



Trolleys, carriages and traffic can be dangerous mix

Accidents occur when drivers don't pay attention.

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By Dana Treen

ST. AUGUSTINE - Dodging trouble along the centuries-old matrix of streets in downtown St. Augustine is an artful pursuit for the dozens of horse-carriage and train-trolley drivers who work those avenues daily.

"You've got a 21st-century business on roads constructed in the 17th century," said Cmdr. Barry Fox of the St. Augustine Police Department. "There's congestion and there are people who don't drive with consideration."

And accidents do happen. On July 14, a 10-year-old girl was ejected from a Ripley's Sightseeing Train that hydroplaned and hit a car during a downpour. Carriages are occasionally rammed by drivers who may not know the streets, are distracted or may be impaired.

Early last month, a case was settled in a 2002 accident in which a Buffalo, N.Y., woman suffered serious neck and wrist injuries when a carriage that was changing lanes was struck in the side by a drunk driver, said the woman's attorney, Charles A. Sorenson of Jacksonville. The carriage seat where the woman and her husband were sitting broke loose and flipped backward.

The amount of the claim settlement against the carriage company and the other driver were not disclosed, Sorenson said.

"It's kind of a dangerous mixture," he said of carriages and other traffic. Sorenson said the speed limit is 20 mph where the accident happened, but carriages travel about 4 mph.

Many factors to consider

Avoiding crashes takes caution and training, and in the case of horses, respect for each animal's nature, carriage and train drivers said.

But with eight or more horse carriages and at least as many trains on the road daily, the accident rate is low, Fox said.

"We have a couple of bumps here or there, but nothing like we had the other day," he said.

Murphy McDaniel, owner of St. Augustine Transfer, which has most of the 46 city-issued horse carriage permits, said he has talked with city officials about safety measures, including reversing the route carriages now taken to eliminate dangerous left turns, he said.

Now, the carriages wait along the east side of the bay front for fares, then travel north and turn left into the historic section to begin an hour-long tour.

"From a safety standpoint, if the carriages were going in another direction, the few accidents we have would be even fewer," McDaniel said.

City Comptroller Mark Litzinger said city commissioners may begin a review of horse carriage-related regulations this year, though Mayor Joe Boles said nothing has been scheduled or requested.

Boles also said that with the low number of accidents, the current route system appears to be working.

"If it ain't broke, I don't think we need to fix it," he said. "Every modification brings with it some risk."

In December, a sports utility vehicle traveling north past the carriages ran up on another vehicle and swerved, striking the rear of a carriage in the right lane, according to a police report. The carriage driver was ejected and the horse bolted, making a U-turn and striking a light pole.

A second, parked carriage also was struck and damaged by either the SUV or the other carriage, the report said. A third horse also ran. None of the horses and neither of the passengers on the first carriage were injured.

Driver Barry Doyle has been driving carriages off and on since 1989 and said he has not been in an accident. He said motorists pose the greatest threat - not necessarily tourists.

"I'm more concerned about Floridians who stay too long at a bar at the beach and are headed back to Jacksonville, for example," he said. "You've got to be paying attention."

Other sources of trouble

Carriage drivers themselves also cause accidents. Recently, a driver got out of a carriage to check his lights and the horse took off. McDaniel said the horse was heading back to the barn but the passengers jumped. In another incident, a driver tried to make a tight U-turn and the carriage rolled on its side, temporarily trapping the riders.

Drivers must be cautious but the temperament of the horse also makes a difference, said John Capp, a driver for Country Carriages.

Some horses, he said, are not disturbed by traffic noises or other vehicles and are better suited for the work. Horses that might become spooked by umbrellas or orange traffic cones encountered on the street might find those things placed in their stalls as a way of conditioning.

"Each horse has fears, as humans do," Capp said. "So we try to work at correcting them."

Ed Schaffer, manager of the Ripley's trolley train service, said trolley operators must have a commercial driver's license and undergo training.

Ripley's driver Ralf Ingwersen said the trains are visible and travel slowly, making them less likely to be in an accident.

"You are always waiting for that person who doesn't know where they are going," he said.

In the July 14 accident, police said the trolley driver was braking for a turning car. The trolley began to slide on the wet street and drifted into the oncoming traffic, striking a car.

The girl who was ejected and two other girls, ages 10 and 11, were taken to Flagler Hospital with minor injuries, according to the police report. In addition to the driver, the police report listed 42 passengers on the train. The trolley operator was cited for careless driving.

LIST OF ACCIDENTS

A sample of accidents involving horse carriages and trolley trains in St. Augustine during the past two years

- June 9, 2007: A carriage horse bolts when the driver steps off to check the carriage lights. It ran down about three blocks before the five passengers jumped out. One person was taken to a hospital and another received several scrapes.
- Dec. 8, 2007: A car struck the rear of a horse and carriage, pushing it into two parked cars. The horse broke loose and ran off. It was later found uninjured. The driver of the car left the scene but was later located and charged.
- July 24, 2008: A horse carriage was upended when the driver tried to make a U-turn. The passengers were trapped until the carriage was righted.
- Dec. 16, 2008: A sport utility vehicle struck the rear of a carriage on Avenida Menendez, causing the horse to bolt in a U-turn and crash the carriage into a pole. One other carriage also was struck and a third horse was spooked and ran. The driver of the first carriage was ejected, but the two passengers were not injured.
- July 14: A trolley train hydroplaned when the driver attempted to stop for a car that was turning. The trolley struck a car in the oncoming lane and jackknifed, ejecting a 10-year-old girl who was taken to a hospital for treatment.