

Sleigh Riding

By Denny Emerson



LEFT TO RIGHT: Denny Emerson's father, Ed, driving Miller Commander in the 1950s; The poet Robert Frost visiting the Green Mountain Stock Farm at the final dispersal of horses (photo © Warren Patriquin).

For most of us in 2022 the closest we come to taking an actual, literal sleigh ride is by listening each November and December to either the old Thanksgiving song, “Over the river and through the woods to grandmother’s house we go. The horse knows the way to carry the sleigh through the deep and drifted snow;” or by hearing Christmas carols like *Sleigh Ride*, *Jingle Bells*, and *Winter Wonderland*.

Or perhaps we are familiar with the poetry of Robert Frost, who was a Morgan horse lover. I met him at the Green Mountain Horse Association’s 1957 100-mile trail ride when I was riding Lippitt Sandy. Frost speaks of sleighing in several of his poems, even in a description of a dried-up brook in the summer month of June. He describes the chorus of spring peepers as “a ghost of sleigh bells, in a ghost of snow.”

While the reality of sitting in a sleigh behind a horse is gone for most of us, the idea of doing so is well-embedded in our collective memory. Here are several lines from three familiar Christmas carols. As you read them, think of the music and the melodies.

The first are lines from that old favorite, *Jingle Bells*:
 “Dashing through the snow in a one-horse open sleigh,
 O’er the fields we go, laughing all the way
 Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way.
 Oh, what fun it is to ride
 In a one-horse open sleigh.”

Just when the local disc jockey has finished playing *Jingle Bells*, she may treat us to *Winter Wonderland*:

“Sleigh bells ring, are you listening?”

In the lane snow is glistening.
 A beautiful sight, we’re happy tonight,
 Walking in a winter wonderland.”

This is from another sleigh-themed Christmas song, *Sleigh Ride*:
 “Just hear those sleigh bells jingling,
 Ring ting tingling, too.
 Come on its lovely weather
 For a sleigh ride together with you.”

However it is that we hear or read about sleighing, to grasp its essence we need to sit in a sleigh behind a Morgan horse, bundled in blankets, and pounding along a snow-packed dirt road feeling that big Morgan road trot, bells ringing, snow squeaking beneath the runners. For a short decade back in the late 1950s until the mid 1960s I had access to those kinds of real sleigh rides, high on the hill above the tiny town of South Reading, Vermont, when my father had an 1830s-era sleigh and a Morgan horse to pull it.

My father’s Morgan was Miller Commander (“Bongo”), a foal of 1955 by Millers Pride and out of Betty Ross by Mansfield. Dad bought his sleigh from a retired Greenfield, Massachusetts, banker who had inherited the sleigh from his grandfather. The seller told Dad, “Now Ed, my grandfather had this sleigh custom built in 1830. It’s a courting sleigh. Do you know the definition of a courting sleigh? Big enough for one, strong enough for two.”

I don’t know where Dad found the woolen robes or the sleigh bells, but off he’d go up Grasshopper Lane toward Cavendish or down Pucker Street towards South Woodstock, bells growing

fainter until they were muted by the falling snow.

On Christmas morning in 1960 I was staying at my parents' farm while on vacation from Dartmouth College, and my two little cousins, Mary and George Emerson, wanted to go for a sleigh ride. Dad told me, "Denny, it's easy, just like driving the Meadowbrook on dirt. We hooked up Bongo in heavily falling snow and headed up toward Mrs. Derby's house a mile away. Mrs. Derby was the youngest daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt, and she was also a big fan of Morgan horses. I found driving the sleigh trickier than driving a cart because the runners slipped out on turns. I managed, though, to turn around in Mrs. Derby's yard without tipping over the sleigh and brought my cousins safely home.

For me, there's something about the time around Christmas, late December into early January, that I most equate with driving a sleigh. Probably that has to do with long ago remembrances of school and college vacations in South Reading, plus all those Christmas carols that involve "dashing through the snow."

Probably the most memorable of all those carols is *White Christmas*, sung by Bing Crosby. Bing's business manager, his brother Everett Crosby, had a Morgan breeding farm in Connecticut and it's not too hard a stretch to imagine that Bing Crosby might have actually ridden with his brother Everett in a one-horse open sleigh.

Here are the lines from *White Christmas* that are known far and wide, especially due to Bing's melodic vocals:

"I'm dreaming of a white Christmas,
Just like the ones I used to know,
Where the treetops glisten and children
listen
To hear sleigh bells in the snow."

"To hear sleigh bells in the snow," is more than a fantasy for Morgan horse owners. The next step is to turn possibility into reality, as James Saindon describes. James got his Morgan, Hope Grove Isiah, through Morgan Safenet, and while my sleighing adventures are far in the rear-view mirror, James is telling us that the better time is now. "Ever been wrapped in a buffalo robe, in a 100-plus-year-old sleigh, and go gliding over a snow-covered field or down a snowy, wooded back road? A well-trained Morgan horse is essential, of course. To complete this most fortunate opportunity, bells will be jingling with each stride of the alert, excited, and compliant horse!

"Here in Maine, and wherever snow conditions are appropriate, winter can be embraced if you have a good driving horse. You will need a sleigh, antique if you are so fortunate, complete with harness. Add to this a standing list of friends who may never have experienced a sleigh ride. All the more fun with first timers.

"Imagine the excitement, climbing aboard the Portland Cutter and it's 2022! How incredibly satisfying to be able to offer friends a dash in the snow. Winter can be enjoyed, not dreaded, with the accessibility of a sleigh, harness, and suitable driving horse."

But before any Morgan owners succumb to the allure of sleighing and equate driving a sleigh to driving a vehicle with wheels, we need to heed the advice of Jeff Morse, a man who, unlike me, truly knows what is involved. "You are nowhere near as agile on foot around a sleigh as you are around a wheeled vehicle. The snow (or ice!) is much slipperier than turf, gravel, or dirt where you would be driving a wheeled vehicle. You will be colder and are apt to have on heavier gloves and bulkier clothing when taking out a sleigh. You will be clumsier and moving slower.

"Sleighs do not turn the same way as wheeled vehicles. They tend to slide around turns which is fine except when they slide sideways into ricks, ruts, or other debris buried out of sight under the snow. This can abruptly stop the sliding and, in fact, can even be the cause of an upset with your sleigh. Make use of experienced help. It's best if you can enlist the help of someone who has had sleighing experience... and not just riding in a sleigh, but of actually hooking and unhooking a sleigh to a horse. Wear a helmet. Wear a helmet. Wear a helmet. And insist that your passengers do as well."

Thank you, Jeff. It seems that when I headed out in the storm with Bongo, hauling my two little cousins, ignorance was bliss, and it would be wrong to underplay that. There is joy to be found in taking your Morgan for a sleighing adventure, but more joy when both you and your horse know what to do. Back when sleighing was as common in northern winters as driving a car is today, sleighing lore

must have been a normal part of existence. Mainly I remember the sheer fun that sleighing involved. Our neighbor, Percy Weldon, had an Upwey Ben Don daughter, and like her sire, Percy's mare could fly. Far up the lane we would see a bay mare tearing along in full out road trot, and here they'd come past our house, plumes of new fallen snow drifting, hooves thudding, and above it all, the bright clear crystal song of those ringing bells. ■



TOP TO BOTTOM: James Saindon says there is always a list of friends in line for a sleigh drive with Hope Grove Isiah, the Morgan gelding he acquired from Morgan Safenet; Jeff Morse in the sleigh behind Green Meads Galen on the March 2013 cover of *The Morgan Horse*.