

The Farmyard Rickshaw

Larry Springer, LLI Spring 2017

While recently visiting our daughter, Tisha, and her family in Pittsburgh we toured the Frick Museum. It is named after Henry Clay Frick, a Pittsburgh resident who founded the H. C. Frick & Company coke (a low impurity fuel like charcoal) manufacturing company, was chairman of the Carnegie Steel Company, involved in forming U.S. Steel Corporation, and financed the construction of the Pennsylvania Railroad. One of the museum buildings housed the antique cars, and buggies dated from about 1880 to 1900, that the family owned.

They reminded me of the weathered 4-wheeled buggy on the farm in Wisconsin that I remember as being 2-wheeled. Don, my brother who was 11 years older than me probably customized it – effectively turning it into a rickshaw. In his teens he was regularly building contraptions or modifying something into one. It now just had the basics, no ‘conveniences’ like seat railings or a step for climb into and out of it. The image below is closer to depicting its condition.



When I was about 10 or 11 my friend Chooner, who lived down the road, and I apparently discovered it and quickly put it to use as anything with wheels wasn't going to sit still very long. We pulled each other around in our yard, which wasn't exactly racetrack smooth, so it turned out to be quite a bit of work and we had to switch every five or ten minutes. The farmyard was formerly field with dips and humps that were there since the time the land was cleared and maybe plowed, dragged, and seeded in the 1800s. There wasn't much landscaping of farmyards in those days.

The grass was typically un-mowed between the house and the barn, which produced a lot of resistance. There was also a slight rise onto the gravel driveway that ran about 200 feet from the road, past the house, and to the pump house attached to the barn. Another part of the yard was on the other side of the driveway, so our route through the yard would usually take us up and over the driveway and back again. I don't recall ever taking it into the fields, but they would have been more difficult to traverse than the yard, and I'm sure we never took it out on the road, as ma would certainly have objected.

The most fun we had with it was after my sister, Elsie, her husband Neal, and their first two children April and Toni, moved back from the Seattle area in 1954. Neal had been a painter in the shipyards, and the work started drying up after the Korean War. They rented a farmhouse only about four miles south of us. Now we had some 'willing victims' we could terrify, racing around the yard with them on the rickshaw screaming their heads off as young girls do. We probably started doing this in the summer of 1955 when they were five and three respectively. During those romps I may have left the ground jumping over obstacles in the yard like cats, chickens, or clumps of grass; but one thing for sure – I never left the ground without coming back down like the donkey below!



My other sister, Leona, and her husband Roy would periodically visit from the west coast for a few weeks when he had leave from the Navy. Their oldest daughter, Penny would have been about four years old in 1955, so we potentially were pulling three screaming girls on it at times. They only came about once every two years as airfare at the time was beyond the income of the average person, so they would drive about six days round trip without the convenience of a quiet, comfortable, roomy car with air conditioning.

It wasn't until about 1970 when most cars included air conditioning as standard equipment making it affordable. Prior to that there were "car coolers" that used the evaporation of water (rather than your own sweat) to cool you. These 'swamp boxes' or 'swamp coolers' were mounted on the passenger side and blew the cooler air in through the partially open passenger window. They were referred to as 'swamp boxes' for a reason – that's what the air smelled like, and they were consistently effective only in areas with low humidity like the southwestern states.

As we grew up the rickshaw was used less and less until it eventually went back to its former state of weathering in the yard. This may sound like a sad ending for it after providing many hours of enjoyment for a few glorious years of its life. But the story doesn't end here. When I was in high school I became interested in astronomy and build an eight-inch diameter reflector telescope that was about six-foot long. Now the problem was finding sturdy axles to mount it on, as it weighed about 10 to 15 pounds, so that it would smoothly rotate to follow heavenly bodies as they revolved around the North Star. Attaching the inner steel axles of two wooden wheel hubs together at 90 degrees was more than adequate. So for several decades these buggy parts lived on, until through good fortune I found a manufactured mount for a large telescope that someone dropped off at the local landfill.