

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, August 11, 2008

Celebrities at Yorklyn: Perhaps you have heard much more than you need to know about the Yorklyn trapshooting tournaments staged by my father. The week just finished was traditionally the “big week” each year at the Yorklyn Gun Club, when shooters from all parts of the country participated for 4½ days. Some of these names were big in the trapshooting world but meant nothing to anyone else.

The big tournament usually started Tuesday afternoon with an introductory event and settled into the Marshall Marathon on Wednesday, billed as the 500-target World Amateur Championship. Thursday and Friday were each 200-target events, with the Doubles Championship thrown in somewhere (usually 100 targets). The Handicap on Saturday finished off the week and had the largest number of shooters. In addition to the day events, however, there were always two night shoots on Wednesday and Friday. These were shot at 50 targets and were especially popular with local shooters who could not afford the longer programs. Often more than 200 marksmen would enter for one of the night shoots. Six traps were each lighted with two large 1,000-candlepower light bulbs in front of giant reflectors, mounted in portable wooden boxes on the two sides of the trap house. The beams of light shown on the trajectory of the clay targets so that they looked like flying lightbulbs until broken or “smoked” by the shooter. The lights also let us know how many bugs were flying around—millions! A small 40-watt bulb with a “pool table” reflector was over each shooting position, so the shooter could see to align his gun barrel. Originally, direct current for this operation was supplied by a large generator hooked to a 1917 Packard Twin Six motor (later the club was connected to commercial A.C. power). It was not uncommon to have over 1,000 spectators, and the 200 shooters could be handled in about three hours (more detail on these tournaments can be found in *Weekly News* stories of 10/17/05 and 2/20/06).

Trapshooting at Yorklyn attracted some famous people. First of all, the du Ponts: Eugene E. du Pont of Greenville was an expert shot who won several state championships. Eugene of the “Owl’s Nest,” and his son Eugene III both enjoyed shooting but were not very good at it. Victor du Pont of Guyencourt and his sons, Victor Jr. and Charles, all took part and did very well at times, the father winning the Delaware State Handicap at Yorklyn in 1942 with a score of 94 out of 100 and 25 straight in the shoot-off with Donald Tulloch. Philip F. du Pont of Fairville attended the early Yorklyn tournaments and bestowed upon my father a book of his poems in appreciation for the good times he had here.

A few major league baseball players came to the night shoots. In the 1930s, all big league games were in the afternoon, so when the Red Sox or the Yankees were playing the old Athletics in Philadelphia, a few of them came to night shoots at Yorklyn and shot the 50-target program. Herb Pennock, the great Yankee pitcher who was called the “Squire of Kennett Square” invited Lefty Grove and several of his teammates to have an evening of fun at the traps, and this they did. To my knowledge, however, neither Babe Ruth nor Lou Gehrig were ever at Yorklyn.

The band leader Paul Whiteman, a huge man, came to Yorklyn in 1948 with his friend Jack Matthews. With many engagements in the New York area, Whiteman was then living near New Hope, Pennsylvania. During one afternoon between shooting events, I noticed Mr. Whiteman looking for a place to sit down, so I offered him one of our many wooden folding chairs. He was very grateful but asked if there was another as he was too wide to fit on one. Lowell Thomas had planned to come, but a week before the shoot he sent my father a letter saying his commitments would not allow him to attend. Howard M. Nichols, president of the Atlantic Refining Company, was an avid trapshooter and an annual participant at Yorklyn. Robert W. Johnson Jr., son of Robert Wood Johnson, founder of Johnson & Johnson in New Brunswick, New Jersey, shot here several times just before World War II.

The opera singer and movie star James Melton was at the Gun Club in 1951 but not as a trapshooter. An avid antique auto collector, he attended the National Spring Meet of the Antique Automobile Club of America here that year and drove our Model H-5 up and down the hill several times, accompanied by my father, who had just restored it.