

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, November 14, 2016

Arthur Harmon (1882–1942): All of us who attended Wilmington Friends School in the 1930s knew “Arthur.” It turned out so did students from the 1900s, 1910s, and 1920s. Arthur drove a horse-drawn jitney owned by the school at Fourth and West Streets to pick up pupils all over the city and take them from home to school and vice versa. By the end of World War I, he was driving a small school bus with two bench seats facing each other with a capacity of about 12 pupils. I use the word “pupil” rather than “student,” as a teacher once told me she had many pupils but very few students. Arthur must have had a newer bus by the time I was in school, but it, too, was small and antiquated. One day he drove some elementary school pupils to Sunny Hills School (Sanford) near Hockessin and parked next to the small elementary school building there. He left his bus for a few minutes, and when he returned the bus was in the pond at the bottom of the hill. It was pulled out successfully, but I’m not sure whether it was serviceable to return to Wilmington Friends that day.

Since my cousin Eleanor and I were from the country, Arthur’s services were not available to us except on short school trips as part of the curriculum. Even so, we knew he was a very special person, always smiling, and loved by all who came in contact with him. He did janitorial work around the school when the bus was not in use.

Arthur was a black man who grew up with white boys, most of whom were members of prominent ship-building families who lived in mansions along Pennsylvania Avenue in Wilmington. He was treated like one of them and participated in most of their activities. As they became teenagers, however, it became harder for Arthur to go and do what his friends were doing because he was black. The white boys were saddened by this, but Arthur took it with his usual good humor, as he knew that was how things were. As his friends went off to college, Arthur settled on driving a horse pulling a small school wagon.

Arthur had musical talents, and he founded an all-black band of which he was the conductor. They had bright uniforms in John Philip Sousa style and played for many events around the city, with all types of audiences. Charles W. Bush, principal of Wilmington Friends when I was in elementary school, engaged Arthur and his band to entertain the school body occasionally. For such occasions a temporary stage would be set up in the gym at 5th and West Streets, and Arthur and his band provided a fun program for all.

In the early 1930s, the school purchased a second bus, slightly larger, built on a Model A Ford frame. A man named Ermont (as well as Coach Herschel Loomis) drove the Model A, but Arthur stuck to his old bus. When the school moved to Alapocas at the edge of the city in 1937, Arthur and his bus went with it.

I was graduated from Wilmington Friends in June 1941, and Arthur was still working and seemingly well. However, he died the next year at age 60. He and many in his generation made major contributions to the life of our country, but in their time they never received proper recognition.