

# PLACES.

The snug 65-by-75-foot ring at the Claremont Riding Academy fits a maximum of six determined young equestrians at any one time.



## Horse Opera

**Amazingly, Claremont Stables has been in continuous operation since 1892. But how much longer will it be home to its 65 equine residents? BY BRONWEN HRUSKA**

IN 1892, SAVVY BUSINESSMAN EDWARD Bedell decided to cash in on the horse and carriage boom in Manhattan. He bought land at West 89th Street—part of the old Aphthorp farm—and put up the Claremont Stable, a handsome red-brick affair built in the Romanesque Revival style with three arched bays on the ground floor, one of them large enough for horse traffic. The state-of-the-art livery stable did big business, with 100 horses and 70 carriages for hire. But Bedell and the owners of the 750 other stables in Manhattan at the time couldn't have anticipated what would happen six years later, when automobiles hit the streets. And even then, New Yorkers were skeptical. "No doubt they will limit the use of cabs drawn by horses, but they will not do away with them," read an 1899 *New York Times* article. "It will still be difficult for the smartest automobile to compete with a smart cab drawn by a smart horse."

How wrong they were. Very soon Manhattan's stables were being torn down or converted into garages. Clare-

mont managed to dodge extinction by reinventing itself as a riding academy in 1927. (providing lessons and horse rentals for rides along Central Park's bridle paths). Today it remains the sole survivor—the last operating public stable in Manhattan (there's a small private stable for Central Park's carriage horses on West 48th Street) and the oldest continuously operating stable in the entire country. Unless you happen to catch horseback riders moseying along the street or catch a whiff of the manure that pours down from the second floor into a truck twice a week, you might pass right by without realizing that Claremont constitutes a living, breathing piece of New York's history. "We're not a boutique, fancy schmancy stable," says Claremont's owner, Paul Novograd, whose father, Irwin, bought the stable in 1943. "We give a lot of lessons to a lot of people and we try to do it in a quality way." That said, Claremont has seen its fair share of celebrities: mobster Dutch



Schultz rode here regularly, as did a young Caroline Kennedy, who came for weekly lessons. Jackie O. cantered in the park as her Secret Service detail jogged behind. The stable has appeared in *Sex and the City*, *Law & Order*, and a slew of movies. Even the horses have star power. Casco, a white Warmblood and a regular in the Met's production of *Aida*, has appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* opposite a sultry Jessica Lange (the spread is pasted opposite his stall, where he can admire it).

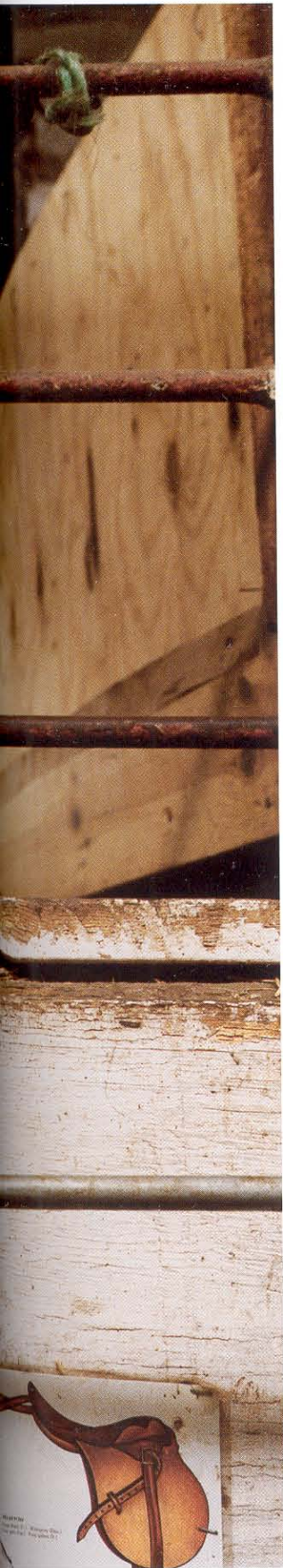
For girls in their horse-obsessed years, though, it's not the celebrities that make this the spot to be every weekday afternoon. Nor is it the décor of the bare-bones waiting room with green-and-white linoleum flooring. Grime lurks in hard-to-reach spots where pipes cut through the old building's high ceilings, carrying horse urine from the stalls above through an antiquated sewage system. The young equestriennes couldn't care less. They come for the horses—65 of them, housed in the original tongue-and-

groove box stalls on the basement and second-floor levels of the five-story building. "There's something very down-home about a stable—the atmosphere here takes you out of city life," says Judith Martin, Claremont's office manager. Beyond horseback riding, Claremont provides hay for crèches all over the city at Christmastime, as well as used horseshoes (for good luck), horsehair (to tie around warts), and horse liniment (for arthritis) to anyone who asks. And people do.

*"It's like learning to ride in Grand Central Station," says Judith Martin. "We manufacture some tough little riders here."*

The highlight of the main room is the picture window overlooking the ring. A maximum of six riders can fit into the tight 65-by-75-foot space, which is interrupted by eight weight-supporting columns. "It's like learning to ride in Grand Central Station," says Martin. "We manufacture some very tough little riders here."

Claremont would never have lasted 115 years without a little tenacity of its own. In 1965, the city acquired the failing building by condemnation, and planned to demolish it for the West Side Urban Renewal Project. For more than 30 years Novograd ran the business on a month-to-month basis while the city let the building fall apart (in 1996, the city built a sidewalk bridge to protect passersby from falling bricks). Still, he wasn't going to let his little piece of New York history go without a fight. Novograd gathered signatures, wrote letters, applied for federal landmark status, and staged demonstrations. "We put big sandwich boards on horses' rumps and circled



around City Hall. We made it known that we would not go easily.”

The stall tactics worked, and luckily for Claremont, the city ran out of money before it could tear down the stable. The National Register of Historic Places finally landmarked the building in 1990, and Novograd bought Claremont back from the city in 1998. In an extensive, \$2.5-million restoration, he replaced supporting beams and a sagging roof, repointed brickwork (allowing him to do away with that sidewalk bridge), and cast a new wrought-iron fence pieced together from intact bits of the original.

But two summers ago, looking toward retirement, Novograd briefly put Claremont on the market, asking \$10.9 million, a price that would have appealed to developers wanting to turn the prime piece of real estate into high-end condos. The city's tween-age girls were in good company as they prepared to mourn Claremont's passing. Richard Feldman first came to Claremont when he was 10 years old—62 years ago—and took riding lessons from Novograd's father. Every day for the past 18 years, he's donned his riding best—boots and britches or jodhpurs, jacket and tie, and velvet hard hat—for a 6:30 a.m. ride through the park on Brutus, the dun field hunter he's leased from Novograd for the past 11 years. “When I ride out of

Claremont's 65 horses—60 of them are available for hire to ride on the six miles of bridle paths in nearby Central Park—occupy the 115-year-old stable's original tongue-and-groove box stalls.

*“When I ride out of the stable, it's completely the best part of my day,” says Richard Feldman. “The rest is downhill.”*

the stable, it's just completely the best part of my day. The rest is downhill,” says Feldman, a managing director of Lehman Brothers. “If we didn't have riding in Central Park, it would be a disaster, as far as I'm concerned. It would be a great loss to the population, especially the children.”

Novograd agrees. But one day he really will have to sell Claremont, which is why, if he and preservationists have their way, the city will open a stable smack in the middle of Central Park. In fact, he says, one already exists at the 86th Street Transverse. The 1871 stone Victorian, originally designed as a stable complex, has been used by the police since the 1930s and is scheduled for a major overhaul that will upgrade it to a cutting-edge precinct. The Manhattan preservation group Landmark West has called the plans “disastrous.” They think that the police should find another spot and the city should return the stable to its original use.

But negotiations such as these take time—perhaps long enough for a generation of New Yorkers to grow up without ever seeing horses trot through Central Park. “On one hand, it's regrettable,” says Novograd at the prospect of eventually closing Claremont Stables for good. “And on the other hand, I can look at myself and say, ‘You really kept it going for far longer than anybody had a right to expect.’” ■

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