Restoring Yesterday's Elegance

by Marcelle B. Wright

"I'm going to return it to its original elegance—with gold silk tassels and velvet draperies, and replace the broken curved glass," says Ray Pellerin.

You would think he was describing an elaborate salon. He isn't. He's speaking of his latest acquisition, an old horse-drawn hearse.

Ray Pellerin collects old buggies and returns them to their original condition. He's in the funeral home business, so he has a special fondness for this old hearse which he found in Amite, La.

"It was the Rolls Royce special of its day. It was decorated with brass railings and lanterns, and was constructed of the finest materials. An interesting note about it is the compartment under the coffin slot. Here was placed the ice for the funeral procession, as there was no embalming in those days. There is also a rack with brass pegs which could be adjusted to fit every size and shape coffin," describes Pellerin.

In the five years Pellerin has been

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Old horn, above, is attached to driver's side of touring coach owned by Ray Pellerin. The four-seat coach is quite popular for parades.
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collecting buggies, he has acquired several interesting ones.
"I saw an old mail wagon in a pasture near Youngsville, La., and hunted up the owner of the property. He was anxious to get it off his land and for $25 it was mine," laughs Pellerin.

His wife, Susie, has taken an avid interest in the renovations and can tell you just about as much as her husband can about the refurbishing.
"The old mail wagon was in terrible shape," she recalls, "but we could see the painted fleur-de-lis pattern through the dust and grime. We could also see where the lettering once was—as well as the flags. With this to guide us, we were able to return it to the original style."

The mail wagon is a tiny, one-man, enclosed buggy. It features a black leather seat where the driver sat, and was able to handle the reins through the open front window. The mailman could easily place mail in the rural boxes through the side windows—without dismounting.

"Our touring coach is the one most popular for use in parades," says Pellerin. "Painted black with gold trim, it has black leather seats and a gold-fringed canopy. In researching this coach, I found it was used much like a bus. They were commonly used at railroad stations for transporting arriving and departing passengers to and from

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The ladies, upper left, couldn't resist sitting in the surrey. Also pictured are the buckboard and touring coach. Left, everyone putters with the old hearse. Below, one of the brass lanterns that adorns it.

PROBABLY the most appealing to the romantic's heart is the two-seater "surrey with the fringe on top." Upholstered with soft black leather and richly painted in black and gold, the surrey probably carried many a young couple or Southern belle, accompanied by a chaperone, to a ball or party.

Also included in Pellerin's collection is a buckboard, the predecessor of today's pickup truck, and a buggy which he is in the process of refurbishing.

"The buggy has an interesting feature. The front seat, or driver's seat, is collapsible. When a driver wasn't available or when a fellow wanted to be alone with his girl, the front seat was folded down to fit on the floor," explains Pellerin.

While wagons and buggies are hard to come by these days, they do show up in rural areas. It is sometimes difficult to get accessories, but if you really want them, they can be found.

"I never know what Ray is going to come home with. One day he drove up with a trailer full of odds and ends he found while out on the road," laughs Susie.

Pellerin doesn't take all the credit for the renovations.

"Just about everyone who works for me in my business putters around with them. Then, there is an upholsterer who takes care of the seats, and an artist who does the repainting. Clarence Guidry takes care of the horses and keeps the buggies as clean as a whistle.

WHILE air-conditioned cars of today offer the comforts of home, a buggy ride is one of those things that few moderns miss. Yes, gone are the days of the horse and buggy, except around Breaux Bridge, where if you're lucky, Ray Pellerin might give you a ride.