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An abrupt end for hard-working horse!

By Sally Jacobs | Globe Staff August 26, 2014

WATERTOWN — After a lifetime of pulling newlyweds and children in an ornate white carriage, Freddie posed for his last keepsake photo Sunday night. Minutes after he dropped off a couple of wedding reception guests at the St. James Armenian Apostolic Church, the towering gray Percheron put an unsteady hoof on the sidewalk and then collapsed in his traces as several partygoers standing outside the church hall looked on in horror.

Freddie, 30, died within minutes, still in his black harness, lying partly on the sidewalk. A grim Bruce Hallgren, the longtime driver of the horse, struggled to release the carriage's shafts as he explained that Freddie had not wanted to stop in front of the church hall.



He wanted to go. He always wanted to go,” Hallgren said at the scene. “I think he wanted to go back home. His hoof caught the curb and then he went left, and then he went right. He just couldn’t get his balance and then he went down.”

Freddie, seen in action for the Boston Carriage Co., was a friendly and gentle fixture at weddings and children’s parties.

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Sally Sutherland, the owner of the Bridal Carriage Co., arrived at the scene within minutes and was visibly distressed. She said that Freddie, who had worked for her company for more than a decade, had been examined by a veterinarian three weeks earlier and was given a clean bill of health.

“I am so upset,” Sutherland said, as she placed blankets over the horse’s body. “I cannot believe this has happened. Freddie! Oh, Freddie.”

The state Department of Agricultural Resources said that the incident is under investigation. A state inspector visited Sutherland’s Pembroke farm Monday, but the agency declined to reveal any findings.

Amy Mahler, a spokeswoman for the state agency, which regulates the farms used by horse-drawn carriage companies, said Sutherland's stable license is in good standing. She said Sutherland, who has six other horses, has been licensed since 2007, and has had no infractions.

Mahler noted that 30 is a relatively senior age for a horse, but said that there is no cut-off age at which a horse is barred from working. The state instead advises owners to have a veterinarian evaluate their horse's general "fitness for work."

"The vet makes the call," Mahler said in an e-mail.

Sutherland said Monday that she had buried Freddie, who was transported back from Watertown on Sunday night, in a remote corner of her property, along with some of her other horses who have died.

"He's already gone," Sutherland said Monday. "I wanted my horse buried with the rest of his friends and that is where he is at. . . . I don't really want to talk about this."

Mahler said in an e-mail it is possible that Freddie could be exhumed if "other parts of our investigation lead us to believe that was necessary." His cause of death is unknown.

Lisa Cullity, Pembroke's animal inspector, said she makes annual inspections of Sutherland's farm operation and has never found anything of concern.

On Sunday, Freddie was brought into Watertown and unloaded in a lot not far from the church hall at around 4:30 p.m., according to Sutherland. His job was to give carriage rides to guests attending a reception celebrating a wedding held a day earlier. Freddie was to take the guests a few blocks down Mount Auburn Street, pause for a photograph if the riders desired it, and then return to the church. He had just begun to work when he collapsed at around 8 p.m.

Those attending the reception were drawn outside by the commotion but were urged by organizers to go back inside; none would comment publicly Sunday. Michael Mamishian, the church's facilities manager, said many people were upset about Freddie's collapse and asked about him later.

"A lot of them were deeply concerned about the horse and wanted to know what the outcome was," he said. "I told them and some were visibly shaken up."

For Freddie it was the end of a long life that began in Pennsylvania's Amish country, where he was born, according to Sutherland. He worked for the Boston Carriage Co. before Sutherland bought the company in 2001. At the time, she said, Freddie, then 16, was already worn down from hard work because "the man who drove him before we got him drove him hard. Real hard."

After a few years, Sutherland said, she decided to give Freddie a break, and sent him to a farm in Maine in 2005.

On his return two years later, she said, Freddie was rejuvenated, "like a stallion, running around all over the place, filled with energy. So we decided to put him back to work doing special occasions, that kind of thing. Light work. The vet thought it was a good idea to keep him moving, keep him in shape."

Since 2009, Freddie has regularly pulled newlyweds on suburban streets, and shouting children at birthday parties in order to earn his keep. He has attended holiday tree-lightings and paraded

up Boston's Charles Street. Known for his gentle nature, he was chosen to give rides to homeless children at Boston's annual Christmas in the City event.

Paul Bowman, a carriage driver who was trained on Freddie and drove him a few times, remembers the lumbering draft horse was so friendly that he would sometimes follow him around a field in hopes of being patted.

"He was just the sweetest horse I ever met," said Bowman. "He was full of a kind of love, like affection. He just ate it up. That's why he was chosen to drive newlyweds and children. This horse had a lifetime of public service."