

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, November 2, 2009

**A Travel Agent in Wilmington:** I always liked geography and travel. Having completed a business course at Beacom College right after World War II, I wanted to get into some phase of it, possibly starting and running a small bus line. Selling travel, however, seemed much more practical and required a very small investment. After thorough investigation, in 1949 I teamed with Alexander M. Burton, recently employed by American Express in New York, to form Marshall & Burton, Travel Associates. Our first office was on the second floor of the old Village Barn building at 11<sup>th</sup> and West streets, then owned by the DuPont Company. We had a room partitioned off from what was otherwise dark storage space. IBM technicians used much of this floor and were kept busy working on electric typewriters and other business machines, mostly for the DuPont Company. Ours was not a prestigious location.

Officially, there were three travel agents in Wilmington when we started, but only one of them, the husband and wife team of Russell and Mary Fisher, provided serious competition. They were experienced and had a practical monopoly on providing service in booking trans-Atlantic steamships, cruises, and tours, unless the prospective traveler wanted to go to one of the established agents in Philadelphia. In addition, they handled a commercial account for the DuPont Company, a very lucrative business. They fought hard to keep competition out of Wilmington. A travel agent lived on commissions, and to be successful he had to be appointed by one of the major steamship carriers that belonged to the Trans-Atlantic Passenger Conference. If a newcomer could break the ice with one of them, the others would follow suit. Through personal connections Alex Burton had in New York, we finally got approval from the Holland-America Line, after which the Cunard Line, the French Line, and the others came through quickly. The up-and-coming airlines would gladly take on new agents to promote air travel, and although two (American and Eastern) had city ticket offices in Wilmington to compete for retail sales, they were very helpful in getting us started. Resort hotels and most big city hotels were also glad to recognize travel agents. The railroads paid nothing to agents unless the sale was part of a rail tour, usually of the west. The top commission rate was 10%, but domestic air tickets were commissionable at only 5%. A \$15 air ticket from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh netted the agent 75 cents. Fortunately, most of our sales were larger.

In 1950, we moved to a nicer office in a restored home at 1003 West Street, where the agency remained until 1972, moving to the first floor of that building in 1955. In 1956 Lindsay Greenplate joined the firm, and in 1957 Alex Burton went to work for American Express in Philadelphia, and the agency soon became Marshall & Greenplate. The year 1952 was the first we made any money, this because we were the primary American agent for the Friends World Conference held at Oxford, England, that summer. We booked 305 Quakers for the trans-Atlantic crossing and took care of many more for local tours in the British Isles and on the Continent. By 1960, we were getting into group tours successfully, and Lindsay continued this phase of the business after I sold my share to him in 1963. When the Farmers' Bank bought Marshall & Greenplate in 1972, the office was moved to their new building at 10<sup>th</sup> and Market, with Lindsay hired to run the travel department for the bank. By that time, several more travel agents had entered the field in Wilmington and throughout Delaware. Travel had come of age.