

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 22, 2014

Decorating for “Old Fashioned Christmas” at the Magic Age of Steam, 1971–77: Unfortunately, women were not involved in the Christmas decorations, outdoors and in the museum, during the Magic Age of Steam's seven years of its “Old Fashioned Christmas.” Crude as the decorations were, however, the five or six days each year were extremely popular, and it was not unusual to have over 600 visitors in a single afternoon or evening.

The events were scheduled in early evening except on weekend days, when they would be in the afternoon, and the Magic Age was open three hours each time. In 1971 and possibly '72, three days before Christmas and three days after were advertised, but it was soon realized that the events after Christmas were much better attended, so they would often start on December 26 and run as late as January 3 if New Year's fell on a Friday. The main attraction was the outdoor train ride, and two steam trains, running one behind the other in a counter-clockwise direction, attempted to keep up with the demand.

Lighted trees were all over the yard of Auburn Heights, including the large holly in the circle of the driveway next to the big house. As the trains left West Yorklyn Station, a distant lighted display to the left showed Santa with his sleigh and several reindeer, of which Rudolph was the first. Looking beyond, passengers could observe the big house, now called the “mansion,” with electric candles in 72 windows. As the tunnel was approached, colored lights were all over its portals as well as inside its 90-foot length. The ticket booth and Lakeside Park Station were festively lighted as the train trip progressed. A lighted rotating tree turned on the island in the pond (there was no bridge or platform there in those years). Several small “volunteer” trees with colored lights down the bank toward the mill race offered eye appeal for the less sophisticated passengers. Paper-mache sheep grazed on the lawn below West Yorklyn station as the train ride came to its conclusion.

Our faithful Cretors popcorn machine, running on house steam in the garage (carriage house), was kept busy supplying the demand, along with hot chocolate, both served without charge. In the museum, also displaying a large rotating “Steam-powered Christmas tree,” the operating Lionel electric trains, all from Tom Marshall's boyhood collection, were perhaps the greatest attraction. The rebuilt “O”-gauge circular railway was part of it, but the Standard-gauge layout, erected on the concrete floor and different each year (until 1976), was of especial interest. Since “house steam” was piped through the museum building, it was possible to operate several stationary model engines, the Model EX Stanley (in place on a stand), and the 3/4-inch-scale 4-8-4 locomotive that had been built by Clarence Marshall during World War II (this has been run on air in recent years).

Displays of old dolls, early children's books, and a stuffed Santa Claus worn out with his feet propped up at a makeshift fireplace (after all, it *was* after Christmas), supplemented the display of about 24 antique cars then in the collection. Tom Mitchell played Christmas tunes on the Estey Reed Organ. Those who ran the Magic Age operation during the warm-weather months, mostly high school students who were glad to make extra spending money, were eager to work these holiday events. In 1977, a quartet of 18-year-olds rode in the back seat of the Mountain Wagon, entertaining riders with vocal selections. It was so cold that the “Wagon” would be backed into the steam-heated garage between trips, so car, driver, and male singers could warm up.

Indeed, it was an unsophisticated operation by today's standards. Weldin Stumpf and I put it together each year. All-inclusive admission was \$2.50 for adults and \$1.25 for children under 12. Nevertheless, it was *fun*. Like today, most visitors left happy. Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to all!