

Horse Trailers

desirable features and “must have” amenities

By Joanne M. Anderson / jmawriter.com

From the first documented incident of a horse being transported over land in 1771 to today’s common practice of moving horses between stables, shows, races, trails, clinics, owners and trainers, the method of transport has vastly improved.

“Contemporary reports suggested that the horses were not quite so enthusiastic about the vanning experience as their owners and trainers. The timidity of some horses about being loaded and unloaded was frequently remarked upon.” (May 27, 1837, *Spirit of the Times*, a weekly New York publication, 1831-1861) Well, loading and unloading horses is still a popular conversation topic.

Descriptive phrases like “country estate,” “4-star quality,” “luxury liner” and “timeless classic beauty” might refer to horse trailers now rather than real estate, travel and appearance. And, while one can pay the same for an upscale condominium or a horse trailer, most folks are content with a utilitarian model that’s well-constructed, comfortable and safe – oh, and has a few “must have” bells and whistles.

Trailer Particulars

Vaughn Judson, a member of the Southwest Virginia Natural Horsemanship Club, relates that her first horse trailer, an old, rusty, 2-horse bumper pull with a tack compartment and swinging divider, was called “a rolling coffin” by one trainer. Hearing that horses preferred stock trailers anyway, she bought a 12-foot Adam stock trailer. “Horses like it because of the fence-like walls and open air.” If Judson had her way, she’d buy a Brenderup trailer with the means to carry a portable corral on the outside.

Donnie and Diane Coleman of Pulaski County have had their Royal style Brenderup trailer since 1998. “We bought it after having a steel trailer that rattled and banged, was heavy, not easy to pull and rusted within two years,” states Diane. “The Brenderup is a composite trailer, 1,000 pounds lighter, aerodynamic, easy to pull and still looks almost new.”

The reduced weight of this trailer came in handy the day Diane and a girl friend pulled the loaded trailer up what they thought was a country road, but turned out to be a driveway with no where to turn around. “We unloaded our horses, unhitched the Brenderup, and the two of us were able to turn the trailer around, hitch it back up to the Blazer and load the horses. Try that with a steel trailer!”

Tara Smith and Carol Davis of Yorktown regard themselves as “economy-minded, low-tech, day trippers who wanted a trailer that’s lightweight, easy to pull, capable of hookup and detachment by one person.” They chose an aluminum 2003 Gore model with an aerodynamic front. Must-have items are a spacious tack room [“You’ll always need more room than you think.”]; removable and flexible separator [“It pivots and swings, which makes it easier to get a shy horse in.”]; and open and airy [“So it’s not cave-like and intimidating to the horse.”] One thing they would do differently: “We would get a step up instead of a ramp; the big, black ramp is intimidating for shy horses.”

Tack and dressing room space is a must have for many horse owners. “I bought my first steel, 2-horse, straight load, bumper pull trailer in a package deal with two horses,” relates Clare Evans of Giles County, also a member of the SWVA NH Club and

the Parelli Play Group of the Virginias. “It didn’t have enough storage space, and I haul often on interstate highways and wanted a fully enclosed trailer.” So, Clare’s current trailer has a small tack room for storage and to sleep in when camping overnight. It’s also fully enclosed.

“I went to the factory and had my Adam 2-horse, slant load, gooseneck trailer custom made,” says Carol O’Brien of Riner. “I have my tack in the dressing room, and there’s no metal post to hold the doors closed in the back, but one door that swings wide. The divider is spring loaded, and the light at the back is helpful, as you really never know when you might be out after dark.” She finds the ramp slippery sometimes and suggests horizontal rubber strips so a horse cannot slip far.

Another fan of Adam trailers is Tenley Shewmake. “I love my trailer. It’s extra heavy duty to carry draft horses, but I really miss not having a tack or dressing room. I have to load everything I want to take into the bed of the truck with no protection from the weather.”

Kelly Sigler, the South Carolina-based 3-star Parelli Professional (www.kellysigler.com) often seen conducting clinics in Virginia, reports that her favorite horse trailer features are aluminum and the gooseneck. “I would never pull anything else. I love slant loads and Sooners. Currently, I have a 4-star trailer with conversion for the living quarter, which I love, too.”

Peace of Mind

While the “must haves” run the gamut, it’s safe to say that everyone would concur with Sian Simon, owner of Frierish Farm in Purcellville, on ‘peace of mind’. Her story is one no one ever wants to experience.

“My first trailer was a 3-horse, slant load, gooseneck Sundowner which was hit head on (with 3 horses in it) by a low flying telephone pole. The pole broke in half, with one half caving in the roof and the other ripping out the emergency door which went flying down the road, leaving one horse attached by a cross tie with nothing to keep him from jumping out. Miraculously, no one was hurt, and when the animal control people arrived, they commented that if I had a less well-built trailer, it could have been disaster.”

“So, I’ve always stuck with gooseneck Sundowners, though I’ve pretty much hauled every make and model. The one thing I couldn’t do without is ‘peace of mind’, which my Sundowners have given me.”

In terms of trailer equipment, Simon loves the water tank under the gooseneck and the ramp. “I have a motor and hose attachment, so I can hose a hot, sweaty horse following a cross country course in July. From a horse with a fused knee to young horses learning to load and unwilling horses that need extra coaxing, the ramp is easier. It helps to have firm footing for yourself, too, than jumping up and down from a step.”

Kent Moeller, director of operations at the Virginia Horse Center in Lexington, is a former commercial horse hauler, and he’s seen or driven almost everything out there. “What worries me most about horse trailers is pulling too much trailer with not enough truck,” he says. “Moving it down the road is not the issue, but stopping it can be a big problem.”

Simon echoes those sentiments. “No one should be without a proper towing vehicle. Many of the set-ups on the road may be fine for towing in perfect conditions, but I would hate to see what happens if they do a quick avoidance movement.” Simon has

always towed with a Ford F-250 and “had many happy hours with ‘peace of mind’ that I have the right vehicle to be able to get out of trouble.”

Moeller also comments that while the slant load trailers may be more balanced going down the road, if a horse goes down, you could have to take out all the others to get to the one that needs help. He’s a fan of the head-to-tail, straight load models.

Buying and Sprucing up the Trailer

The first bit of information Susie Ladd, manager of Virginia Trailer Sales in Lexington, wants to know is what kind of horses the prospective buyer owns. “Warmbloods, for example, are normally taller and tend to like straight load trailers, whereas quarter horses, paso finos and the smaller horses will generally ride slant or straight. I find that most folks like the taller trailers because all breeds fit in them - seven-foot, six inches, rather seven feet,” she explains. “Drop down windows with face guards are a plus, and lined and insulated or fiberglass trailers are cooler inside. Other trailers are okay if you are moving with a breeze, but they become a sweat box for horses if you are sitting in traffic.”

Extra padding and paint are common do-it-yourself improvements to used trailers. “I painted the lower interior with truck bed liner to reduce scratches and rust, and padded a rail of the rear door to protect horses’ tails when they lean back,” states Shewmake. Davis and Smith increased safety with an upgraded tow package and electronic braking system on the truck. The Colemans are partial to the Brenderup also for its brakes. “It has a different kind of braking system – inertial brakes – which doesn’t require a braking box in the cab of the towing vehicle,” says Diane.

When she got her fully enclosed trailer, Evans replaced the emergency braking system, put in a new oak floor and painted the lower inside with a protective coating. “My next trailer will be an aluminum, 3 horse, slant load, gooseneck with a tack room for sleeping and a screen door! If wishes were horses ... ,” she muses.

Joanne Anderson is an editor, innkeeper (www.claycorner.com), and freelance writer in Blacksburg. She has two horses and is comfortable with her used 2-horse, bumper pull, steel trailer with a tack compartment.

[Sidebar:]

Horse trailers come under the requirements of trailers:

<http://www.dmv.virginia.gov/webdoc/citizen/vehicles/trailerreg.asp>

A trailer is not required to be licensed and inspected, but it must be registered each year with Department of Motor Vehicles and assigned license plates. The above link provides all the background on trailer requirements.

~ Melanie Stokes, Public and Media Relations Manager, DMV, Richmond, VA