

Fond memories of winter sleigh rides remembered



Ideas and
The Arts
by
John Sommer

By JOHN SOMMER
Herald Special

When I was a child no other season amazed me as much as winter. I remember the delicious cold feeling of the melting snowflakes that drifted down from enormous distances in the sky and touched my upturned face. I remember the stillness of the farm, how the abundant snowdrifts muffled all sounds.

I remember gliding swiftly over smooth, white roads in a horse-drawn sleigh. I remember the high-pitched music of the little bells that were fastened to the harness of the horses, announcing with their sound to the world, that an otherwise soundless sleigh was approaching. How clever the "idea" of a sleigh was. It amuses me now, when a few inches of snow becomes a major obstacle to the motorist. The invention of the sleigh was once considered as important as the invention of the wheel. Today we insist on the use of the wheel all year round. Maybe we are not as smart as we think.

Sleighs were so popular that people arranged sleighing parties. The most impressive sleighing party I remember took place when I was five years old. My parents had established with two other nearby farm families a close neighborly relationship. Our three families did many things together.

After New Year in 1932, they decided on the ultimate sleighing party. They would all go with their children, houseguests, and servants, in as many sleighs as they could muster, to a far-off country inn, famous for its hospitality, have a good meal and hot wine, dance after dinner as long as they felt like, and return home eventually in the dark.

Halfway between our farms, near a crippled old oak that had stood by this junction for hundreds of years, was the meeting place. I will never forget the sight

of the nine sleighs with their spirited horses and filled with men, women and children of all ages, amidst a white, sunny landscape. My family had come with three sleighs. A big black one for five persons, an even larger one, with sides woven like a basket, that seated six, and a small narrow sleigh pulled by one horse only, that could seat two.

Our nearest neighbors had come with four sleighs, transporting almost 20 people, and the third family arrived with two sleighs and about eight persons in the.

Forty grown-ups and children exchanged loud greetings from sleigh to sleigh, the warm horses steamed in the cold winter air, whips cracked, and a lot of differently tuned bells created a delightful noise.

Eventually the three households merged, the many sleighs formed a splendid long row, and the whole cavalcade sped down the tree-lined avenue with snow being blown in all directions, towards the agreed upon destination. This was the most wonderful event in my life up to that time.

I was sitting between my parents in the black sleigh, opposite us sat my brother with the son of our headman. Behind us, on a special seat, sat the headman with the reins in one of his gloved hands and a long, braided whip in the other. We were all bundled up in thick wintercoats and furlined hats, blankets and footmuffs. In the latter, hot waterbottles had been deposited for additional warmth.

After some time we entered a forest. We drove through a canyon of huge fir trees, their strong branches loaded with snow. When we emerged from the forest a valley with a village spread below us. Beyond the village was another forest and at the end of that one was the inn, an old castle-like edifice with stables and barns.

We got there much too soon for everybody's taste.

The blankets and furs and hot waterbottles were taken into the inn. The older boys helped stable the horses. A vast stove was going full blast in the inn, and a large table had been set and was waiting for us. The adults had hot wine with their meal, and we children had hot milk, sweetened with honey.

Later the grown-ups danced to music played on the inn's gramophone, and the small

children fell asleep in the big leather chairs of the lobby. When I awoke we were on our way home.

It was a very clear night with an astonishing amount of stars in the sky. The flickering candles in the lanterns belonging to each sleigh, hardly managed to throw shadows onto the snow, so brilliant shone the stars. The par-

ty did not keep together, as they had done on the way out. Some sleighs went fast and others took their time.

We came through the same village as hours before, but the night made the houses and barns look different and far from inviting.

Behind some windows burned lights and the occasional dog

barked at our passage. The night was luminous and a bit scary and I was glad to sit so close to my mother. We joined our hands under the furs. At one point the narrow two-seater sleigh passed us quickly and the young couple in it waved to us.

That is the last I remember. I did not wake up until the next morning.



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