When the Calesa Rule the Streets of Manila

A century ago, clip-clopping along the major arteries of Manila were wooden horse-drawn rigs called *calesas*. They belong to romantic times when governor-generals down to the commoners rode in them. Indeed, they were an indispensable form of transportation during that time.
The Calesa

The affluent had their own personal carriages (carruajes) beautiful and lavish, the style influenced from their European counterparts, with the coachman (cochero) dressed in full livery.

The rest of the population devised their own version of this versatile form of transport –the *carretela*, the *carromata*, *calesin* or *tartanilla* and what is now known and is still very much part of Manila and provincial scene, the calesa.

The streets of Manila today are crowded and polluted with carbon dioxide. We can only image those days when Manila is pollution free. But according to historian Ambeth Ocampo, Old Manila had a different pollution from horses and carabaos –one either smell their dung or made a mistake of stepping on them.
Remarkably the calesa still manage to survive threats of motorization in the name of progress. Although drastic traffic control measures confine the calesa to the narrow streets of Downtown Manila, but they still abound in provincial roads.

Today, calesa are extensively used for sight-seeing or taxiing people for short distances, carrying small cargoes of fruits and vegetables, and privately, on ranches and small estates.

Cochero Terminologies

In olden days the cochero among other areas of domestic service like the portero, muchacho de cuarto, sota, and cocinero was honored. Although without driving experience (or license), the cochero soon gains enough audacity to get on the pescante or driver seat. Pescante, which has its roots in pescar, meaning to fish, described the cochero as seeming to be fishing as he hold the reins.
My old folks would say *mano* to turn right or *silla* to turn left. Ocampo explains that these Spanish words literally mean “hand” and “chair.” One can never use these terms with a Spanish taxi driver who responds to *izquierda* (left) and *derecho* (right). As a matter of strange fact, *derecho* in Filipino means to go straight.

The origins of these terms exclusive to the Philippines goes back to colonial times when a proper cochero sitting on the pescante held the reins with his right hand (*mano*) while his left hand rested either on his seat or its handle (*silla*). Thus, the old time passenger uttered *mano* if he wanted to turn right and *silla* if he wanted to turn left.

Thus, *buena mano* then did not mean a lucky first sale in a store as how it means today when the tindera urges a prospect to buy something at a discount “pang buena mano.” At that time, it meant that a cochero literally had a “good hand” in handling both the horse and the carriage.

Cocheros fed their horses cheap grass bought from a *zacatero* which must have been the equivalent of diesel in those times. A good cochero supplied a horse with a diet of palay mixed with honey, an equivalent of premium gas these days.

Professional cocheros kept in mind that vehicles stayed on the left side of the road, and they were able to make the horses move in unison to ensure a smooth ride. In the same way as in today’s motorists learns the gear shifts *primera,*
segunda, tercera, cuarta, quinta and atras, the cochero learned the three different speeds of the calesa as trotando (trotting), galope (full gallop), and escape (when one is a rush).

**Reviving the Calesa**

There is no doubt that once upon a time, the calesa earned the reputation as King of the Road. Not only as one of the few if not the only means to go from places to places, but also from their reckless “cocheros” openly flaunting parking laws (they can be flagged anywhere and asked to alight whenever one pleases).

But the deposed King may yet come again to claim his throne. With fuel prices soaring at unimaginable cost and the hankering for the romance of the bygone era, the calesa might have its come back to the roads again.

Information source: Ambeth Ocampo in Bonifacio’s Bolo