

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, November 2, 2015

Hill Climbs on Gun Club Hill: In 1922, the Yorklyn Gun Club (trapshooting only), moved to the very top of the hill southeast of the fibre mills, and an early road of coal cinders was built from the industrial plant below. This road was somewhat winding with one right-angle turn as it climbed from about 190 feet elevation at the railroad to approximately 360 feet on top in a distance of less than ½ mile. Early automobiles made it in first or second gear; by the late 1930s, many could climb the grade in high gear. National Vulcanized Fibre built a concrete road to Warren Marshall's barn, about 1/3 the way up, in the late 1920s, and the remainder of the climb to the gun club was black-topped, 12 feet wide, in 1937. In 1947, with its mechanical restoration completed, our 1915 Mountain Wagon without its seats carried more than 50,000 clay targets from a box car on the team track next to the B & O station to the gun club, and a 1931 Packard Model 826 with a small dump truck body carried over 100,000 at the same time.

No one thought about racing automobiles up the hill during the trapshooting days that ended in 1950. However, at the Spring Meet of the Antique Automobile Club of America held at the Gun Club in June 1951, one of the events was a timed run of about three miles, which necessitated going down and then back up the hill. My father let James Melton (the opera star) drive his newly restored Model H-5 on this run, with my dad beside him. I don't recall the rules or who won the event.

Alexis I. du Pont (1928–), from whom we bought our 1901 Mobile steamer in 2005, asked my father if the road to the gun club could be used by a hill-climbing group in which he was interested. Members of this group had mostly sports cars of the 1940s and 1950s, some older. There were MGs, Jaguars, BMWs, Morgans, and several American makes. My father got permission from NVF and from those who lived on the hill, and one or two such climbs were held each year in the mid-1950s. It seems the day was always a cool one, and Lex du Pont often had a fire going in the big fireplace in the club house at the top.

The competition began from a standing start at the railroad crossing next to the mills and the Wilmington & Western Railroad station standing at its original 1873 location (it was moved to Greenbank in 1968). I can remember the freight platform attached to the station being piled high with spare tires and parts. Timekeepers sent the cars off in two-minute intervals, or something like that. Noise from the exhausts and a lot of smoke dominated the hillside. Many locals had heard about the event, and although it was nothing like the famous hill climbs of the early 20th century, a lot of people were at the starting line, and a few lined the route up the hill.

I got permission from my father to try it with his H-5. I thought I could make a definite impression and speed up the hill in grand style. Having had no experience with such things, however, I failed to do well. I had not advanced the boiler pressure and was carrying only 500 p.s.i., and I didn't have everything hot at the starting line. Soon after I took off, the boiler pressure had dropped to 300# plus, and, as steam car operators know, little is then left for speed or acceleration. I should have tried again on another occasion, but I never did. Maybe I weakened the H-5 engine, but it lasted another 50 years before it gave trouble.

My father turned the gun club property over to me, but neither of us had the inclination to resume shooting on top of the hill. In 1959, I leased the clubhouse and surroundings to Harold E. Thomforde, who operated a chicken barbecue business there and catered for special occasions. About 1962, supported by his wife, Elinore, he expanded his business to Sunday smorgasbords, which became quite famous in these parts. After the 1967 season, Thomforde discontinued the smorgasbords at the gun club, and the next year he opened the Stone Barn on his family's farm near Unionville. In 1971, much of the gun club property was returned to NVF, and it was used for many years thereafter as a management and recreational center for the company.

A few people each year still tell me they attended hill climbs at Yorklyn in the 1950s.