

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, May 16, 2016

John and Lee Minnick, Father and Son: John H. Minnick, born about 1865, had a cycle shop at 700 Delaware Avenue in Wilmington, like Henry Ford and the Wright Brothers at Dearborn, Michigan, and Dayton, Ohio, respectively. At the turn of the 20th century, cycleries catered not only to growing boys but to adults who could not afford a horse and to those who liked to race. Racing bikes were often built for four or five riders (the Ford Museum has one built for 10), and Minnick told of personally racing on a five-passenger model. The lead rider had to get the bike started, followed by #2 getting on, and so forth until the bike had its five occupants and soon picked up speed.

John Minnick was also an expert trapshooter who was at the height of his career before and after World War I. My father first met him when he started shooting regularly at the DuPont Gun Club in 1914. My record is not complete, but Minnick probably won the State Championship during this period. In 1921, another prominent Wilmington trapshooter, Isaac Turner (1874–1965), challenged Minnick to a 500-target match to be shot in August at the time of the very first Marshall Trapshooting Tournament at Yorklyn. With no other participants, the two of them shot at 500 targets each in about three hours! Ike Turner won with an outstanding score of 492 to Minnick's 479. Turner was challenged by 23-year-old James L. Luke in 1925, and on a windy day on Gun Club Hill, Luke won with 461. Later that summer the "Marshall Marathon" began, which was open to all amateur trapshooters, its first winner being Steve Crothers with 497.

On June 30, 1933, my father held an "Old Timers' Shoot" at Yorklyn, and an effort was made to get well-known shooters from earlier years to participate if they were able. John Minnick, who had retired from shooting, came out and enjoyed himself while shooting the 100-target program. We have home movies transcribed onto DVDs of Minnick in action on this occasion.

Minnick's son, R. Lee Minnick (ca. 1905-ca. 1950), operated his father's cycle shop at the same location and became interested in shooting in the late 1930s. He worked on a few lightweight racing bikes and a lot of heavy children's bikes with 26" balloon tires, very popular at that time. Lee Minnick was never as good a shot as his father (who was then deceased) but participated in most of the 50-target Penn-Del League Shoots and occasionally shot registered targets at Yorklyn or at the Delaware State Championships. He and his good friend Clement A. Lippincott of Centreville enjoyed shooting together. Lippincott, whose family had owned and operated Lippincott's Department Store in Wilmington, lived in the old family mansion along Kennett Pike opposite Centre Meeting Road. The family had fallen on hard times, and Clem worked as a clerk in the Sears Roebuck store at 7th and Shipley Streets. Unfortunately his income was insufficient to keep up the large 19th-century home or to shoot clay targets, but he tried to do both. Only an 80% shooter, Clem and Lee Minnick (Lee was about 88%) dreamed of shooting the 500-target "Marathon," which they did about 1942. Clem built a small shooting ground with one trap in his back yard at Centreville, and the shot went over the hill toward the cemetery of Lower Brandywine Church, some distance away.

When I was a student at Beacom College at 10th and Jefferson Streets in 1947, I would wander over to Lee Minnick's cycle shop between classes to talk trapshooting. He had married a sophisticated lady with a 14-year-old son, they lived above the shop, and they seemed very happy. Later that year when I opened the Club House Theater next to the Snuff Mill in Yorklyn, the Minnick family came from Wilmington to attend the first showing. While still in his 40s, Lee Minnick died from heart failure about 1950, and the cycle shop closed immediately. His stepson was graduated from Wilmington Friends School in the Class of 1951.