

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, September 7, 2015

**Traveling the Roads of Delaware, 1930s:** During this decade, my parents owned a house on the beach at Rehoboth, 96 miles, more or less, from Auburn Heights. It was also the time of big Straight Eight Packards in the Marshall family, supplemented by a couple of V-12s toward the end of the decade. For those days, these big cars were fast and comfortable for making the north-south trip. Going south, the first 10 miles in New Castle County was over the hills, then it was flat and the roads were very good.

Usually our route was via Newark, Summit Bridge, and Middletown, joining the DuPont Highway at the H & H Garage north of Blackbird. A stop was often made at Middletown to visit my grandmother Shallcross and to pick up produce in season from the Shallcross farms. On the return trip, we often stayed on the DuPont Highway to a point north of St. Georges, then continued through Red Lion, Bear, Christiana, and Stanton. Since there were fewer than 50,000 cars registered in Delaware, traffic was always light, and my father, without the aid of speed control, would keep the speedometer right on 50.

My parents started going to Rehoboth regularly in 1925, and for three summers they rented houses on Maryland Avenue, first the Bradford cottage and then the Handy cottage, where I fell down the stairs and knocked out all my lower baby teeth. In those days, the road surface from Milford to Nassau was sand and gravel, so the preferred route was via Georgetown, which added about 12 miles. The principal towns en route had no by-passes, so we went down the main streets of Smyrna, Dover, Magnolia, Frederica, and Milford. In the fall of 1927, our new house on Queen Street in Rehoboth Heights was completed, and an 18-foot-wide concrete road was built from Milford to Five Points, connecting with the road from Georgetown. The Rehoboth boardwalk was extended south to Prospect Street, just beyond Queen, in 1929.

In the 1930s, my father was president of the bank in Kennett Square, and during the Depression, the Board of Directors met twice each week. Tuesdays and Fridays my dad would leave Rehoboth about 4:45 A.M. (Standard Time), arriving at Auburn Heights soon after 8:00 (Daylight Saving Time). At that hour of the morning, he might meet one or two cars between Rehoboth and Milford. Returning in late afternoon, he gained an hour and arrived in plenty of time for dinner. Most of the time he made this trip alone, but about two or three times each summer, I would go with him. He rather enjoyed the trip in one of his Packards, as he did not fish, play golf, or enjoy the beach at Rehoboth and would rather explore the roads and the small towns of Sussex County.

A retired doctor named Tomlinson lived a few blocks away, and my dad often invited him to ride around the countryside on day trips. Sometimes they would go to Denton, Salisbury, or Ocean City in Maryland and sometimes to less distant points. There was no coastal highway south of Rehoboth until about 1937, so a trip to Bethany Beach was over 30 miles via Millsboro and Dagsboro, and to Ocean City, it was 50 miles via Millsboro, Selbyville, and Berlin. Once in a while, I went along, but I would fall asleep before the day was over.

Other than the major highways, Delaware and Maryland had hundreds of miles of nine-foot roads. Such a road cost half as much to build as a two-lane 18-foot-wide road, and worked well where traffic was light. The lane in one direction would be concrete nine feet wide, with the lane in the other direction being gravel. A driver was expected to travel on the concrete until he spotted a car coming in the other direction, whereby he would take to the dusty gravel portion to pass. The gravel lane would be on one side and then the other, so theoretically a driver would have to take to the gravel only half the time when passing. I'm not sure what happened on the curves where approaching cars could not be seen very far ahead.

As traffic picked up during the 1930s, most of the nine-foot roads were widened by concreting the full width of 18 feet. On our trips to Rehoboth, the roads south of Dover were 18 feet wide; from Dover to Wilmington they were slightly wider. By the end of the '30s decade, many 18-foot roads were widened to 22 or 24 feet by adding concrete strips on one or both sides. In fact the DuPont Highway was becoming a dual four-lane road with a wide median strip by 1935. This major project began at Wilmington and moved southward, reaching Smyrna

about 1938, and on to Dover by the beginning of World War II. Smyrna, Dover, Frederica, and Milford were also by-passed for through traffic using the DuPont Highway.