



A Tale of Two Ladies

A Journey to the National Drive

by Steve Stillions

"It was the best of times , it was the worst of times..."

Well, not exactly.

Spoiler alert: ramblings of a proud husband.

For me it was like any other great year to be alive, but for Sheryl (Lady Number 1) it represented a challenge. Her favorite driving mare, Megan, was expecting and would not be available for the driving season. More importantly, our daughter Angela was also expecting, and Sheryl knew that would take top priority for both of us. We had already warned our driving club, Best of Iowa in Traces Society (BITS), that we wouldn't be available for any events that spring and summer due to other priorities.

We were ultimately blessed with both a new filly (in May), and a new grandson Jacob on July 4th. Life was grand and we were enjoying the new family additions immensely. But by August I could tell Sheryl was feeling 'horse remorse'. With our best driving horse nursing a baby, the chance of attending the fall carriage driving events was very small. We were resigned to sitting the year out and volunteering to assist with the fall events rather than competing.

Enter Lady Number 2. Our twenty four year old Morgan mare, Lady, has been an all around wonderful horse for us, the children, and the now the grandchildren for over

sixteen years. As a teenager, our daughter Sonya found the ad for the then 8 year old mare from an elderly lady's estate. Sonya simply wouldn't let up until Sheryl took her to see it. Just to go look, she told her Mom...I decided then that resistance was futile. We now had a Morgan we could ride and drive, even though we didn't have any driving equipment.



Uh oh... THE SCALE!

Life went on for years and we enjoyed Lady as a riding horse. Regardless of the competition, she always wanted to lead the pack when trail riding. She had two primary speeds: go and go-go-go forever. Her Morgan heart and Flyhawk breeding just didn't know anything else. Eight years passed and with the help of a local gentleman we reintroduced her to driving, but the results were not what we hoped for.

Five years later, we would try driving again. The results were much better, but still the professionals felt Lady may not work out as a good driving horse. Several years went by and we acquired a nice driving mare (Megan), better equipment, and Sheryl's driving experience improved. Sheryl had been driving Lady occasionally at home but not in a crowd. With Megan out for the season, could this be Lady's year? I decided to gently push the issue.

I encouraged Sheryl to change from volunteer status to competitor status just before the deadline for the September Harvest Moon Carriage Classic in Des Moines. She began preparation for the timed individual events, electing to bypass the judged ring events (e.g. the crowd). We set up multiple cones pairs and poles (like pole bending except with carriages) at home for practice. With each practice session, the two ladies seemed to find their groove. They were on a mission..

The Harvest Moon Carriage Classic in Des Moines is a wonderful event for both competitors and spectators. It is held each fall at Living History Farms as part of their "Horse and Buggy Days". Busloads of tour groups stop there to enjoy the venue and activities. It includes a parade through historic Walnut Hill with all the carriage competitors and many others that come out to drive for the visitors. It has been a major family outing for us now for several years.

For Sheryl, granddaughter Kayla, and Lady it was a resounding success (defined as a safe and successful parade trip on both Saturday and Sunday). Oh yes, and several ribbons for various competitions but that was a secondary achievement. What could possibly top that? What's next? How about the October National Drive at the Kentucky Horse Park? The *NATIONAL DRIVE*?

We had followed the burgeoning National Drive at the Kentucky Horsepark from afar, hoping one day to have an opportunity to go. Then in its third year, everyone that attended raved about the sheer exhilaration of riding and driving their horse(s) in one of the most beautiful equine parks in the country. The park is home to the annual Rolex Kentucky three day event and will be the site for the 2010 World Equestrian Games. It is administrative home to the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF), the Carriage Association of America, and other national organizations. The museums, facilities, and grounds (over 1200 acres) provide an unmatched level of beauty and safety for equine events. Horses even have the right of way.

The National Drive is perhaps the largest gathering of recreational carriage drivers in the country. This year over 350 people brought 280 horses from 31 states and Canada to enjoy the event. Midwest venders Sandee McKee of Iowa Valley Carriage Supply and Marjean McIntyre of Camptown Harness in Nebraska among 20 other venders made the long trek. You have access to the facilities and obstacles used by some of the top drivers in the country, without the stresses and timetable of an actual competition. Add to that the clinics, camaraderie, wine and cheese parties, venders for shopping, etc. and it becomes an unbelievable experience for you and your horse.

Building on the ladies' success in Des Moines, we decided in the 11th hour to move ahead with plans for the trip to Kentucky. Sheryl, initially working for her father Ron and now for her brother Bob Wright at Wrightway Trailers, has built one of the largest horse trailer operations in the area. She was able to make arrangements to attend as a horse trailer vender, taking one of her 'carriage driver' trailer designs. And now we would actually be able to take a horse and cart. I equipped the trailer and our truck with a remote camera (adapted from a baby monitor) so we could monitor Lady on the trip. And yes, her most favorable travel position was riding facing backwards.

The trip was a long one, perhaps 11 hours, with frequent breaks. We bedded Lady down in one of the large stalls provided, knowing we would give her until the next afternoon to rest before any driving duties. When we returned in the morning we took time to get situated and explore the other vendors and activities at the drive. Just like the first day of camp as kids, excitement was in the air. The weather was beautiful and we were taking it all in.

A National Drive day always starts with coffee, pastries, and an informal drivers meeting for any announcements. Our friend Wade, from *Driving Digest*, would get up at 4AM each morning to make this happen. Here they described that three driving courses had been setup in different areas of the park for our enjoyment. We donned our new matching black and gold Hawkeye sweatshirts (I couldn't find any red and gold for myself in a 3XL at the last minute...), and by early afternoon we had Lady hitched for our first exploration of the park.

When you see the rolling hills, hedgerows, and manicured grounds of the Kentucky Horsepark you can just imagine the pounding of hooves as the horses fly by for a cross-country or steeplechase event. Another thing that strikes you about the area is the white or brown fence systems of these farms, miles of it. We once asked someone from the area why the double row of exterior fence along the roads. Is that extra protection to keep the horses in? Primarily, they explained, that is to try to keep wayward vehicles out.

We had opportunities to attend various clinics and even have a few lessons. Lady really took to the wide open spaces and seemed to enjoy every minute of it. We even had the chance to hitch her to a four wheel vehicle for the first time. She just needed a safe place to let go and fall into her stride. She had proven what she could do, and Sheryl felt she had found a new horse. All are home safely now, with a twinkle in their eye and an appreciation of their great experiences.

Sometimes, journeys last a lifetime. I first met Sheryl because I let it be known that I wanted to buy a horse. Every teenager needs one, right? Our younger brothers decided I needed some expert advice so they put me in contact with Sheryl. She had saved for three years to buy her first horse at age 12. When I met her she was on her second horse Joe, with a room full of trophies and ribbons from local events, mostly for barrels and poles. From him I learned the true meaning of power steering. Our first date was at Saddle Stock Farms, I proposed on horseback, and gave her the ring in a pony cart. We have been nurturing kids and horses for over 35 years since then.

This year was a great journey for two of my ladies to the National Drive. One to be remembered and cherished. I am glad to have been a part of it. "It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done." Well, Mr. Dickens, not exactly but I can appreciate the concept.

