

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, November 15, 2010

**Cretors and Company Popcorn Wagons:** This writer is not an authority on the Cretors Company in Chicago or the thousands of peanut and popcorn machines they made for at least 75 years. We believe they started in the 1890s with a very nicely made single cylinder steam engine, complete with its boiler and burner, used to turn a heated drum of peanuts and a rake in the bottom of the popcorn pan to keep the corn from sticking to the pan as it was popped. The complete outfit included a four-wheeled cart, nicely painted and striped to attract attention. The burners used alcohol, both under the drum boiler and to heat the peanuts and pop the corn.

I'm sure there were other makes of popcorn wagons, but Cretors far outpaced their competitors in numbers and popularity. They were seen at circuses and all kinds of shows, as well as on street corners of most American cities. A mechanical clown appeared to turn the peanut drum, and there was a tiny steam whistle to attract business. Water was pumped mechanically from a tank on the wagon to satisfy the steam boiler, which normally operated at about 25# pressure.

My impression is that the heyday of these machines was from the 1890s through the 1920s. The company remained in business, however, and would furnish a new unit on special order until World War II. Knott's Berry Farm, 8 miles from California's Disneyland, operated several Cretors units before and after that war. Walt Disney ordered 100 new units for Disneyland, which opened in 1955. These were furnished without steam boilers, however, and the engine and other mechanics required were operated by an electric motor mounted out of sight. I assume other large orders were placed as Walt Disney World in Florida and the other Disney operations came on line.

Our Cretors popcorn machine has been at Auburn Heights since the mid-1950s and has always been mounted on a two-wheel trailer, instead of the conventional and more colorful cart. A man trading as "Roxy" in Florida bought the unit in the 1930s and intended to go into business as a money-making endeavor. His signs were on the machine as it was delivered to my father for the museum, and the whole thing was painted an unattractive orange. We converted the machine to burn propane, and between 1961 and 1965, Joe Mitchell and the late Bob Way, as volunteer members of the newly formed Historic Red Clay Valley, Inc., ran the machine for 70 days when the Auburn Valley Railroad and the museum were open to the public. The popcorn was sold for 25 cents per bag, and one day Joe Mitchell took in \$66! It was during this period that the machine was used in connection with a DuPont Company exhibit next to the Playhouse in Wilmington (the present DuPont Theatre), and steam cylinder oil was substituted temporarily in the pan for popcorn oil, to the delight of the tasters.

During the Magic Age of Steam years in the 1970s, the unit was used for the popular "Old Fashioned Christmas" events, where Bob McGovern and his helpers gave away all the popcorn our patrons could eat. The machine was located inside the carriage house, and since we had "house steam" in those days, we piped this into the boiler and required fire only under the popping pan. After a rest of at least 20 years, the old machine has been a fixture at all Friends of Auburn Heights Steamin' Day events, being used about 15 days each year. Maintenance and restoration on boiler and engine have been performed by Emil Christofano, Ed Hoffmeister, Jim Personti, and Steve Jensen, and several more have become very proficient in the unit's operation. Fran Randolph, Susan's mother, made a new suit for the clown, which he richly deserved. We thank Ed and Betty Hoffmeister for the hard work and loving care they have given this operation for the past several years.