

Percheron Horses Pull Grand Hotel's Omnibus



HORSE TALES

by Candice C. Dunnigan



One of the sights a person sees seven days a week on Mackinac Island is the big maroon omnibus stenciled with two words: "Grand Hotel." The bus is managed by a male or female driver complete with top hat. The horse power is provided by two huge gray Percheron horses. Actually there are three of these buses at work, four drivers, and six horses that fill in the picture.

The Grand has been using an omnibus for decades. Many years ago, they used matched black heavy draft horses (black Percherons) that were featured on many a postcard at lilac time. An omnibus is actually a large enclosed wagon with a rear entry door that was designed to hold 12 to 20 passengers. Grand Hotel buses hold an average of 14 people.

The hotel's omnibuses deliver and pick up guests from

the Grand to the three ferry docks, Star, Shepler, and Arnold. The rate is \$4 for adults and \$2 for children, and some hand luggage is allowed (while actually overnight bags are transported by horse-drawn dray to the hotel). The trip from a pickup at the docks to the Grand can be as short as 10 minutes or much longer, dependent on traffic in town.

About 10 years ago, Grand Hotel and Mackinac Island Carriage Tours made a change in style and they began to feature gray drafts, also known as Percherons. While the Grand leases the horses, the hotel, however, owns the collars, harnesses, lines, and the carriages.

Jim Chambers, of Carriage Tours, has worked hard to find six gray horses that are well matched and that can work the route as well as haul the buses. The six great horses this year



Grand Hotel's bus transports guests between Mackinac's three ferry lines and the hotel. Traffic congestion determines the length of the trip.

are Smoky and Ben, Captain and Billy, and Jack and Big Ben. All are geldings and they're more than 16 hands high. Smoky (the youngest) is the easiest to spot, as he is the darkest. Back at the barn, though, it's Big Ben who is the hands down favorite.

One sleepy August morning, I bicycled up to the stables at the hotel and I chatted with Luke Baxter (who drives one of the buses for the Grand) and one of the cutest little kids around, none other than Jim Chambers' grandson, who likes hanging around the horses and the barns. Both of them agreed they liked Big Ben the best.

"How come?" I asked.
"Because he's the biggest and the best," they both

replied.
The big grays of the Grand have nice digs. The horses live in clean, airy standing stalls in the rear of the hotel stable. They're on the roads from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., the busiest passenger time for the hotel. These animals are hosed off before and after work, and shampooed every other day.

The tack, which is a wonderful Freedman harness, is cleaned daily by the Grand's stable hands. The Grays are driven by Luke Baxter, his brother, Daniel Baxter, from the Melbourne area of Australia, Steve Breyer, and Sharee Newman.

These horses are fed hay in cubes for daily ration. Cubed hay, according to Gavin Robson, the head stable master for the Grand, enables the barn to give them consistent quality forage.

The horses are grained with a pellet compound mixture for breakfast, lunch, and dinner (yes, they do get lunch).

Prior to my trek to Grand Hotel's stables, I caught up with driver Steve and his team, Smoky and Ben, who were awaiting arriving guests at the Arnold Transit dock. The dock,

or any dock for that matter, is a sea of chaos and congestion when the boats come in and the passengers arrive, and I was amazed at the demeanor of the Grays. They handle it well.

The hardest part of the day is to deal with the mass of humanity that doesn't quite know where it's going yet.

Grand Hotel's buses are actually "body by Cadillac." Take a good look at them, there is more than a hundred years of heritage in them. The six horses that pull these are handsome animals and are notable examples of classy draft horses at their best.

The 35th anniversary of the Mackinac Island Horse Show is this Sunday, August 14, at Turtle Park starting at 9 a.m.

Come and see everyone and anyone who is involved with horses assembled there (trying to win a Mackinac blue), as well as just having a good time.

Candice Dunnigan is an active member of the American Equestrian Association, the Waterloo Hunt, and the Mackinac Island Horsemen's Association. Seasonally she resides at Donnybrook and Easterly Cottage.

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