

HISTORY FROM OHA

A "Brush" with Danger: The History of Sleigh Riding in Syracuse

It is the late 1800s — picture elegant sleighs hitched to a team of graceful horses driven by men dressed in sealskin caps, heavy wool coats, and fur blankets. Plumes flying, sleigh bells jingling, and whips snapping through the crisp air — these were common sights and sounds on the snow-covered city streets of Syracuse.

BY KAREN Y. COONEY

Add to this picture, crowds of spectators equally well-dressed lining the main thoroughfares while cheering on their favorite horses and drivers. During this time, racing on the city streets was a favorite winter pastime. Onondaga Street, lined with imposing mansions owned by some of Syracuse's movers and shakers, was one of the most popular locations for these regular races. The drivers included well-known businessmen such as Milton Price, department store owner, C. C. Bradley, owner of the C. C. Bradley Foundry and Machine Shop (previously Bradley Manufacturing), and the eccentric D. Edgar Crouse, grocer. Many prominent men were remembered by the horses they owned rather than by their own accomplishments and personalities. No sport entertained the city's inhabitants more than a "brush" (race) on the streets between the "good ones." Onondaga Street, though very popular, was not the only street where these races occurred. Numerous near tragedies were averted on a number of city thoroughfares. Regular notices in the daily newspaper were printed warning both drivers

and pedestrians to obey the city ordinances and to take particular care crossing the snowy streets.

Syracuse itself was the home to several sleigh and cutter manufacturers, the most notable ones being H. A. Moyer Co. and Bradley Manufacturing. Moyer began his business in 1876 in Cicero, moving to the city in 1881. His Syracuse factory occupied an entire city block (near the present location of Destiny USA) and employed more than 300 skilled workers. About 6,000 vehicles — including several styles of wagons, surreys, sleighs, and cutters — were manufactured there annually.

The construction of cutters and sleighs differ because of the structures of each type. The cutter, for instance, was built lower to the ground and required more flexibility to ensure the bumps on the road did not break the structure. The builder often used a glue to secure the boards together. The construction of the sleigh, however, is sturdier and more rigid. Because the sleigh sits much higher than a cutter, the runners absorb more of the shock and better protect the sleigh's structure. Both types were used during the winter racing season.

Moyer continued to manufacture sleighs through the early 1900s. Eventually, however, he became fascinated with the automobile industry and began producing "high pleasure cars." Christopher C. Bradley also was noted for his wagons and sleighs before he began manufacturing the forging hammer. A third, much smaller manufacturer, originally located on Gifford Street was Short & Smith, later known as the Syracuse Cart Co. That company purported to produce annually more than 900 unique sleighs that were shipped to a variety of nationwide locations for both commercial and private use.

Sleigh races were also held on surrounding country roads and Onondaga Lake when the ice was thick enough to hold the weight



The Barnes family with their sleigh.

PHOTO CREDIT: OHA

of the sleighs, horses, and occupants. Obviously, sleighing on the lake held some special dangers. For instance, in 1899, a party of eight, each couple driving their own cutter, left a private city residence to drive "up the lake" to Liverpool. Once there, they enjoyed refreshments before preparing to return home. Snow had begun to fall heavily and the wind was blowing. They began their trip home only to find themselves quickly lost in a blizzard. Feeling it would be foolish to turn back, they headed for what they thought was the opposite end of the lake. Encountering large drifts and gale force winds, they continued driving for about an hour in the blinding snow before realizing they were totally lost. They eventually reached a stretch of open water and knew they had

traveled north rather than south. They turned around hoping to reach the Rockaway Beach Hotel located along the shoreline. It was almost another hour before they saw a faint light on the shore. The son of the resort proprietor had heard their distant cries and lit a lantern as a beacon. He rescued the group just in time, as they were near death, and brought them back to the hotel along with their horses and sleds.

Today, unfortunately, sleigh riding is limited and only enjoyed by just a few hardy individuals when snow blankets the countryside. ■

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A Manlius mailman delivers mail via sleigh.

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