a venerable scion of the coaching world from England, Peter Munt, who has driven for HRH Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, and whose family continues the tradition of four-in-hand driving through his sons, Tony and Roy.

Only road coaches could be used—and we saw some lovely examples of the marvelous old coaches that once carried passengers all over England, with wonderful names like Tantivy, Nimrod, the Boar, and Old Times. Road coaches could hold as many as 14 people, and needed a team of four horses to pull them.

Harry J. Tucci, our host and owner of the coach our horses were to help pull, has a spectacular collection of carriages and coaches on his farm in Pennsylvania, and had entered two road coaches in the Middleburg drive. The coach we rode, known as a Park Drag, was built by Million Guiet & Co. of Paris in 1873. It was displayed at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, and is painted dark green and black, with vermillion trim—quite squishy mud.

We were in the second group, but one of our “wheel” horses threw a hissy fit and wouldn’t go. Embarrassingly enough, it was one of the School’s horses—but along for the ride was Bruce Rappoport, New Bolton Center’s Associate Dean, who heads our carriage program. He reckoned the horse’s bit needed to be changed, which meant unhooking all four horses! Cardinal safety rule: never leave a horse in the traces unless he is fully harnessed and bridled! We were marginally delayed, because our horse’s tantrum had upset the other horses, and they all needed to be soothed. But we finally got going, parading through the grounds before heading down the road.

I was fortunate to be sitting behind the Whip, Mr. Munt, and next to his son, Tony, also an experienced coachman. He operated the coach’s brake, and I felt very glad of this before too long. I was able to listen to the fascinating chat between father and son. Mr. Munt knew two of the horses well, as they had once belonged to him. It was such fun to hear them talk about how the horses were going, which one was working and which was slacking off, and when to use the brake and the whip. Coaches stretched ahead as far as the eye could see, and behind as well. Our team was a mix of greys and bays, arranged in checkerboard formation.

Shortly into the drive, we descended a very steep hill, and I was a tad nervous, as our horses did not seem to be staying in an orderly line. We were perilously close to the vehicle in front (expressions of rank alarm could be seen on the faces of its passengers), doing a bit of erratic weaving. In addition, very steep ditches lined each side of the road. A couple of times our wheels slid off the hard...
top and into the soggy ground; I had visions
of the coach toppling sideways into the
ditch! I was calculating how best I could
bail out, sandwiched as I was between two
substantial gentlemen, particularly as our
horses were getting more and more fussed.

Our two capable grooms (one a nursing
assistant at New Bolton Center) jumped
down and went to the horses’ heads to calm
them (great credit to them, as both young
ladies are very petite). Apparently,
one of our brake
shoes had no
contact with
the wheel, so
when the brake
was applied
it caused the
couch to side
slip. The
horses tried to
compensate
for this,
giving us a
very erratic
wake! All’s
well that
ends well, however,
and the rest of the drive went off very
pleasurably — although I was frozen in
the damp, cool weather. Thinking of how
passengers traveled 150 years ago, in the
“golden age” of stage coaches, made me
appreciate the value of voluminous skirts,
warm wraps, and cozy bonnets.

Saturday’s weather was much kinder.
The day’s drive included a stop at a lovely
farm called Llangollen, which reputedly
appears in “Gone with the Wind” and is
very close to the “hidden White House,”
where the President takes refuge in
national crises. It was a little surreal to
drive a coach and four through the gorgeous
Virginia countryside, dotted with elegant
mansions and farms, and to see in the
side of the hillside what looked like great
concrete bunkers. Overhead, a helicopter
circled endlessly — presumably routine
security.

A sumptuous champagne lunch followed,
under a tent on the sweeping lawns of
Llangollen. Seeing 31 road coaches with
their four-in-hand teams ranged across the
parkland of this antebellum mansion was
quite magnificent! As we departed, the long
line of carriages was to “pass in review” up
the driveway. This
meant the lead coach pulled
off to the side to watch all others go by, the
second coach did likewise, then the third,
and so on. The lead coach would see all the
vehicles pass, then would pull out and take
up its lead position again, followed by the
rest in correct order.

This was the humans’ plan, of course.
The horses had other thoughts about it!
Having stood quietly for more than an hour
while we ate and drank, all they wanted to
do was Get Going! So this process got quite
a few of them worked up — ours included.
Oh dear, another embarrassing moment for
the School. After we pulled over, one of our
lead horses took exception to the stop. He
let us know of his dissatisfaction by kicking
out at the splinter bars behind him. After
some sizeable whacks, he reared on his hind
legs and nearly went over his traces, which
would have been very dangerous. Our tiny
little groom managed to get him down safely,
at which point Mr. Munt said quietly, “Get
these ‘osses going! Safety first!” Bad etiquette,
but good judgment. A coach behind us had
a similar problem, and indeed, one of their
lead horses fell down on the road. This was
very alarming and looked appalling, but we
later learned that everything was
safely resolved and the
foursome got
home, coach
intact.

The day
ended with
a ball at a
participant’s
Virginia estate.
His indoor
riding arena was
transformed into
an enchanted
autumnal grotto,
with paper lanterns
hanging from the
rafters, huge sheaves
of corn delineating the dance floor,
and tall vases of roses — 1,800 of which
had been flown in from Colombia that
morning — decorating each table. Quite an
extravaganza.

I’m so looking forward to reading about
this magnificent event in the carriage
and driving magazines. It was a privilege
to be part of it, and to be the guest of such
a generous host, Mr. Tucci. Hope you have
enjoyed reading about this memorable
chapter in New Bolton Center’s carriage
driving history!

Love,
Jane