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A Letter From America

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A Letter from America

Editor's note: In October 2004, more than 30 antique road coaches gathered in Middleburg, Va., for a weekend of pleasure driving to celebrate the National Sporting Library's 50th anniversary. This spectacular gathering, chaired by Jacqueline L. Ohrstrom (wife of the Library's long-time chairman, George L. Ohrstrom, Jr.) and George A. "Frolic" Weymouth, benefited the National Sporting Library in Middleburg. The School loaned its two Kladruby driving horses, Ricardo and

Amor, to one of the participants.

The School's Carriage Program is an important outreach and advancement tool; since its inception by Dean Mark Allam at New Bolton Center, it has taken the School's message of teaching, research, and healing to a wide variety of audiences.

Jane Simone, New Bolton Center's Director of Development, attended the event and wrote the following letter to her family in England describing the historic weekend.

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 Guet & 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



Peter Munt takes Harry Tucci's 1873 Guet Park Drag through a gate en route to Llangollen Farm, Va. New Bolton Center's greys are Amor (front/left) and Ricardo (right/rear). Photo by Alix Coleman.

the thing to be seen in on a Sunday drive through the park!

Three days' driving was planned, beginning Friday, October 22. The coaches were divided into three groups of 10 or 11, because it takes quite a while to get so many coaches on the road. The going was also very heavy—lots of rain had left deep,

squishy mud.

We were in the second group, but one of our "wheel" horses threw a hissy fit and would not 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 coach 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 pleasantly—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 cosy 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



Road coaches that participated in the National Sporting Library's driving weekend in Middleburg line up at Llangollen Farm. Photo by Alix Coleman.

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