

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, August 31, 2009

Climbing Mount Washington: Flora Stanley called August 31, 1899, the last day of summer. It was on that glorious day in northern New England 110 years ago that she accompanied her illustrious husband in his tiny steam car up the Mount Washington Carriage Road to the top of New England, an elevation of 6,288 feet above sea level. Freelan O. Stanley (his wife and close family called him “Freel”), then working for the fledgling Locomobile Company of America, became the first driver to successfully climb the mountain in an automobile. Was there a reason he took Flora with him in that diminutive steam car, improved but no larger than the very first experimental steamer in which the Stanley twins were photographed in 1897?

Although a historic first, the 8-mile trip up the mountain was almost climaxed by the journey of the F. O. Stanleys from their home in Newton, Massachusetts, to the Glen House at the base of the Carriage Road. Where they carried luggage and tools in Locomobile #93 is a mystery, for they drove the 175 miles prior to their attack on the mountain. Photos exist showing the two of them (from the rear) leaving their home on Hunnewell Avenue. The well-documented text, taken from Flora Stanley’s exacting diaries, is briefly related here.

Obviously in 1899, there were no auto roads as there were almost no autos. The “main road” from Boston to Portland, Maine, must have been a fairly well-kept carriage and buggy road. The Stanleys used this route, stopping the first night at Newburyport and the second at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Going inland “off the beaten path,” they spent the next night at Ossipee, a tiny New England hamlet, and the following at North Conway, already somewhat of a tourist town opened up by the railroad. They reached Glen House in early afternoon the fifth day (August 30) and gave some thought to attempting the climb to the summit that afternoon. Think of the adventure that trip must have been! In most villages and towns they passed through, people had never seen an automobile! A small boy was often the first to spot the steamer, and he sounded the alarm to the town. Once they came to a toll bridge, and two young sisters were tending the toll booth. The charge to cross was posted as 5 cents for those on foot, and 15 cents for a horse and wagon. The girls consulted their mother who said she thought 10 cents would be a fair toll. Flora Stanley said she thought that was about what she and Freel were worth.

George Eli Whitney had attempted the Mount Washington climb in his steamer in June 1899, but he turned back about 1/3 the way up, the real reason unclear. Freel had arranged for a team of horses to have water at the Half-Way House, so they could refill and continue their upward journey. Starting early in the morning, they made the four miles to this point in about an hour, half the time it took a team of horses. The water was not there. He decided to continue, hoping to meet the water wagon coming down from the top, but in less than a mile, the steamer’s tank was dry, and they had to stop. Eventually the water wagon caught up with them, and they successfully completed their ascent to the summit. Their total time was over two hours, but they had lost at least ½ hour waiting for water. In her diary, although quite complete with most details, Flora said nothing about the descent, except that they came down with no problems. Rumor has it that they dragged a log to hold them back. In any event, they had not had enough, as they drove over into Maine (possibly Kingfield) to visit friends before going home.