

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 12, 2011

Short Line Bus Company: After the heavy dose of Packards at Auburn Heights in last week's story, I will take a break of two weeks or so before concluding that story. There have been, and still are, several Short Line Bus Companies operating in the East, many of them around New York City. The focus of this story is the bus line through Yorklyn and Hockessin that was headquartered in West Chester and operated here for about 40 years (1925?–1966).

When the electric trolley line from Kennett Square to Brandywine Springs went out of business in 1923, local people, only a few of whom owned automobiles, needed a means to get to and from Kennett Square and Wilmington. One of the Short Line routes that soon provided this service ran from the Pennsylvania Railroad Station (*train station* is a modern term) at Front and French streets in Wilmington to the Green Gables Restaurant in Kennett Square. The route was uptown to 11th Street in Wilmington, then west to Kennett Pike, across to Lancaster Pike in the vicinity of Westover Hills, out Lancaster Pike to Hockessin, over Yorklyn Road to Yorklyn, and then north on Route 82 to Kennett Square. Another equally popular route was from Wilmington out Kennett Pike (Route 52) all the way to Hamorton, then westward on Route 1 to Kennett Square. This route served the communities of Greenville, Centreville, and Mendenhall, in addition to Longwood Gardens. Buses would stop to pick up or discharge passengers anywhere along the road. Service every two hours was offered from early morning to midnight.

There was also local service by Short Line from West Chester to Wilmington; West Chester to Kennett Square; Coatesville to Kennett Square; Kennett Square to Avondale, West Grove, and Oxford; and probably on several other routes of which I was not familiar. Once about 1937, I rode a Short Line Bus from Rehoboth Beach to Wilmington, with stops in Lewes, Milton, Milford, Dover and Smyrna, where we stopped for supper at George's Place. This long-distance route did not allow for picking up roadside passengers. The bus driver counted his tickets while driving along at 50 M.P.H., a forerunner of modern communication while behind the wheel. His bus still had a hood in front of the driver.

Many residents of Hockessin, such as the young Ruth Pierson (Marshall), and millworker families from Yorklyn rode the bus on Saturday nights to the movies or to shop in Kennett Square. During World War II, business flourished because of gasoline rationing. From Auburn Heights, the trip to Wilmington took about 40 minutes and to Kennett less than 15 minutes. The fares changed over the years, but my recollection is 15 cents to Kennett and 35 cents to Wilmington in the 1930s.

At the end of February 1945, I got off an eastbound Pennsylvania Railroad train at Coatesville in late evening, having been advised there would be a bus about midnight to Kennett Square. I had left Tinker Field at Oklahoma City that morning, hitchhiked by Air Transport Command first to Indianapolis, then to Wright Field (Dayton, Ohio), and finally to Olmstead Field at Middletown, Pennsylvania. A shared taxi took me to the railroad station in Harrisburg, where I boarded the eastbound train. At a corner drug store in Coatesville, I was advised to wait next to the Reading Company's old station (which was locked up), and the Kennett bus would be along about midnight. It was cold, and I waited. I would have given up, but there was no place to go. Finally about 12:40 A.M. the Short Line Bus pulled up with Sumner Massey as its driver. With me as the only passenger, he made a fast trip down Route 82 to Connor's Drug Store in Kennett. Chief George McCloskey, Kennett's only cop, delivered me about 1:30 A.M. to the gate posts at Auburn Heights.

On August 13, 1946, about to be discharged from the Army at Fort Meade, I rode in a shared taxi to Union Station in Baltimore, took the train to Wilmington, and rode the Short Line Bus to Auburn Heights. It was a nostalgic trip, as I had been away 17 months, but all that was now behind. Lawrence L. Hazzard Jr., a young black man who had worked for my mother in the 1930s and who lived near Marshall's Bridge, rode beside me as we reminisced about former times. I thought I would enjoy parading around in my uniform, but I never wore it again.