

Glimpses of the Past at the Thrasher Carriage Museum

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The Thrasher Carriage Museum, adjacent to the Frostburg Depot terminus of the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad, offers visitors a rare opportunity to explore an intriguing chapter of our nation's transportation history. One of the top five private collections of horse-drawn vehicles in the United States is located within the Museum, a renovated 19th century warehouse.

The collection was assembled over four decades by James Thrasher, a prominent businessman from nearby Midland, Maryland. Born in 1913, he was the son of a blacksmith and grew up with horses on the family farm. He worked in a milk processing plant, coal mines, and construction before launching several business ventures. By the 1950s, he had achieved recognition as a successful businessman.

Over the years, Mr. Thrasher collected hundreds of horse-drawn vehicles, many purchased all over the United States from auctions, estate sales and private collections. In 1975, he leased a school in Midland and opened a museum to display his carriages. After his death in 1987, the Allegany County government purchased his collection. Eventually it was moved to its current location in Frostburg and the Thrasher Carriage Museum opened in 1991 as part of the Depot Center. Railroad passengers receive free admission to the Museum as an option during the layover in Frostburg before the train returns to the Cumberland Station. The Museum is also popular with bicyclists riding the Great Allegheny Passage and visitors to Frostburg.



This Ayrlawn Dairy Farm's 1914 milk wagon from Bethesda, Maryland, is all original, including the tires.

Within the Museum are vehicles from a bygone era that represent all walks of life, ranging from rustic delivery wagons to elegantly crafted carriages that once conveyed the rich and famous.

One of the best examples displaying the everyday side of life is a 1914 milk wagon, in original condition — including the tires.

“It draws people to the Museum because it’s in original condition,” says Museum Director Gary Bartik. “It’s the real deal. And people can relate easily to a milk wagon.”

This particular wagon was built for and used by the Ayrlawn Dairy Farms in Bethesda, Maryland, all the way through World War II because of gas rationing. Constructed of plywood with a tin skin, the wagon’s body is suspended by ribbed platform springs, front and rear. An interior raised deck allowed ice to drain as it melted.



Above: The Thrasher Carriage Museum is located adjacent to the Frostburg Depot terminus of the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad.

Right: The elegant park drag, made by Martin Co. of London around 1890, was a high style, high fashion sporting vehicle, built to carry as many as 12 people.



Primarily a city vehicle, the milk wagon was pulled by two horses. “The driver had to be skilled and quick to deal with melting ice and to prevent the glass bottles from breaking,” Bartik explains.

Representing the other extreme of life – the world of wealth – is an elegant park drag, a recreational, flashy vehicle 300 to 400 pounds lighter than the common road coach. Built to carry as many as 12 people, including the driver, it required four to six draft horses, usually purebred and well trained Belgians or Percherons.

“It was a showboat, sporting thing, a vehicle plus grandstand that offered riders a spectacular view,” Bartik says. “It was high style, high fashion. Like a Hummer, the park drag was flashy, well built and expensive.”



Made by Martin Co. of London around 1890, the Museum's park drag is painted black with lower panels painted in cream, and accented by red risers and carriage parts. Large brass candle lamps provided ample lighting that could easily be seen at a distance. Passengers climbed a ladder to reach the upper level. An umbrella basket held the only means of rain protection. A rear compartment provided space for a pair of tin-lined picnic boxes and a smaller box lined with felt to protect crystal and sterling used for picnics.

"Younger folks or the men usually rode on the top," Bartik says. "It was not for the faint of heart. The ride was often bumpy and it could be pretty scary going downhill."

The park drag, pulled by four to six draft horses, was a recreational, flashy vehicle 300 to 400 pounds lighter than a common road coach.

Visitors to the Thrasher Carriage Museum should allow at least 30 minutes to explore the painstakingly conserved, 50-piece collection appropriately located close by the historic National Road. It's a journey in time worth taking.

Thrasher Carriage Museum
 19 Depot Street, Frostburg, Maryland 21532
www.thrashercarriagemuseum.com