



## Crashing Through the Snow: The Grim Sarcasm Behind 'Jingle Bells'

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It's the holiday season, and Christmas carols are everywhere, including the ubiquitous "Jingle Bells," first published in 1857. Many take the refrain, "Oh what fun it is to ride in a one-horse open sleigh!" at face value. But an underappreciated aspect of the lyrics is that they are actually rather cynical about sleigh rides. Part of the song goes:

*The horse was lean and lank*

*Misfortune seemed his lot*

*He got into a drifted bank*

*And then we got upsot.*

In the next verse, which is often skipped, the narrator relates being thrown out of the sleigh onto his back and getting laughed at by a romantic rival. His misfortune was relatively minor, but being thrown from a sleigh or carriage was not always a laughing matter.

During the time of horse-drawn vehicles, accidents frequently caused not only delays and inconveniences but also injuries and deaths. The British historian Paul Hair called the horse "one of man's most dangerous tools," arguing that "it is likely that per unit of travel the horse was more dangerous than the motor vehicle."

He quotes Britain's registrar general as noting in 1865 that "street accidents by horse carriages kill more people in a year than railways" and estimates a horse-related mortality rate of around 55 deaths annually per million people in 1874. In 2020, there were 1,516 road deaths in the United Kingdom. Divided by the current U.K. population of 67.2 million, that translates into a mortality rate from motor vehicle accidents of about 23 deaths annually per million people, making modern car rides more than twice as safe as Victorian horse carriage rides. And car deaths are becoming more rare almost everywhere.

One problem with relying on unruly, skittish horses for transportation was that the animals sometimes bolted or reared unexpectedly. A slightly faulty harness could also spell disaster. Even dismounting a horse or carriage was dangerous; horse kicks have an average force of 2,000

pounds per square inch and an average speed of 200 miles per hour. One famous study found that, in the 19 years between 1875 and 1894, at least 280 highly trained Prussian cavalymen died from horse kicks.

No amount of wealth or power could shield someone from the inherent danger of a horseback or carriage ride. Servants and nobility alike succumbed to carriage accident injuries.

The crown prince of France's July Monarchy, Ferdinand Philippe d'Orléans, died of a skull fracture from a horse carriage accident at the young age of 31 in 1842. In the United States, the French-born governor of Louisiana, Pierre Derbigny, died in office in 1829 when he was thrown from a moving horse-drawn carriage. A grandson of Thomas Jefferson died in a horse carriage accident in 1875. Future first lady Frances Cleveland's father died in a horse carriage accident that same year.

A monument in New York City commemorates a debutante named Charlotte Canda, who was killed in a horse carriage accident in 1845. On her way back from her 17th birthday party, the horse bolted, and Charlotte was thrown out of the moving carriage.

In Australia, the English novelist Charles Dickens' daughter-in-law died in a similar accident in 1878. The ponies became spooked and ran wild, flinging her out of the carriage and causing a fatal head injury. She was just 29 years old and left behind two children who survived the accident, but were no doubt traumatized by witnessing their mother's death. In Germany, in 1900, Prince Albert of Saxony died at age 25 when an open carriage collided with his own, overturning it into a ditch.

Old newspapers reveal many episodes of startled horses running amok, wrecking the vehicles they were pulling and injuring riders. The horses themselves were often casualties. In fact, Victorian streetcar horses had an average life expectancy of barely two years.

If we look beyond horse-drawn carriage accidents to other equine-related injuries, the list of victims includes several kings. William of Orange, for example, died from illness exacerbated by a broken collarbone sustained when his horse tripped on a molehill in 1702. After having the bone set, he took a bumpy 12-mile carriage ride that jolted the bone out of place and necessitated re-setting it. That carriage ride must have been horrifically painful.

So rather than romanticizing horse-drawn transportation, the next time you hear the line, "Oh what fun it is to ride in a one-horse open sleigh!" remember that the lyric is somewhat sarcastic—and with good reason. And as you travel to see loved ones for the holidays, take a moment to appreciate the technological advances in transportation safety.

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