

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, May 20, 2013

Fun with Our Mountain Wagon (Part Two: Tom Marshall): As mentioned last week, my father let me drive the “Wagon” home from Boston, but I really didn’t know how to do it in 1946. After the restoration he gave it during the next year, however, it was his toy to enjoy for several years. By the mid-1950s, however, he had “moved on” and was glad to have me use it. I took to the car like a “duck takes to water,” and I did have *fun!*

For many years, we were invited to the Woodward Farm at Mendenhall for a July 4th picnic, along with about 30 others. One year I had the “Wagon” full of adults, giving a ride down Kennett Pike. I went around the curve at Fairville too fast, and it started to swerve from the passengers’ weight high and to the rear. I almost lost it, but fortunately I got things under control and drove much more conservatively thereafter. I followed my father’s footsteps in taking the car to the annual Old Timers’ Picnic in Wilmington’s Josephine Gardens. With the car packed for the one-mile free ride, we loaded on North Park Drive opposite the zoo, crossed Market Street Bridge, then up South Park Drive to Van Buren Street Bridge, and back to the starting point.

In the mid-1950s just before the Salk vaccine for Polio was perfected, the Wilmington JayCees staged a “Mile of Dimes” with sidewalk tapes along both sides of Market Street from 5th to 7th Streets, and those who put dimes on either tape could have a four-block ride in the “Wagon,” complete with city traffic. On a much larger scale, Henry Austin Clark Jr., well known in antique automobile circles, convinced the National March of Dimes hierarchy that they should publicize a coast-to-coast tour on which a Pony Express mail pouch would be carried in an antique car from Boston to Los Angeles. With knowledge of the tour route and the schedule, hobbyists were invited to participate for one or more days near their prospective homes, with each participating car carrying the pouch for a short distance.

The tour left Boston on January 2, 1956, and I joined with the Mountain Wagon at Phillipsburg, New Jersey, three days later, after driving to Earle Eckel’s home, 10 miles east of Phillipsburg, on a bitterly cold January afternoon. The next day, joined by about six other cars and with melting snow on the roads, we made the trip to Reading, Pennsylvania, after promotional stops at Easton, Bethlehem, and Allentown. Eckel had the good judgment to substitute his 1925 Pierce Arrow roadster for his 1914 Stanley as he followed along. The Mountain Wagon carried the illustrious pouch from Reading to Philadelphia, where high winds blew the top off going down the Benjamin Franklin Parkway toward City Hall. When we got to Rodney Square in Wilmington by 2:30 that day, I decided to call it quits and left the tour to head back to Auburn Heights with the wagon’s top in shreds. Clark, himself in a 1929 Lincoln Touring Car, was the only one to make the whole trip from Boston to Los Angeles, after a five-week journey.

About 1958, I carried about 14 beauty queens who were vying for the title “Queen of the Furrow” in a West Chester parade from the VFW home north of town. About 1960, a load of younger friends went Christmas caroling around Hockessin in the wagon on several occasions, often driving across someone’s frozen front lawn to serenade the occupants. My mother made sure we carried logs heated in her oven to keep the passengers’ feet warm under lap robes. Before the annual car shows started at the Hagley Museum in 1996, the museum often had fall festivals to which the Mountain Wagon was invited to give rides. On one such day, I was busy. Starting about 10 A.M. and stopping briefly about 2:00 to take on water, by the time we concluded, the Hagley people told me 850 had ridden on the big car that day.

In the 1970s, the Mountain Wagon appeared in one Hollywood production called *Ragtime*. This was the story of the architect Stanford White, his girlfriend actress Evelyn Nesbitt, and Evelyn’s husband, Harry K. Thaw, who shot and killed White in 1906. It was James Cagney’s last movie (he was the police commissioner). The scenes were shot in Lower Manhattan, advertised as Philadelphia, and Weldin Stumpf operated the car. The scene made it for about 10 seconds in the final movie version.