

Canada's Coachman

by Don Mason

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Ted Swendson seems like an ordinary guy. He loves music, he loves to travel and like many other Albertans, he has been involved with horses for many years. However, Ted has an extraordinary passion. He is a coachman! Possibly the only one in Canada.

Years ago, Ted had what he called a 'pipe dream.' It began after watching a coaching demonstration at the 1993 Worlds Pairs Competition in Gladstone, New Jersey. He was so impressed with what he saw that he quietly decided that coaching would be the direction that his horse-driving career would take.

He already had his horses - Norwegian Fjords - which he had acquired during the 1986 World's Fair in Vancouver, British Columbia. It is rumored that he traded his friend, Orville Unrau, a truckload of tin for the horses.



Now he needed a coach! Ted researched the history of coaching and learned that by the mid-1850s the "sporting gentry" of England began to cultivate a nostalgic yearning for the days of the mail coach, when gentlemen were allowed to "handle the ribbons" behind a spanking team of four blood horses. To satisfy their urge, a few of the keenest among them had coaches built and teams put together. They met during the summer season in London's Hyde Park. These coaches soon became known by the term "park drags." This comparatively new class of coaches was built on the same general lines as the old mail and stagecoaches. They were, however, somewhat lighter and more highly finished. Other dedicated coaching enthusiasts set up public coach services on popular routes out of London, driving to resorts and beauty spots on a regular schedule throughout the summer months. The passengers were charged fares, but the main purpose of the service was to provide the owners with an opportunity to practice the art of driving as it had been in the old days. These public coaches were of similar design to the park drags but of heavier build. They were known as "road coaches." Coaching became very popular among well-to-do sportsmen and coaching meets were occasions for city dwellers to catch a glimpse of "Society." The coaches were generally used for social outings and to watch sporting events. They were drawn by four well-matched horses and usually driven by the owner. Servants and passengers accompanied the driver and once the destination was reached the servants would prepare and serve the food and refreshments.

In 1999, Ted's search for the perfect coach took him to Henry duPont's farm in Greenville, Delaware. Here, in a large barn was a remarkable carriage collection including a Turrell Park Drag. Completely appointed and in immaculate condition the magnificent coach stood ready for use. Ted had found the

coach of his dreams! Ted's research into the history of this coach resulted in a journey to England to visit with a previous owner Josephine Oliphant (85 at the time) who, at fifteen, had won the British Coaching Championship at the Richmond Horse Show.

When Henry du Pont's entire collection of horse-sized carriages became available, Ted could not pass up the opportunity to own all ten vehicles. He may have only been looking for a coach, but what he acquired in its entirety is truly something special.

As the saying goes – The rest is history. Ted has been coaching ever since. He and his wife Yvette have competed at local pleasure shows and have even placed first in the Calgary Stampede Parade. However, since there are very few, if any, Park Drags in western Canada, the Swendsons have had to travel all over North America to compete in actual coaching meets. One year they traveled to Ontario and won first place in a Pleasure Driving class at the Toronto Summer Classic. Last year, they traveled to Kentucky. Ted is a director of the Carriage Association of America and had the honor of driving dignitaries to the opening ceremonies of the CAA offices and library at Lexington's Kentucky Horse Park



This year, Virginia was their destination. Preparation began in April when Ted enlisted the help of family and friends. Yvette helped with the logistics – making travel plans (for six horses, six people and one large coach), researching traditional protocols, outfitting everyone, and in general making sure that the turn out was authentic down to the last button. Ted even had his own coach horn song, ('Ted's Golden Dream'), which the horn player plays during the victory lap. Kerri Unrau, Chlorus Short, Jennifer Reider, Ron Platt and Joe Havinga helped condition and prepare the eight horses for the event. Each team was driven for approximately two hours every day, over all types of terrain, pulling about one thousand pounds including carriage and crew. Since the horses needed to be ready to handle all manner of strange sights and sounds Ted tried to expose them to everything that they might encounter. The horses' 'bomb-proofing' even included Yvette playing the Caliope.

In September, after months of training, planning and hard work the entourage headed off to Virginia where twenty-eight of America and Canada's most famous coaches converged for a week-long outing reminding both whips and spectators of the elegant days of yesteryear. The turnouts came from as far away as Colorado, Florida and Calgary, Alberta. Tom and Gloria Burgess of Bridgewater, Virginia offered their stable as a home base and Tom acted as brakeman on the coach.

It was a busy week. First, they competed at a Pleasure Show in Piedmont. Next, they took the coach to Upperville to take part in the National Sporting Library Coaching Weekend fund-raiser. This event was

held September 27 through September 30, 2007 and raised more than \$100,000 for the library, the nation's largest depository of equine literature.

There were three different drives on three different days. Each drive being a loop of between eight to twelve miles around the beautiful Virginia countryside. The horses struggled with the 90-95 degree temperatures (95% humidity) and needed to be clipped after the pleasure show. Otherwise, they performed very well and Ted's training paid off when they encountered noisy road construction.

The coaches were also driven to the Upperville Horse and Colt showgrounds for presentation. This gave the public a chance to view and hear a brief presentation about each coach, its whip and passengers. In addition, a horn blowing contest was held. Social activities were numerous and included a black tie gala held at Liangollen (Gone with the Wind was filmed here) with the music of the Peter Duchin orchestra. When asked if he would do it again, Ted with a twinkle in his eye replied, "Of course!" It was a huge undertaking but well worth the time and effort. Although Alberta doesn't have a history of "coaching", Ted Swendson is certainly helping to preserve the driving heritage of years gone by.



Ted and Evette were long time members of the CFHA.
They reside West of Calgary, Alberta.