

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, January 13, 2014

The Lukes and Beaver Valley Hill: Actually, there was no connection between the Luke family and the steep hill in Brandywine Hundred called Beaver Valley Hill. The Luke family, originally from the Wilmington area (I think), made its fortune from paper manufacturing at Piedmont, West Virginia, well over 200 miles from Wilmington. The Piedmont mills, along the upper Potomac River about 20 miles upstream from Cumberland, Maryland, were widely known, and my father, being in the paper business himself, drove his newly acquired Model K Stanley from Yorklyn to Piedmont and return in late summer of 1910, accompanied by two friends. The town of Luke, Maryland, across the river from Piedmont, was undoubtedly named for the family. Westernport, Maryland, and Keyser, West Virginia, are neighboring towns. It's my understanding that the Luke family maintained its primary residence in and around Wilmington while making its fortune at Piedmont.

James L. Luke Jr. (1902–1964) became an active trapshooter while still in his teens and by the mid-1920s was considered one of the best shots in Delaware. Isaac "Ike" Turner (1874–1965) and John H. Minnick (slightly older), both of Wilmington, had each shot 500 targets in a day at Yorklyn in 1921, which challenge match had been won by Turner with a score of 492 to Minnick's 479. At the Delaware State Shoot in 1925, also held at Yorklyn, young Jim Luke challenged Ike Turner for his "title." On a very windy day, the 23-year-old Luke defeated Turner with a score of 461, which reflected the wind-blown targets. Although a generation apart in age, Turner and Luke became lifelong friends.

About 1930, Jim Luke and his young wife bought a property along Concord Pike (Route 202) north of Talleyville, and he built a gun club in the back yard that he called "Lukehurst." There were four traps (now called "fields"), and the Delaware State Shoot was held there in 1932 and 1933. For the night shooting, Jim Luke borrowed the 1,000-candlepower floodlights from Yorklyn. It was on one of these occasions that I first remember visiting Lukehurst.

In traveling from Auburn Heights in his 1932 Packard Model 902 Club Sedan, my father always went up Beaver Valley Hill. The route he took was certainly not the most direct, but for some reason he liked it. We would take Snuff Mill Road to Centreville, then Center Meeting and Smith's Bridge Road past Granogue and through the covered bridge. When I was along, he would point out Irene du Pont's home off to the right. Once in Brandywine Hundred, we would take the road through Beaver Valley past the remains of an old grist mill and reputed illegal stills that were active during Prohibition. Ahead lay Beaver Valley Hill, at least ½ mile long at an estimated incline of about 15%. It was hard to get a start, as a narrow truss bridge with a reverse curve was at the bottom, but cars that were tuned up could make it in high gear, according to my father. His Packard always did, but he wanted to see how fast he could be going at the top. We came out on Concord Pike at Perry's Tavern, later called the Tally-Ho, and then drove less than one mile south to Lukehurst.

Through the 1930s, Lukehurst was one of the clubs in the Penn-Del Twilight League, and I shot there several times. I think it was in late fall of 1938 that a picnic was held there, sponsored by the Kiwanis Club of Wilmington. Everyone was invited, and you entered to shoot 25 targets only, but you could enter several times if you wished. Prominent local Kiwanians who were not regular shooters also enjoyed themselves, people like Benjamin F. Shaw (wholesale manufacturer of plumbing supplies), and B. Frank Shinn (Shinn's Paint Store). There were some great donated prizes. My father won a fifth of Canadian Club Whiskey. The shooters knew he didn't drink, so several of them tried to talk him out of it. However, he brought it home, put it in the safe, and there it stayed for over 50 years.

By 1940, Jim Luke was shooting less, and he sold the property containing the gun club, moving to another home in the Wilmington area. His younger brother, William D. Luke, started Delaware Oldsmobile, first on North Market Street near 14th, and later on Governor Printz Boulevard. By the late 1950s, the old Lukehurst property was owned by the Brandywine Country Club, and a nine-hole golf course was built there. It is now part of the campus of Widener University.

Back to Beaver Valley Hill: When I first had my driver's license in the spring of 1940, I was allowed to take my mother's 1938 Packard Six to Wilmington Friends School on Alapocas Drive. One day after school, with a friend as my passenger, I took on Beaver Valley Hill with gusto. I didn't get very far. As I swung through the narrow bridge at the bottom, the car lost its footing, and I sideswiped the steel side of the bridge at some speed. The front end alignment was damaged, and the fenders and running board on the left side were badly creased. I drove home slowly with my tail between my legs. My father said very little, which made it hurt even more. This was the first of several fender benders, two more of which happened before 1940 was over.