

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, August 16, 2010

The Willises of Penns Grove and John Philip Sousa: Ralph P. Willis (1882–1981) of Penns Grove, New Jersey, was a prominent trapshooter for much of his life and sold ammunition at Yorklyn during the big tournament. He and his brother, Robinson F. Willis, owned and operated R. F. Willis and Brother, a sporting goods and hardware outlet in Penns Grove. Ralph went to the Grand American tournament in Vandalia, Ohio, with my father and me in 1940 and 1942 and with my father in 1947. He also accompanied us on the Glidden Tour through New England in 1947, riding most of the time in our 1918 Stanley Model 735.

The famous march king and composer John Philip Sousa (1855–1932), who wrote *The Stars and Stripes Forever* and countless other marches, was also a prominent trapshooter. When his band was not performing, he attended “shoots” all over the country. A registered shoot was held outside Penns Grove about 1920, and Sousa was there. Ralph Willis and his wife, the former Florence Brinton of West Chester, Pennsylvania, invited Mr. Sousa to come home with them for lunch, and the band leader accepted. He “hit it off” with them and was especially fond of Mrs. Willis. For several years thereafter, he sent little mementos of thanks for his visit and pleasant lunch at their home. She treasured these and had them displayed in her dining room at their riverfront home in Penns Grove. My parents and I enjoyed several dinners with the Willises, and they always lodged in the north bedroom at Auburn Heights during the Yorklyn tournament.

Ralph Willis was born and raised on Maryland's Eastern Shore. He was one of five or six children. When he was about 10 years old, he and several of his siblings were standing on a porch in front of their house when a bolt of lightning struck. It killed his sister, and he had a lifelong mark down the side of his body where he was struck (though it did not shorten his life, which lasted for 99 years).

John Philip Sousa never retired. He never shot at Yorklyn, but he did shoot at the old Greenhill Gun Club in Wilmington, before Wawaset Park was built in the mid-1920s where the old gun club had been located. In 1932, at the age of 77, he and his band were playing in Reading, Pennsylvania. He died in his sleep at the Abraham Lincoln Hotel in Reading of an apparent heart attack.

I visited Ralph Willis for the last time in 1981, a few months before he passed away. He told me he had been recognized as the oldest man in Salem County. I took with me some old 16 mm. movies of him shooting at Yorklyn in 1940. He seemed interested, but then his mind would wander, and he couldn't pay attention to what was being projected.

Bruce Willis, the well-known actor from Penns Grove, has to be descended from Ralph or his brother, but I never researched this. Ralph and Florence had three sons, Calmer, Donald, and Warren, and his brother had at least one, Robinson Jr. All of them were married and had families.