



Charlie Matheson driving the Viking with Julie Martin on the box and Justin Wiley behind her

# The Newport Coaching Weekend

by

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Photos by Eduardo Galliani

The streets of Newport, Rhode Island, were once again awakened by the familiar sound of horses' hooves this August 17-20. Every three years, the Preservation Society of Newport County, which looks after 11 historic properties (seven of which are National Historic Landmarks), hosts a Coaching Weekend in which coaches and whips (or drivers) come from all over America to drive their horses, enjoy them-

selves, and help raise money for these historic homes. These Coaching Weekends were first revived in 1968 when the Carriage Association of America held its annual conference in Newport. Since then it has occurred with a few interruptions every three years. This year whips came from Florida, Tennessee, Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Rhode Island. They, members of the Coaching Club, the Four-in-Hand Club,

the Carriage Association, the American Driving Society, the World Coaching Club, and the Private Driving Club, all descended on Newport for a week of hard work, fun and frivolity.

The first Coaching Weekend occurred in 1968 and was the dream of Paul Downing and others who longed to see the Breakers Stable alive again with horses. Coaches and carriages had been de rigueur in the social seasons of 1890-1920.

The Vanderbilts, Belmonts, and Astors drove their coaches during July and August around Newport and to the various sporting events. They built summer “cottages” complete with stables. These summer cottages are what the Preservation Society of Newport County has so fastidiously maintained. With the advent of the car and WWI some of the lavishness of Newport dissipated, and soon stables such as the Breakers were converted into garages.

Carriage horses remained out of the Newport spectrum until 1968 when the Coaching Weekends were revived. And what a better way for the Preservation Society of Newport County to help Newporters and other vacationers feel

what those Gilded Years of 1880-1920 must have been like than to sponsor the Coaching Weekend? Once you have seen or been on a coach driving along Bellevue Avenue, you are left with no doubt that the Gilded Age was as much an age of leisure as it was of hard work. And it is with leisure and hard work that the 14 whips and coaches participated in this most recent Coaching Weekend.

No horse sport, especially coaching, is a solitary one. It requires time, patience and manpower. Coaches can weigh 2,500 to 3,500 pounds without the 10-12 people that they carry. To get their horses fit, the whips drove approximately 8-10 miles each day all through the summer. Driving a coach is no theme park ride

either. It takes skill, intuition, experience and resourcefulness. Whips are responsible for the safety of the passengers, the horses and themselves by exercising absolute control over the horses and anticipating every mishap. Yet the elegance and nonchalance in which the best whips maneuver is enlivening.

The hosts and hostesses of today may not spend \$300,000 per season for entertaining guests as they did in the Gilded Age, but they certainly made sure whips, passengers, donors and grooms alike were well taken care of by hosting glamorous luncheons, cocktail parties and black tie dinners. On the first day, coaches stopped at Rosecliff (c.1902), a mansion modeled after the Grand Trianon at

Mr. Louis Piancone and Ms. Gladys Szapary



Versailles; Fort Adams, a bastioned fort used from 1799–1945; and the Newport Country Club (1894). The drive continued along Ocean Drive to Price’s Neck where Mr. and Mrs. Donald Lamont hosted a luncheon at their home, Sea Edge. That evening the Szaparys and Roberts hosted a cocktail reception at the Breakers Stable. The whips were entertained at a black tie dinner at Ker Arvor, the home of Mrs. John R. Donnell.

The next day, Friday, whips drove on nine miles to Greenvale Vineyards where Mr. and Mrs. William Wilson hosted a luncheon. That evening some whips drove an additional seven miles to Brenton Point and to the Elms, a French-style chateau, and then to Bellevue Avenue where Mr. and Mrs. Michael Fernandez hosted a cocktail party. Later that evening, the whips and donors enjoyed a black-tie dinner at the Elms.

The festivities continued on Saturday. Whips drove along Bellevue, where crowds lined the street to the Elms. One of the best aspects about riding in a coach on Bellevue is that one is just the perfect height to be able to peer over the stone walls and get a glimpse of some of the magnificent summer cottages. But more than that, there is a sense of peace and sensuality riding in a coach. Men wear top hats and smart summer jackets with ties, and women wear beautiful hats with matching suits, shoes, purses and gloves. Little children who ride are also in proper dresses with hats or coats and ties. The warm, earthy smell of the leather, the rhythmic clip-clop of the horses’ hooves, the call of a coaching horn, coupled with the luncheons at seaside houses and dinners at historic cottages, all combine to physically and emotionally transport participants back to the Gilded Age.

After the horses rode up Bellevue and turned into the Elms, they performed a free exhibition for the public. At the exhibition, Ted Eayrs, Vice Chairman for Coaching, David Lindh, Chairman of the



**Mr. and Mrs. S. Tucker S. Johnson with Robert Dryer blowing the horn**



**Mr. James Miller and Ms. Misdee Wrigley at the Breakers**

Coaching Weekend, and Sir Paul Nicholson explained to the public about coaching. For example, a park drag was a private and smaller vehicle that was used for travel, while a larger road coach was

used for public coaching runs. That is why so many road coaches have the names of the places they served on them just as a bus would have today.

At the exhibition were park



A gathering of the coaches for a luncheon at the home of Mr. and Mrs. J. Lawrence Sheerin

drags, several famous coaches such as the Viking driven by Mr. Charles Matheson, the Nimrod driven by Mr. Tucker Johnson, two sister Tativys driven by Mr. Louis Piancone and Mr. Richard Sanford, and the Rocket driven by Mr. Jim Hundley. There was even a staff coach for the British Royal Artillery driven by Mr. Doug Kemmerer.

Mr. Walter Eayrs, son of Ted Eayrs, drove a roof seat break driven by polo ponies. This vehicle would have been used to go to pleasure and sporting events such as the races or polo games. There were also a variety of horses for the different vehicles: Mr. Frolic Weymouth brought his elegant in-step hackneys; Mr. William Staples brought his Canadian hackney crossbreds; both Tativys were driven by gelderlanders; Mr. Doug Kemmerer drove thoroughbreds; Mr. Harvey Waller brought European warmbloods; Mr. John White brought his French Polish dappled grey warmbloods; Ms. Gloria Austin brought Friesian horses imported from the Netherlands as did Mr. J. V. Renfro; Mr. Howard Fafard brought Lipizzanners and Kladrubers; and Mrs. Jamie Wyeth brought very smart black and

white paint horses recently imported from England.

After a brief horn-blowing contest, the coaches traveled to Hammersmith Farm, the former home of the Auchincloss family and Jackie Kennedy, where they enjoyed an unparalleled view and refreshments courtesy of the Kiernans, the current owners. Afterwards Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Sheerin hosted a luncheon at their lovely home, Seaward. That afternoon participants had just enough time to catch their breath before the black-tie dinner dance at the Breakers, a 70-room cottage designed by Richard Hunt Morris for Cornelius Vanderbilt II. Under the direction of Gladys Szapary, great-niece of Alfred Vanderbilt, and Linda Lindh, the evening was perfect. The dance floor was filled with ladies in flowing summer evening dresses.

My husband, Justin Wiley, a Coaching Club member, Mrs. Wyeth and I were poking around wondering about various portraits when we were lucky enough to run into Alfred Vanderbilt, great-grandson of the builder of the Breakers. For me his presence in his historic family house made the whole weekend all the more

palpable. These were not Disney sets but real people with real dreams and real lives who lived here—something that is so easy to forget when you walk into the 70-room Italian Renaissance-style villa. The same was true with the luncheon hosted by the Prince family the next day in their family house, the Marble House, which was built by Richard Hunt Morris for William Vanderbilt. Despite a later start on Sunday because of the rain, coaches still enjoyed a lovely drive along Ruggles down Brenton and through Dodo Hamilton's Swiss Village before reaching the Marble House.

Indeed the Gilded Age was not too far away as Mr. Pierre DuPont Irving, the Chairman of the Preservation Society of Newport County, pointed out. In many ways it felt as if we were in a new Gilded Age. The triennial Newport Coaching Weekend is truly a time travel experience not to be missed.

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Nancy Wiley lives in Orange, Virginia, with her husband, children, horses and dog. She is an avid foxhunter and is interested in preservation and conservation issues throughout Virginia.