

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, August 24, 2009

**A Summer Evening on Gun Club Hill:** In the years before World War II, the first or second week in August was the week of the Yorklyn "shoot." My father would set the dates based on the moon cycle, as he wanted it as dark as possible for the night shoots; the illuminated clay targets showed up better without moonlight. The tournament began with a short program on Tuesday; the "Marathon" (500 target championship) was on Wednesday; 150 or 200 regular (16-yard) targets were on Thursday and Friday, each with the Doubles Championship thrown in somewhere; and the 100- or 150-target handicap was on Saturday. Never was there any shooting at Yorklyn on Sunday. Wednesday and Friday nights would be the 50-target night shoots, and they were increasingly popular, with six of the eight traps being illuminated by 1941. Thousand-candlepower floodlights, one on each side of each trap house, beamed light from the top of the hill toward the valley below, and through these beams the flight of the targets took place. A 40-watt bulb with a pool-table shade was hung on a wire above each shooter so he could see to align his gun. As the target left the trap it looked like a light itself, and when it was broken by a blast of shot, it was like fireworks without the color. Some smoke from the gunpowder was also illuminated. Flying bugs looked like tiny lights, and there were millions of them, but they really didn't bother anyone; some did not even survive.

The day shooters from afar—regular tournament shooters they were—sometimes did not come to the night shoots. Other times they did. Local shooters came by the dozens, however. Many worked during the day, and they would shoot at night and often on Saturday. From Oxford, West Grove, West Chester, Newark, all around Wilmington, Chester, Elkton, and the suburbs of Philadelphia they came. The entry window would open about 7:30, and it was dark enough to begin shooting just after 8:30. While waiting for the main attraction to start, the store at the end of the long porch was a popular spot for the shooters, their families, and spectators. Breyers' fresh peach ice cream was a bestseller. Sara Bowers ran the store for the Kennett New Century Club, which served the meals in the dining room for the week. When the shooting began, spectators were often three or four rows deep behind the traps to witness the spectacle.

Yorklyn is hot and humid in August. Next to the clubhouse at the very top of the hill (old timers called it Poplar Hill), under a huge shade tree that was felled by lightning about 1980, there was usually a good breeze. Behind the clubhouse was the "ice barrel." A 50-pound cake of ice was put in this barrel each morning, and then it was filled with water. A small spigot at the bottom allowed thirsty people to draw ice water into one of two tin cups that hung on chains from the barrel stand. Some shooters would carry a terry-cloth towel under their belt, and from this barrel they could dampen it before going to the firing line. It would help keep their gun barrel cool and their hands dry.

As shooting concluded before midnight, the trophy winners would be decided on a system called "Lewis Class" (ties were decided by drawing names from a hat), the trophies distributed to the winners, and the lights turned off. Everyone went home tired and happy.