

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 26, 2005

“Bate” Dennis and His Work around Yorklyn, 1900–1935: One of the early people at Auburn Heights was Beaton S. Dennis (ca. 1880–ca. 1957). “Bate” was a black oysterman from St. Michaels, Maryland, but when he had trouble finding work, he came north shortly after 1900 and was hired as a handyman around the paper mill by Israel Marshall. He was quite humorous, had a happy disposition, and everybody who worked with Bate liked him. As was customary in those days, everyone at the mill, black or white, was called by their first name (probably with the exception of my grandfather, Israel). Bate prided himself on being able to write two messages, one with each hand, simultaneously. He used to say “I’s ambidextrous.” With his fine penmanship, the writing was equally good from both hands. For many years, the “mill men” used to mow the grass at Auburn Heights and do other small jobs, as required. Bate seemed to acquire this job on a regular basis. When my mother came on the scene, she thought it strange that Bate would call my father “Clarence.” That would not have been appropriate around Middletown, where she came from.

I can remember Bate running an early gasoline-powered real mower around the lawn. He learned to drive a Model T Ford, and my father bought one, probably about 1925, for Bate and others to use in getting the mail twice a day, the milk from cousin Albert Marshall at Marshall’s Bridge once a day, and other nearby errands. One day Bate parked the “T” at the kitchen door, went in the kitchen to complete his delivery, and when he came out the car was lodged on the race bank against a tree with a smashed fender. I don’t remember how they pulled the car back up the hill. I believe the new fender cost \$5.

Bate married a local widow, Ella Rector, the mother-in-law of the young Lawrence Lincoln “Link” Hazzard who worked at the mill for nearly 50 years. Bate and Ella would often babysit for my parents, and I remember riding in the front seat of that Model T between them. Once we traveled the dirt extension of Meeting House Road that ended at Marshall’s Bridge, then a public road. This road was closed in the early 1930s, and I recall riding my bicycle over the route about 1937 with the weeds grown high. When Ella died, Bate, then in his late 50s, went back to live at St. Michaels. Many years later, in 1953, the Historical Car Club of Pennsylvania had a weekend tour to Easton, with headquarters Saturday night at the Tidewater Inn. We needed someone to watch the cars parked in an open lot. My dad and I thought of Bate, got in touch with him, and he came in from St. Michaels and kept a strict eye on our cars. Roy Bengel with his ‘15 Stanley, my dad in his ‘24 Doble steamer, and I in a ‘32 Packard roadster then owned by my father all knew Bate, and we had a happy reunion.