

New York City's Shame: The Carriage Horse Industry

by: Lauren Gilbert

Those who have visited New York City are familiar with many of the city's famous landmarks; the Empire State Building, Times Square, Rockefeller Center, and Central Park. In Central Park, particularly, there is one traditional tourist attraction that has become quintessential to the city; the horse-drawn carriage rides. For visitors, it seems like a charming, quaint way to sightsee, and for residents, it is yet another unique aspect of their city. What people fail to see is the cruelty and the danger of the carriage horse industry; especially when placed in the chaotic, hazardous setting of New York City. On a daily basis, horses are forced to work long hours while subjected to the stress and the risks of dense city traffic. When their workday is over, they must return to cramped, dirty stables in the inner city, getting no respite from the city's sirens and horns.

New York City is home to about "220 carriage horses... housed in five stables, all on the far west side of Manhattan from 37th St. to 52nd St., between 11th and 12th Avenue" (Animal Angels 1). A few stables under investigation, particularly West Livery Stables on 538 West 38 St., and Clinton Park Stables on 618 West 52 St., have shown substandard living conditions for the horses in their care. The stalls are too small, and the horses are "tethered to their feed trough, which makes it impossible for them to turn around in the pens" (Animal Angels 3). Concerning the condition of the horses, most were observed to have "marks on their bodies and were quite thin" (Animal Angels 3). Another major issue with their living conditions involves fire safety. Because many horses are kept on upper floors, in the case of a fire they would have to be led down several floors via steep metal ramps in order to evacuate: an inefficient and dangerous way to escape a fire. The stables have "no sprinkler system and no other fire protection devices... except for some 'fire buckets' filled with sand" (Animal Angels 5). The buildings often have no

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air conditioning and poor air circulation, and must be an unbearable place during the summer heat waves.

Apart from dismal living conditions and second-rate care, carriage horses are exposed to the hectic and unpredictable city streets, where even savvy New Yorkers must tread cautiously. Horses are, by nature, nervous and suspicious of all things unfamiliar, and present a great danger to themselves, their drivers, and those sharing the road. On September 14th, 2007, a carriage horse named Smoothie attracted media and passersby attention when she “broke free of her carriage ... [crashed] into a tree, and [broke] a hind leg before collapsing on the street” (Burke & White). Smoothie had apparently panicked after “a member of a break-dancing troupe cracked a snare drum behind her” (Burke & White). The accident left the horse dead at the scene. That same incident caused another carriage horse to bolt into oncoming traffic, causing a collision with a Mercedes Benz. Luckily, neither the horse nor the drivers of the car were hurt, but had chance favored differently, that carriage horse could have shared the same fate as Smoothie. In an undercover investigation by Animal Angels, a carriage driver told of an accident where after his horse bolted into traffic, “he fell off, got caught up in the tack and was dragged along by the wheel. He had to be hospitalized” (Animal Angels 5.)

Besides the inherent risk in working in heavy traffic, carriage horses work in all kinds of weather, in snow and in heat, and stand tied for many hours on the job. Although the New York Administrative Code restricts carriage horse usage when temperatures reach ninety degrees, it “does not take into account the humidity or the extreme heat that radiates off the city’s black asphalt streets onto horses’ legs and stomachs” (ASPCA), heat which has been known to reach “200 degrees Fahrenheit” (Animal Angels 8).

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These incidents been increasingly publicized since Smoothie's accident in 2007. As the city grows more and more populous, and traffic grows heavier and the environment more modernized, it becomes a highly dangerous and stressful place for horses. No matter what precautions the drivers take when guiding their carriages through the city, there's simply no way to prevent the horses from being frightened by the city's innumerable sights and sounds. Something considered trivial and everyday to a person, such as the beating of a snare drum, can terrify a horse. When spooked, the horse's reaction can be impossible to predict.

The blatant cruelty to carriage horses both on and off the streets should be enough reason to phase out the industry altogether. If more people were aware of the atrocities taking place they would certainly agree. Besides its inhumane effects on the horses, the practice bears unnecessary danger to both the animals and the people of New York City. Preserving such an unsafe business, an "impractical remnant of a bygone era" (NYCLASS), is an irresponsible act, for the sake of mere tradition or profit. Why must New York City still continue exploiting carriage horses when other large cities such as "London, Paris, Toronto and even Beijing" (Bennett 1) have long banned the practice?

Because of the horse's volatile nature and its vulnerability to the big city's unchanging conditions, eliminating the carriage horse industry entirely is the most humane course of action. There is absolutely no need to keep the horses in the city while there are alternative tourism attractions. The NYCLASS (New Yorkers for Clean, Livable, and Safe Streets) proposes replacing the horse-drawn carriages with electric-powered classic car replicas, which would preserve the tradition and antiquity of the tours without creating unnecessary danger or abuse. These cars would be a much more modern and safe substitute; they would "have the ability to drive at the same speeds as other cars, limiting the traffic congestion" (NYCLASS), and "will

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prevent spooked horses from darting into traffic or tipping over carriages, avoiding many of the injuries and deaths related to the current industry” (NYCLASS). Such an industry would be more efficiently regulated without the issue of animal involvement, and it would provide jobs for those whose livelihood remains with the carriage industry.

While the carriage horse industry continues to run in New York City, the “safety regulations vary and are often difficult to enforce” (Bennett 1). Therefore, we must take steps in order to gradually push the industry out of existence. The first, and simplest, action we can take is to lobby restrictions of horse-drawn carriages to Central Park only, requiring that the horses be shipped to the park in trailers. This would reduce accidents from happening on the twenty block routes that carriage horses take to work every day. In addition, higher standards of living for the horses must be upheld in every registered stable; the horse should be able to turn around and lie down in its stall, on proper bedding and with better air ventilation and temperature control. Even more importantly, better emergency precautions must be implemented; horses should be stabled at ground level to ensure quick evacuation in case of fire or another emergency. Next, New York City must pass a law that will close the currently running urban stables, and organizations such as the ASPCA can work to rescue every single carriage horse from being sent to slaughter, and rehabilitate them on private farms “to be recuperated to their natural, healthy capacity and live out the remainder of their lives” (NYCLASS). Finally, the city can implement new and humane means of tourism, the replica cars being merely one possibility.

The horse is a beautiful, sensitive creature whose utilitarian relationship with mankind has contributed to its widespread abuse even in the 21st century. There are still those who treasure the horse's longtime service to humans over the centuries, and thus may consider the horse-drawn carriages a memory of this kinship. However, we must take a modern perspective

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on this 19th century tradition. We cannot let inertia and sentimental values make us overlook the inhumane nature of the industry, and the dangers it poses to animals and people alike. As Anna Sewell stated in an immortal horse's story, "There are a great many kinds of men; there are good, thoughtful men... that any horse may be proud to serve; but there are bad, cruel men, who never ought to have a horse... to call his own" (Sewell 12). When Sewell wrote *Black Beauty*, the streets were filled with nothing but horse-drawn buggies. Now, some 150 years later, these remaining horses are surrounded by trucks, taxi-cabs, ambulances, and automobiles that leave no possible way for them to be safe. Let us repay the horse for his invaluable service to mankind, and get him out of New York City.

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