

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, January 6, 2014

**Bicycles, Clarence and Tom:** Both my father and I had a great appreciation for automobiles, so as soon as we could get mechanized, in quite different times, we moved away from the physical effort required to ride a bicycle. By the time we were 16, serious bicycle riding was a thing of the past.

My father used to tell me about his bicycle riding, especially the long trips he made. He rode to and from Brandywine Springs Park several times, about 7 miles from Auburn Heights with a lot of hills between. He and a friend rode to Valley Forge and return in one day, 33 miles each way. I assume he was about 15 at the time, which would have been in 1900. Not too long ago, a photo was found with handwriting on the reverse side: "Clarence and his bicycle." It was probably his mother's writing, and the picture was taken of a boy 8 or 9 years old alongside the "farmhouse" down the hill from Auburn Heights, where Israel Marshall and his family lived from 1890 until 1897. His bicycle appeared to have about 24-inch wheels with small tires and no coaster brake, but just the right size for a growing boy of Clarence's age. I assume he may have had a larger one when he rode to Valley Forge.

My first "bike" was a tricycle, often called a velocipede. It provided great fun around the driveway at Auburn Heights and especially on the level sidewalks in Rehoboth Beach, where we spent several weeks each summer. From this, I graduated to a "scooter," a two-wheel cycle that required balancing like a bicycle but with tiny wheels that usually limited accidents to skinned knees.

For Christmas, 1931, when I was not quite 8 years old, I received a *real bike*, a 24-inch-wheeled Columbia with a New Departure coaster brake, chrome-plated spokes and rims, and single-tube glued-on tires. I remember trying to keep my balance while riding it gingerly around the level portion of the driveway at Auburn Heights. A few days later, we went to Southern Pines, North Carolina, for three months, and somehow the new bike was there, too, to help keep me occupied. It must have been shipped on the train, as there was no way our '28 Packard 443 sedan with a standard Packard trunk could carry four people, our luggage, and the bicycle. Some of the sidewalks at Southern Pines were concrete (but not very smooth), and some were pine needles, but I had a great time exploring within a few blocks of the tiny duplex my parents had rented on Connecticut Avenue. That little Columbia was great at Rehoboth, too, and I used it for four years, estimating that I had ridden something like 2,000 miles in that time.

In 1935, I was yearning for a larger and fancier bicycle. In the Sears Roebuck catalog were offered three full-sized, balloon-tired boys' bikes, very popular in those days. The standard Sears bike cost \$26.95; there was an intermediate one that cost \$34.95, and the deluxe version was priced at \$44.95, with an "Easy Payment" price of \$49.95 (buying on the installment plan). Naturally, I wanted the deluxe bike. It was painted light blue with red striping, chrome-plated wheels with 26-inch whitewall balloon tires, a built-in headlight and speedometer, and a tiny tool box large enough for a dry cell battery for the headlight. I hadn't realized that this bike, with all its extra features, was heavy. The shipping weight was 77 pounds. On Christmas morning under the decorated tree in the front hall was this beautiful new bicycle!

At first, I had trouble riding my new beauty over the hills around Auburn Heights because of its excessive weight. As I grew and became stronger, however, I enjoyed it more and explored many back roads I had not known before. Usually a local friend like Edgar Guest would ride his bike with me. Once we made the loop through Yorklyn and up Nine Gates Road to Old Kennett Road, then back through Clifton Mills. Another time, we rode through the abandoned Meeting House Road between Marshall's Bridge and what is now Bengé Road. I could reach 22 m.p.h. on the slightly down grade on Route 82 between Auburn Heights and the Pennsylvania state line. It was tough pedaling up the long hill on Bengé Road to the high point near the present H. B. du Pont School, but on the way down I often reached 40 m.p.h. before hitting the bridge across Red Clay Creek. It was great fun riding to Gregg's store in Yorklyn, buying ½ pint of hand-packed Aristocrat Ice Cream for 10 cents, and consuming all of it before my return. On the level sidewalks of Rehoboth, this bicycle was great and

enjoyed to the fullest. Bill Butz and I enjoyed many rides together; his family spent the summer on Olive Avenue, while we were on Queen Street.

There were many attachments available for this deLuxe Sears bicycle. The built-in speedometer did not have an odometer, so a new speedometer, *with odometer*, was added to the handlebar. A small tail light containing type D flashlight batteries was considered necessary. A two-speed rear was offered, involving a permanent change of the rear wheel, with a shift lever on the handlebar. This latter “improvement” was expected to help navigate the hills around Yorklyn, but it was a disappointment. The low gear was too low, and the high gear was too high, the original gearing having been between the two. I sold the bike to Lawrence L. Hazzard Jr. about 1940. The original rear wheel, in perfect condition, hung in the basement of the shop for the next 30 years.