

Long before engines, sledges and sleds were the original form of transportation. Sometimes moved solely by human power, they were often used with oxen, reindeer, dogs and a host of other animals more efficient at pulling than horses. As harness evolved so did the use of the horse in pulled transport. The exact timeline and method of use is fuzzy at times with each archeological find adding new information. Gösta Berg's book *Sledges and Wheeled Vehicles* discusses finds throughout Sweden and Finland of single runner sledges dating from before the Bronze Age, probably human or reindeer pulled. Ancient Egyptians were well versed in using sleds to move massive stone blocks primarily with humans and oxen. As time passed and technology changed, raised sledges came into being and harness became more horse friendly. The evolution of sleighs, sledges and sleds becomes more clear as we enter the Viking Age and is well-documented from the Middle Ages into today.

It is important to note here that the word sleigh is more commonly used in North America whereas sledge is popular in Europe. For the purpose of this article, we use

the terminology that the museums hosting the artifacts use in referring to them.

THE OSEBERG SLEDGES (CIRCA 834 CE)

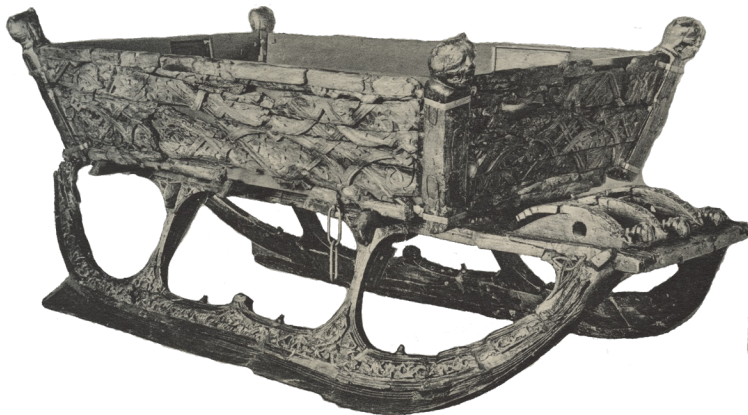
In 1903 the Oseberg burial mound was found near Tønsberg in Vestfold county, Norway. The find was dated to 834 CE. This was an important find for carriage enthusiasts as there were four sledges inside, along with a cart. The sledge appear to have been constructed for use with a pair of horses attached to a single shaft. One "simple sledge" appears to be an agricultural implement. The other three sledges were carved by a highly skilled craftsman. They had been colorfully decorated with red and black paint and tinplated nails.

The Oseberg Sledges are some of the oldest examples of sledges in the form similar to how we think of sleighs today.

SLEIGHS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

In the winter of 1640-41 Nuremberg, Germany nobility hosted a pageant of sleighs. In addition to images of some of those sleighs, *The Album of Tournaments and Parades in Nuremberg*, includes "depictions of contestants equipped

HIGHLIGHTS OF



One of the Oseberg Sledges
Circa 834 CE



One of the more than 50 sleighing images in *The Album of Tournaments and Parades in Nuremberg*.
Circa 1640

for various tournaments; a parade preceding a late form of tournament called a carrousel; participants in tournaments known as Gesellenstrecken, or bachelors' jousts, held in Nuremberg between 1446 and 1561." The images are quite vivid and detailed, showcasing amazing craftsmanship in the more than 50 sleighs presented.

PALACE OF VERSAILLES (1682-1792)

The French Court discovered the joys of sled racing under Louis XIII. The Palace of Versailles built by Louis XIV, with its long alleys proved to be an ideal place to enjoy sledges. Royals and nobility indulged their new passion with fantastic sleighs, many of which were built to mimic wild animals and mythical creatures. The sleighs were often heavily gilded in gold.

Many of the sleighs were designed to be coachman driven. Some have leather "boots" attached to the runners and were used by the coachman to help slow and steer the sledge. The passenger area was often very small and upholstered in wool. Poles with banners or standards allowed for easy recognition of the fur bundled occupants. Horses were

often decked out in silk ribbon and silver bells. Louis XV was a frequent attendee of the sleigh races. The *Mercur de France* (at the time a French gazette) and the *Gazette de France* often commented on these social outings. A Premier cleared the way for the King, who was followed by a sleigh of musicians and then courtiers in their many sleighs.

The Marquis de Dangeau recorded in his 1685 Journal that ladies occasionally drove their own sleighs "as is done in Amsterdam" but that it often ended in disaster. Sled races fell out of popularity during the reign of Louis XVI; social pressure and scandal eventually forced Marie Antoinette to discontinue sleighing. Several of the sleighs have been preserved and are on display in the Gallery of Coaches at the Palace of Versailles.

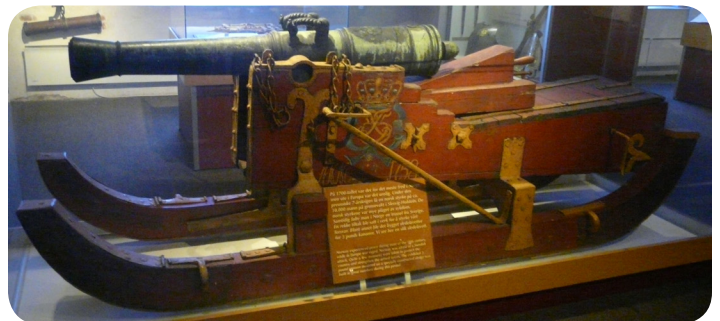
At the 2010 CAA / SWF International Carriage Symposium Mar Stolk spoke about the challenges of restoring vehicles from this era. A portion of the lecture is available in *World on Wheels: Number 3*.

SLEIGHING HISTORY

by Kathleen Haak



Note the leather "boot" brakes on this 17th Century Dragon Sleigh
(front of runners was not included in original photo)



Cannon on a sled
Military Museum at Akershus Fortress, Oslo, Norway
Circa 1758

CONGRESS OF VIENNA (1814-1815)

Following the defeat of Napoleon, world leaders converged on Vienna to redraw Europe. They didn't come alone, their entourages as well as thousands of interested parties joined them. As winter began to set in 1814 there was a desire to hold a Court sleigh ride. Sleighs were built, each highly ornate. Finally on January 22, 1815 "a procession of thirty-six splendidly-decorated two-horse sleighs in total, countless outriders in rich uniforms and two large sleighs with musicians assembled in the courtyard and then drove through all the major streets and squares of the inner city and on to Schonbrunn Palace." The sleigh ride attracted international attention including that of *Ackermann's Repository* (England) who reported:

"The sledges of the emperors and kings were in the form of a phaeton, as represented in the annexed engraving. The body was covered both inside and out with green velvet, bordered with rich gold fringe and tassels. The fore part was adorned by a plume of white and black ostrich feathers. The parts supporting the body were profusely decorated with carving, and gilt all over. The sledges of the two kings

resembled these, but were not so highly embellished; and those of the other princes and nobles, most of whom belonged to the court, were all painted light green, lined with black velvet, enriched with gold fringe."

The surviving sleighs (and carriages) are on display at the Imperial Carriage Museum in Austria. In 2014 the museum hosted the exhibition "Coaching the Congress Along: Rent-A-Carriages, Pleasure Cruises and Luxury Outfits at the Congress of Vienna 1814/1815." In 2016, Monica Kurzel-Runtscheiner, director of collections, presented at the CAA Carriage Symposium and in 2017 her presentation was published in *World on Wheels: Number 6*.

THE ALBANY CUTTER

As the 19th Century began there was a focus on more practical vehicles, art is still an influence, but it no longer drives the design. This concept particularly holds true in America where James Gould of Albany, New York had begun manufacturing carriage and sleighs. He began to develop a swelled-side cutter; the primary design coming into being about 1836. The Albany body and runners were care-



**Unfinished Bredslede or Double Cutter from Norway
Circa 1800**

Note the room for a travelling pistol in the backrest and runners long enough for the addition of a driver's seat.



**Sleigh of Prince Windischgraetz for the
Great Sleigh Ride at the Congress of Vienna,
1815**

fully steamed and bent to their unique shape, requiring a master craftsman. Known by a variety of names the design was quickly copied by other sleigh makers. The Albany Cutter is recognized as the second most popular sleigh type in America.

The curved body was a painters paradise and rich colors were used to decorate the sleighs. *The Hub* reports that dark or light carmine, yellow, blue, even Scotch plaid and purple were used on the body. Trimming was often dark green or crimson. Somewhat sadly, the October 1878 edition mentions that “it was formally the custom of sleigh-builders to employ a variety of fancy colors, stripes, ornaments, etc. but of late years plainness and simplicity have been preferred by city customers.”

Albany Cutters vary in size from single horse and pony sleighs to six passenger sleighs pulled by four horses. Larger sleighs with swell bodies are sometimes referred to as Hudson Valley Sleighs.

THE PORTLAND CUTTER OR KIMBALL SLEIGH

The most popular sleigh in America was designed by

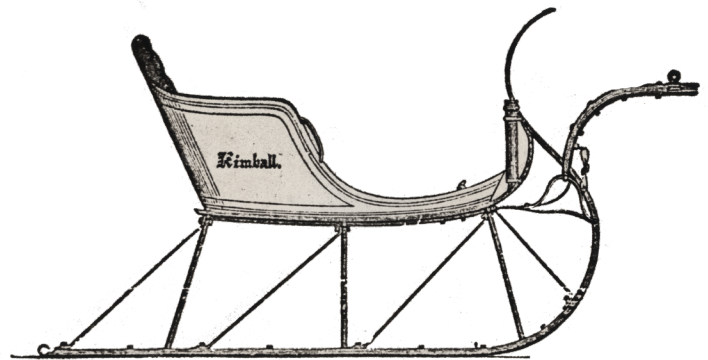
Peter Kimball of Maine. It was his sons James M. (of Portland, Maine) and Charles P. (of Chicago) who championed the sleigh. The straight back offered more wind protection than the Albany and was less expensive for carriage makers to create. In 1876 Charles P. (C.P. Kimball) moved to New York to begin a partnership with Brewster & Company. The aptly named Kimball-Brewster Sleigh which was shown at the Centennial International Exhibition of 1876 in Philadelphia, the first official World's Fair in the United States. Charles chose to move to Chicago the following year with his son, Charles Frederick, where they started the famed carriage company, C. P. Kimball & Company.

Sleigh races were very popular in the United States and Portland Cutters were an early favorite. They gave way at the turn of the 20th Century to specially made racing sleighs. By 1910, a standard Portland Cutter could be purchased for \$20. One ornate Portland Cutter built by Kimball & Clement was trimmed in “silk plush, had silver mountings and cost \$150.”

Portland Cutters typically seat two people but were also made to seat four.



**Albany Sleigh
maker unknown**



No. 63. KIMBALL LIGHT TROTTING SLEIGH.

**Kimball Light Trotting Sleigh
by Kimball Brothers
Kimball Brothers catalog of 1875**

CANADIAN SLEIGH

In the late 1800s a new sleigh type began appearing in North America. The Carriole is native to Canada. The Russo-Canadian or Canadian Sleigh was developed in Canada but were made either in the U.S. or were made for the U.S. market. They often have a removeable driver's seat within the framework of the main body which is similar to that of a Portland Cutter. The body of the sleigh is often painted in darker reds and greens, with fine striping. The runners are what set these sleighs apart from others, they are a solid piece of wood attached directly to the body of the sleigh. Solid runners were more efficient in the open countryside where more traditional runners became clogged with snow and ice.

Carrioles are identifiable by the runner ends, with their distinctly curled iron shoes. Canadian or Russo-Canadian sleighs typically do not have the curled iron shoes but are otherwise very similar to carrioles. The trim on American made Canadian sleighs tended to be more luxurious. The cushions, sleigh back and sides were routinely trimmed in a plaited diamond style. In fact, *The Carriage Trimmers Manual and Guide Book* recommended using eight pounds of

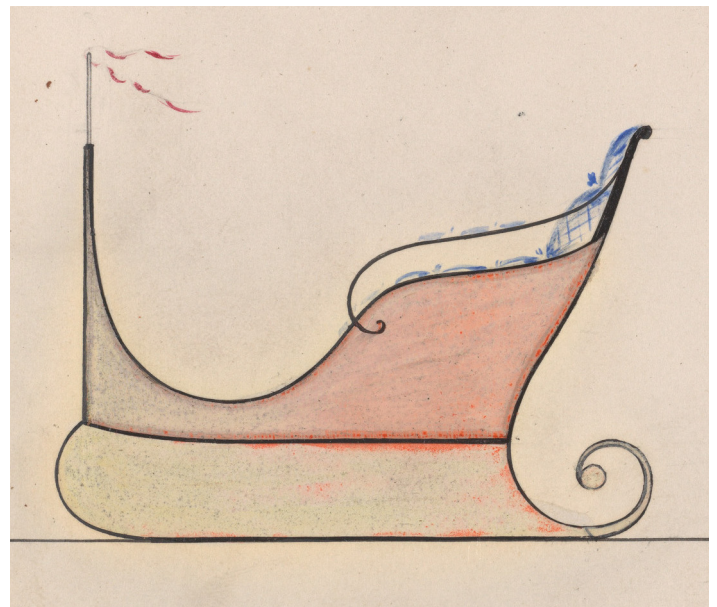
curled hair, four pounds of pig hair and 80 buttons or tufts when trimming a Russo-Canadian Sleigh. Sheep-skin mats or rugs often decorated the floors in an effort to repel the winter cold.

FURTHER RESEARCH

There have been thousands of sleigh variations made over the years. This is but a brief glance into the history of them. We welcome additional discussion and article contributions. ❧



Three Carrioles display their curled iron shoes.



**Brewster #3421
Circa 1878**



Bufford's sleighing cards no. 432
Library of Congress

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Brewster #3869
Rumble Sleigh
Circa 1884

