

History - Carriage Makers Made Their Mark in History.

The Town's history as a transportation crossroads is well known. Stagecoaches, railroads, turnpikes, canal boats and now highways. But what of early vehicles traveling these highways and byways? Plainville was deeply involved in the making of these vehicles, as were many small Connecticut towns.

Great pride was taken in the workmanship and finishing that went into these equipages. Many are being brought out of dusty, rusty retirement and are being lovingly restored for use in rallies and shows. How glad these old time craftsmen would be to see their work shining and proud again!

Names important in our town's carriage business were Gladding, Barnes, Stanley, Webster, Hill and a half dozen others, early as 1840.

When Lewis S. Gladding, a blacksmith, came to town, and was employed by Hills, Stanley & Webster on East Main Street, corner of Crown, things became active.

In 1843 the firm was named Webster & Gladding, and in 1848, the new partnership built a new shop on Whiting Street. In 1852, Webster withdrew from the firm. Gladding then expanded the business into two buildings (across from the present post office) and took Horace Johnson and Ransom Barnes as partners. The firm was then L. S. Gladding, and continued this with changes in 1873 and 1875 it became the Plainville Carriage Company. It split into two businesses in 1878, one Horace Johnson and the other Condell, Mastin and Butler. Before and after the Civil War, good business was done with southern states especially Georgia. L. S. Gladding's "Jefferson Spindle" was a great favorite with plantation owners.

It is to note that during the era of the Farmington Canal, (1828-48) carriages were loaded in boats in the "Center", taken down to New Haven, off loaded and reloaded onto coastal vessels, taken down to a Southern State. Quite a journey for little buggies made in a tiny town, not yet officially named 'Plainville'. A wonderful book entitled "Pony wagon Town" loaned to me by my friend Ivan Wood, (he had two fine Welch ponies, Bucky and Teddy) brought home to me the intense handwork and the number of artisans involved in the making of a good horse-drawn rig. Carriage shops were often subject to fire which started in the blacksmith's shop or the paint shops, where paint rags were discarded randomly.

Indeed safety and health precautions were unknown. Early artisans neither knew of nor were protected from paint fumes, sanding dust, burns or any number of job-related injuries. Considering that each carriage buggy or runabout received 23 to 25 coats of finish in a good shop, it is no wonder that the output was so slow.

Castle's "History of Plainville, Connecticut" tells us that in 1880, Johnson's output was seven new vehicles, of which***** were destined to be shipped to the South. This would amount to about six a month.

Most carriage shops marked their products with metal plaques. Unfortunately, they were not applied with thought to long term and so, today, it is difficult to find Gladding Johnson or other Plainville made stock.

Somewhere among the rigs recently revitalized for use, or rotting on lawns for "cute", there should be some plaques. Usually applied to the back or underneath and giving maker and town, the one's I've seen are small and easily missed. Most of our shops went up in flames, Johnson finally being burned out in 1895, spelling the end of the carriage business in Plainville. In 1875, this shop had employed 20 men, as strippers, blacksmiths finisher sand decorators. An upholsterer might have also worked there.

A truly dashing page in our history.

Respectfully submitted - Ruth Hummel.