

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, June 15, 2015

How Motoring Came to Auburn Heights: When Auburn Heights was built in 1897, it is quite probable there were no motor cars running in Delaware. The early automotive pioneers, such as Henry Ford, Ransom Olds, Alexander Winton, Elwood Haynes, and the Stanley twins, were only in the experimental stage. Very few took horseless carriages seriously. In the family photo taken by the front porch of Auburn Heights in 1903, all adults in that picture would have, of necessity, known how to ride horseback, and to manage buggies, wagons, sleighs, and small carriages. Electric trolley lines were connecting small towns across America not served by the railroads, but no one envisioned that the 20th century would almost completely change everyday transport to automobiles running on paved roads.

About 1900, a 15-year old named Clarence Marshall built a small steamboat, intending to ply the waters of Red Clay Creek. It was top-heavy, and it capsized with him and Ralph Ryan aboard, just above the covered bridge at the Snuff Mill Dam. Fortunately, the boiler did not explode, and no one was hurt, but Clarence was warned by his father, Israel, never to try anything like that again. So, his next attempt was to build a steam-powered automobile in 1904. Purchasing a used Orient Buckboard (little more than a "go-cart"), he removed the tiny one-cylinder engine and replaced it with a boiler, burner, and engine to run on steam. The success of this venture was apparently limited, but it was not long before Clarence bought a two-cylinder Elmore, then a two-cylinder Winton, and finally a four-cylinder Winton of 1906, all "used" cars. Then came the Stanleys, starting in 1908.

Young men enthralled by speed and adventure were the most likely to want a motor car, not too unlike those who fancy motorcycles today. They did not expect to use them as we now use automobiles. These early contraptions were not required for everyday use, as public transportation by trolley and train was excellent in most places, and the roads were built for horses and buggies, not for motorized vehicles. The early cars did not have windshields and tops, so in most latitudes winter driving was out of the question. So, with a few notable exceptions, automobiles were not assumed to be convenient ways to get around but simply as a luxury for those who could afford to waste their time to have fun. Nonetheless, making a trip by car could be an exciting adventure for all ages, as was the three-day round-trip of the Marshall family (Israel, Lizzie, and daughter Anna) to Gettysburg in Clarence's four-cylinder Winton in 1907.

By 1910, things were changing rapidly in favor of the automobile. Roads were improving, and some had early paving. Pneumatic tires with inner tubes, although still far from trouble-free, were less likely to puncture or blow out. In the cities, especially, cars were often in everyday use throughout the winter. The ones with internal combustion engines had become the strong favorite over those powered by steam or electricity. And there were nearly 1,000 makes of American automobiles from which to choose. Young Clarence Marshall owned his second Stanley by 1910, a 1908 30-horsepower Model K Semi-Racer, the fastest stock car catalogued by the Stanleys. Just 25 years of age, he drove this car five miles in 4 minutes (72 m.p.h. average) "on a good straight road" near Quarryville, Pennsylvania.

To my knowledge, Israel Marshall never drove a car, but it appears he enjoyed riding with his son Clarence. In September 1910, Old Kennett Friends Meeting (at the entrance to the present-day Kendal retirement community) celebrated its 200th anniversary, and Israel was on the entertainment committee. Clarence took him in the Model K; it was a warm day, and they ran out of ice cream. The faithful "K" with its youthful owner was dispatched to Kennett Square, four miles away, where more ice cream was bought and hurried back to the picnic in the fast-stepping Stanley. Israel Marshall died at Auburn Heights the next June at the age of 60. His mother, 90-year-old Mary Way Marshall, then living with her daughter and son-in-law at the "Gateway" in Hockessin, was fetched to spend some time at Auburn Heights with Israel's family, as was the custom in those days. It is believed that Clarence brought her in his Model K. So . . . a car in our collection carried someone born in 1821, 32 years after George Washington was first inaugurated as president. The United States is a young country, indeed. (Coming soon: The adventures and travails of early motoring.)

By the way: The Magna Carta was signed by King John on the island of Runnymede in the Thames, just upstream from London, on June 15, 1215, 800 years ago today! I did not witness the event.