

By Coach and Four Along the Lenox Lanes

By: Ken Wheeling

In the closing years of the nineteenth century, that tranquil valley laying between the Taconic Mountains and the Berkshire Plateau, in western Massachusetts, echoed the haunting melodies of coaching calls, sounded by coach guards as coaches once more plied the roads here.

In the early years of that century, stage coaches plied the main stage routes through the Berkshires, especially around Pittsfield, where Jason Clapp had a coach and carriage shop, and where his stage lines carried passengers and mail eastward to Boston and westward to Albany, New York. It was over this same route that the illustrious Marquis de Lafayette made a historic journey in 1824, dining at Joseph Merrick's Coffee House in Pittsfield en route.

Now, new industrial wealth brought a congenial, leisurely lifestyle to the area. The Maplewood Hotel in Pittsfield rivaled any of those in Saratoga, and today, the Red Lion in Stockbridge still provides the same ambiance. Lenox became known as a "summer resort, with fine hotels and magnificent homes." Here, prominent New York families kept summer homes, where leisurely and grandeur created a unique summer life style Coaching became one of the activities of local sporting gentlemen, who kept fine carriages and blood horses in their coach houses and stables. COACHING! "Ah, what a charm that word has for the man who is really an enthusiast! It requires a knowledge of the highest branches of the art of horsemanship and equipage to insure a satisfactory result." So wrote Francis Underhill, in his book, *Driving or Pleasure*, which extols the virtues and sets down the rules and expectations of such sporting endeavors.

Americans, aping their English "cousins," who had already established exclusive clubs for four-in-hand drivers, e.g. the Bedford Driving Club, The Four-in-Hand Club and the London Coaching Club (1870), lustily took up the sport, establishing their own (New York) Coaching Club in 1875. They tooled their magnificent road coaches and park drags through Central Park in New York City at the Annual Meet and, responding to invitations from various club members, traveled to their homes on the "Pioneer," the club's own road coach. The club's rooms were at the fashionable Knickerbocker Club at 61st Street and 5th Avenue.

No less than five members of the Coaching Club summered in Lenox, and it was only a matter of time before the "club" made Lenox the focal point of one of its outings. On May 16-18, 1885, club members drove from New Hamburg, NY, the home of Reginald Rives, to Lenox, MA, to the home of F. Augustus Schermerhorn, elected a member in 1878. The trip to Lenox took 13.8 hours. The return journey took 10.45 hours. Mr. Schermerhorn himself drove the last two stages, from Great Barrington to Stockbridge, and Stockbridge to Lenox.

Harris Fahnestock, elected a member in 1908, regularly drove at club meets and events, driving the Franklyn Park to Princeton stage, and the Princeton to Trenton stage the next morning, on one of the club's longest trips, New York to "Belair House" in Collington, Maryland, October 11-14, 1916. His coach was frequently seen at "Eastover," his estate in Lenox.

George Griswold Haven, Jr. followed his father's footsteps and was elected a member in 1901, being elected club secretary-treasurer in 1906. An indefatigable coaching man, he accompanied his colleagues on many club trips, and participated in all the club meets and drives, his primrose and red drag being pulled by a team of browns and bays. He summered at "Sunnycroft" just off Kemble Street. His next-door neighbor was the equally enthusiastic Coaching Club member, Frank Knight Sturgis.

Sturgis, who founded the New York Jockey Club, often invited members of the Coaching Club to attend the races, was instrumental in promoting sponsorship of the Coaching Club American Oaks, for which the Coaching Club provided the trophy. He had been elected a member on February 11, 1882, eventually becoming the club's President.

Another club member, William C. Whitney, had the rustic mountain preserve, called "Antlers" on October Mountain, which he owned. His son, Harry Payne Whitney, likewise followed his father on the box seat, being elected a member of the club in 1897.

These members of the Coaching Club, who tooled their coaches along the main streets of Lenox, and the surrounding areas, brought fin de siècle coaching to a high standard here in the Berkshires, and brought the elegance of the New York elite to this summer colony.

However, the onset of World War I hastened the twilight years of coaching activities, and only a few devotees kept their teams and their coaches at the ready. Now and again, sporadic appearances of a coach and four stirred the latent interest of a whole new breed of coaching enthusiasts.

In due time, a contemporary citizen of Stockbridge, Mr. Harvey Waller and his wife Mary, decided to follow the example of these former Lenox coaching men, and acquired a team of horses. All though he had already purchased and restored a park drag, his acquisition of the "Old Times" in December 2001 heralded a new chapter in Berkshire coaching history. This coach, once driven by James Selby on his record breaking run in England, was brought to America, and duly restored. Mr. Waller was elected to membership in the Coaching Club in November 2003.

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