

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, August 31, 2015

Eastern Steam Car Tour at St. Thomas, 1975: Carl S. Amsley (1921–1998) hosted four steam car tours at or near his home on the Lincoln Highway just east of St. Thomas, Pennsylvania, and about 5 miles west of Chambersburg; 1975 was the first one, and Johnny Springer and I drove out in our 1913 Model 76. Before Amsley got into steam car restorations in the late 1950s, he had been a building contractor and also owned two motels, one of which was called the Carlton across the highway from his home. Springer and I stayed at the Carlton.

Like most similar tours before and since, touring consisted of day trips, Monday through Friday, from a central point or “hub” that served as headquarters for the tour. These trips usually ran between 50 and 100 miles per day. I picked up Springer at his home on Route 41 between Hockessin and Avondale at 7 a.m. Monday, and with the competent Model 76 performing well, we had an early lunch in Chambersburg after a 120-mile run. Joining the group in the afternoon, we enjoyed the week immensely, laughing our way through much of it.

In retrospect, although I had attended previous steam car tours for nearly 30 years, this tour marked the first for several things. It was the first time I had seen Bob Mead's 1912 Model 73 in operation (this car and its owner seldom missed a tour for the next 35 years). Although I had first met my longtime friend Mike May in 1973 at the New Garden Airfield Steam Car Tour and had met Kathryn at Williamstown in 1974, Carl Amsley's 1975 tour provided the first time I really got to know them. They were camping for the week in Carl's yard with their three-year-old daughter Heather. It was also the first time I got to know the Hancocks: Jim, Judy, and their children Anne and Jimmy, who attended with Jim's 1914 Model 607.

The day tours were interesting. One day we went to Harpers Ferry and had lunch at the old frame hotel on a hill in town with a view of Civil War history unfolding below. Carl Amsley's good friend, Bob Garlock of McConnellsburg, provided a trouble truck which was a big White of about 1914 (not steam-powered). When queried by an onlooker at Harpers Ferry as to whether it cost a lot to own and operate steam cars, Bob replied “I guess so, if they can afford to hire an antique trouble truck.”

The last day was “Game Day,” and Kathryn May planned an extensive treasure hunt for the steam cars, with clues planted around the countryside within 10 miles of Amsley's home. If I ever had a carload of “characters” in a Stanley, this day was it. Bill Zerega, Abner Devilbiss, and Johnny Springer, all very comical men in their own right, occupied the passenger seats in the Model 76. Despite our talents, we did not score high. One place, we were supposed to find minnows in a stream under a bridge and preserve them for inspection in a glass jar. Being unsuccessful, I suggested passing off a slug of Abner's well-used chewing tobacco in place of minnows, which I thought would work. Kathryn May, also the judge, rejected this entry, and even took off points for our devious attempt. The Hancock kids easily won the treasure hunt.

The pilot was very weak and used very little fuel but remained blue throughout the week. For some reason the burner continued to work well and never backfired or failed to light. On the way home just west of York on Route 30, I showed Johnny Springer 60 m.p.h. in the Model 76, one of my favorite cars and the first in the FAHP collection. It was purchased by my father in 1940 from Springer's grandfather, John Becker. Johnny Springer thought he remembered riding in the car when his grandfather owned it, but he was born in 1916, and old John stopped using his steamer in 1919, so he was no more than three years old!

Carl Amsley and his family hosted subsequent steam car tours in 1978, 1984, and 1995. Since these tours had grown in size from the first one in 1975, the Holiday Inn in Chambersburg served as headquarters.