

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, August 3, 2009

Leo H. Shaab (ca.1884–ca.1959): Leo Shaab was a real Maryland “down-homer” who thrived on extravagant amounts of fried chicken, corn-on-the-cob, and watermelon during the abundant harvests of late summer. A native of Elk Ridge, about 8 miles southwest of Baltimore, he worked for the Western Cartridge Company of East Alton, Illinois, for much of his adult life. Western acquired Winchester in the mid-1930s, and the combined company was prominent in the world of trapshooting, manufacturing shotguns, ammunition, clay targets, and the traps that threw them.

Through clippings found in the basement of Auburn Heights, I learned that Leo Shaab had been an auto dealer in Baltimore in the years before 1915 and was quite a well-known racing car driver who had won many local track races and endurance tests in and around his native Maryland. Dealers in those days often sold several makes of early automobiles, and Leo sold at least four such makes, some of which were of European manufacture.

Beginning his career with Western Cartridge Company before my father opened the Yorklyn Gun Club and held the first of 30 annual trapshooting tournaments there in 1921, Leo was assigned to Yorklyn to service the Western traps during the “shoot” in early August that year. It turned out to be the first of the 30 years he came to Yorklyn in that capacity, still handling the job at the last tournament in August 1950. He was devoted to my parents, and in addition to his official job of keeping the 10 traps working flawlessly, he acted as caretaker during the five-day tournament, sleeping on a cot in the clubhouse, checking the refrigerators and freezer, and starting an early-morning fire in one of the cookstoves, so hot water would flow from the spigots in the kitchen and the restrooms. He was often joined on cots in the club room by about 10 shooters plus Arthur A. Fink, a sports writer from Reading, Pennsylvania, hired by my father to cover the tournament. Traditionally, this first week of August was the time of the big Yorklyn “shoot.”

When trapshooting was shut down in the early days of World War II, Leo was sent to New Haven, Connecticut, headquarters of Winchester, for war work. With his family still in Maryland, he was unhappy at Winchester, but he stuck it out for over a year, after which he got a more favorable assignment. In early 1943, while he was at New Haven, however, I was stationed at Providence, Rhode Island, attending pre-meteorology school at Brown University. Once I went by train to New Haven to spend part of a day with Leo, and once he came to Providence and spent several hours with me. On the Saturday in New Haven, we walked outside the Winchester plant, and a war bond rally, featuring the singer Paul Robeson, was going on in the square.

After World War II, Leo resumed his trap work with Western-Winchester, but his arthritis made it difficult for him to climb in and out of a trap house, which was necessary for lubrication and the setting of the traps at least twice daily. My father hired a local carpenter, Sam Massey, who liked trapshooting himself, to do the climbing in-and-out, and Leo would supervise. He retired shortly after the final Yorklyn tournament in 1950. I saw him last in June 1957, at his home in Elk Ridge, where he was propped up in his favorite chair listening to a ball game on the radio.