

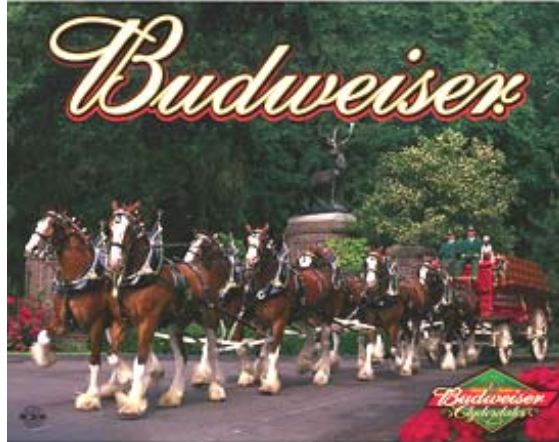


# CHRISTMAS WITH THE CLYDESDALES

## A visit to the Budweiser Clydesdales



**Breweries and Horses** - Drink and driving doesn't usually go together unless it involves a brewery dray and a team of heavy horses. It is still a thrilling sight to see a smart turnout advertising a company's wares and indeed, nowadays this is the working situation that many people associate with the gentle giants. Worldwide, past and present brewery teams of many different heavy breeds have achieved public recognition. The horses were once an essential part of daily delivery operations but are now mainly used as a marketing tool. Unfortunately, many breweries are closing down their teams for "economic reasons" but one company that continues to promote and run its heavy horse operation with great success is Anheuser-Busch. The Budweiser Clydesdales have become a symbol of national pride.



**From Scotland to the USA** - I drive a pair of heavies as part of a summer tourist attraction on the Isle of Skye (West Highland Heavy Horses) and am regularly asked by American tourists "Have you heard of the Budweiser Clydesdales?" This is usually followed by comments such as, "Are these horses related to Clydesdales?", "Our Clydesdales are bigger than this" and best of all "Why are they called heavy horses?!" After hearing these comments on a daily basis, I promised myself that if I ever got the chance, I would visit the "world famous" Budweiser Clydesdales.

The opportunity arose at Christmas 2000 when I was travelling to Florida. I obtained some details from the Budweiser website and correspondence and e-mails were exchanged with a very helpful Clydesdale handler. The results were a recommendation to visit Sea World in Orlando to view a hitch team in action and an invitation for a guided tour at the Clydesdale Hamlet at Busch Gardens in Tampa.

**A Proud Tradition** - Today, not only is Anheuser-Busch the largest brewery in the world, they also have the largest herd of Clydesdales in the world. It all began in 1933 when, to celebrate the end of prohibition, August A Busch Jnr secretly gathered together 12 Clydesdales and presented his father with two teams of six, each pulling a 1904 Studebaker beer wagon. August A Busch Snr was so impressed with the symbolism of strength, style and spirit that the horses were the start of a proud tradition. In 1934 it was decided to increase the hitch teams to eight horses and they began to travel the USA, thrilling audiences wherever they went.

Anheuser-Busch's Clydesdale herd varies from between 225 and 250 horses at any one time. They are spread throughout the country between breeding farms, training facilities, travelling teams and stationary teams. There are two breeding farms, one located at Grants Farm, St Louis Missouri which is a 60-acre suburban facility and the other is the 900 acre Warm Springs Ranch in Meniffee, California. Between the two farms, there are approximately 40 mares and five stallions and 25 to 35 foals are produced each year. If a foal has the proper confirmation, it may later be used in a hitch team. To qualify, a Budweiser Clydesdale must be a gelding, three to four years of age. When fully mature he must weigh between 2000 and 2300 pounds and stand at least 18 hands high. In appearance the ideal horse is bay in colour with a black mane and tail, has a white blaze on the face and four white feet. Horses that seem suitable are handled from a young age and fully trained by age four. During training they are teamed up with older, experienced horses until they move up to work as part of the eight-horse team. When a horse reaches retirement age (late teens) it is either put out to pasture, used for training younger horses, used for display purposes or sold. Clydesdales that do not meet the required confirmation are sold at national breeder sales, where additional horses may sometimes be purchased.



The official home of the Budweiser Clydesdales is a beautiful brick and stained glass stable in the historic Anheuser-Busch brewery complex in St Louis, Missouri. One of the three travelling hitches is also based there with the other two at Menifee, California and Merrimack, New Hampshire. Stationary hitches and small horse displays can be seen at several Anheuser-Busch theme parks throughout the USA, where although the slow pace and gentleness of the horses is in stark contrast to the fast and frenzied roller coasters and rides, they prove just as popular with the public.

**On The Road** - Thousands of requests are received each year for Budweiser Clydesdale appearances, so the travelling hitches are on the road for 11 months of the year. Each hitch is transported in three custom-built 50-foot tractor-trailer units equipped with all "mod cons". They have air-cushion suspension, thick rubber flooring, vent fans and trailer cameras so the driver can check the horses on a cab monitor. The teams always travel with ten horses so each member of the eight hitch regularly gets a rest. Two of the tractor-trailers carry the horses and the third carries the wagon, harness, portable stalls and other equipment. Stops are made each night at local stables so the horses can rest properly. No expense is spared to provide comfort and safety for the precious cargo.

The Budweiser beer wagons are meticulously restored and maintained 1904 Studebakers. Each wagon travels with two Dalmatians as mascots. They first rode on the hitches in 1950 to commemorate the opening of the Newark Brewery and were trained to guard the horses and wagon when the driver was inside making deliveries. The horse harness is elaborately handcrafted at the Santos Leather Shop in Massachusetts. A full set for eight horses is valued at over US\$70,000. A set for each Clydesdale weighs around 130 pounds and is made to fit any horse except for the collars, which are individually sized.



**A Festive Visit** - On the warm and sunny morning of Christmas Eve, I set off to Sea World, Orlando for my first experience of the Budweiser Clydesdales. With mounting anticipation I fought my way through the holiday crowds to the Clydesdale Hamlet where, in the front paddock, I was greeted by a yawning foal and his dam. The stable complex was an impressive white and green building surrounded by neatly painted fences. The outside was decorated with festive wreaths and poinsettia in celebration of the season. Inside, everything was ordered and spotless with harness and a replica wagon on display. Christmas decorations festooned the rafters and each horse stall had a huge red stocking hanging outside the door. Sea World houses a working stationary hitch team with approximately 21 geldings and one mare with a foal. When not pulling the wagon, the horses are on display and pose for regular photo sessions. I took my turn for a picture with one of the big boys who was groomed and plaited to perfection. I also watched a video showing footage from various Budweiser advertising campaigns and events the horses have attended. The most stunning image I have retained from this was a hitch team participating in a Christmas parade in the snow wearing harness illuminated with lights!



The Sea World hitch parades twice daily through the park with all the preparation being done behind the scenes in a huge barn. Unfortunately this is off limits to the public so I had to wait and see the finished product. It was very exciting to hear eight sets of shoes on tarmac and the jangle of harness decorated with Christmas jingle bells as the hitch swept into view. Luckily I was able to snap some photos before a large crowd thronged out of the nearby killer whale show. The horses were immaculately turned out. The harness gleamed and each horse had a red, white and blue bow on it's tail. The wagon was polished to perfection, hung with Christmas garlands, topped with a fir tree and of course a Dalmatian was sitting in pride of place beside the driver. I wondered what it would be like to drive eight in hand instead of a pair but I didn't think the driver would readily hand over his 40

pounds of leather reins! The Budweiser Clydesdales in action were even more impressive than I had imagined and the visit was definitely worth the effort.

Recovering from Christmas Day feasting, Boxing Day saw me again seeking out the horses, this time at Busch Gardens, Tampa. Prior to my arrival I had telephoned the Manager of the Clydesdale Hamlet there to arrange a visit. He had organised free passes into the park for two of us and at \$50 a head, this was really appreciated. This is only a small facility housing a maximum of six horses year round. These Clydesdales work at Sea World and on a rotational basis, spend six to 12 weeks a year at the Busch Gardens Hamlet for a break from their daily routine. While there they are ridden for exercise and showcased during photo sessions. The Manager was extremely helpful and the handler with whom I had previously corresponded showed us around. The building was similar to the one at Sea World, complete with Christmas lights. We were introduced to each of the horses and up close, the flawless grooming and attention to detail were impressive. The horses were shod in the traditional Clydesdale manner, Scotch bottom shoes with the addition of grip studs along the toes. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to get closer to the horses than the public is usually allowed. The appropriate way to end the day (after a screaming roller coaster ride or two) was with a couple of cold Buds in the Anheuser-Busch hospitality pavilion. I had my fill of horses and my boyfriend had his fill of beer – a perfect match all round!

**Holiday Highlight** - For anyone with an interest in heavy horses who is travelling to the USA, I thoroughly recommend making the effort to catch up with the Budweiser Clydesdales. It was one of the highlights of my holiday and if I ever find myself back in the southern USA, a visit to the St Louis complex will definitely be on the itinerary. In these changing times it is good to see there are still companies who acknowledge the benefits of investing large amounts of time and money into heavy horse promotions. They help to ensure that the gentle giants can be seen as a living part of modern life, not just as old photographic images in history books. So now back at work on the Isle of Skye, when I'm asked "Have you heard of the Budweiser Clydesdales?", I answer with an enthusiastic smile, "Yes, I've met the horses, bought the t-shirt and drunk the beer!"

**T.A. BOYD (2001)**

