

How to Celebrate a Day Off (Part 1): Nineteenth-century working people, especially those working in the “trades,” normally worked 10 hours, six days per week, with Sundays off to spend with their families. Supervisory people, most of whom were provided a place to live near their work, were normally paid a weekly salary, the logic for which was that you were paid for the job you were expected to turn out. Hourly workers, often young with recognized ability, were paid by the hour, often 60 hours per week. Many reliable employees were stuck in this category. From the employer’s perspective, the higher level of interest and reliability was worth more to the company. From the employee’s point-of-view, young people had a chance to advance to supervisory jobs, while others faithfully performed continuing jobs in management, and hopefully employers would reward them by wage increases and other family benefits.

The ball was securely in the employer’s court, but strong, successful companies, of which there were many in the Wilmington area, treated their employees well, and in return some fine products were manufactured. In addition to gunpowder, paper and leather products, yarn and dry goods, ocean-going ships and riverboats, and railroad carriages, smoking and chewing tobacco and snuff, as well as kaolin (a high-quality clay), were turned out in top quality and quantity in the many mills during the Industrial Revolution in the greater Wilmington area. While neither owners nor employees would think favorably of the working conditions endured to produce the results above, they were greatly improved from those of earlier generations, and the future seemed bright to move this brand new experiment in democracy forward. In fact, how did “family day” stack up and what fun things were in store for spending a few hours on a limited budget?

In the financially successful latitudes of the heavy-manufacturing areas, about four months through the winter and two months through the summer were not ideal for outdoor activities, so those most popular were patronized about six months each year.. Riverboat excursions on the Hudson, the Delaware, the Ohio, the Mississippi, and several more rivers were short and highly successful. “On a Sunday Afternoon,” a ballad written by Andrew E. Sterling in 1902, was a favorite, available to young Victor phonograph owners such as Clarence Marshall, who used to listen to it “by the hour.” The lyrics went like this:

“On a Sunday Afternoon,
 In the Merrie Month of June
A Trip up the Hudson
 Or Down the Bay
Take a Trolley to Coney
 Or Rockaway.

“On a Sunday Afternoon,
 You Can See the Lovers Spoon,
They Work Hard on Monday,
 But One Day that’s Fun Day
Is Sunday Afternoon.”

Paddle-wheel excursion boats plied the Hudson from New York to Albany (few had the time or could afford the trip all the way to Albany). Other than the Hudson River Day Line (which also had night service with berths like sleeping cars on the railroad), there were shorter scenic excursions from the Manhattan piers to Bear Mountain, Poughkeepsie, and Kingston. Seaside destinations, “corney” but affordable, were available from New York to Long Island resorts, such as Rockaway Beach and Coney Island with their famous roller-coasters, and those on New Jersey’s Palisades, such as Fort Lee. On the Delaware, a renowned excursion boat named the “Republic” made a fast trip from Philadelphia to Cape May, with scheduled stops for day passengers at Chester (PA), Gordon Heights (for Wilmington, DE), Penns Grove (NJ), and one or two more. For years Lizzie

Marshall, my grandmother, took the children of workers from the Yorklyn fibre mills on the “Republic,” a highlight of their summer.

A train trip was always a popular and practical way to offer an excursion to a nearby pleasure park. As the original Wilmington & Western (W&W) Railroad was being built westward from Wilmington to open large agricultural areas to the Port of Wilmington, a scenic area with two wooden trestles across Red Clay Creek, along with a deep rock cut, was seen as a prime place to entertain railroad passengers. The area was known locally as “Cuba Hill,” which the W&W enhanced further to name it “Mount Cuba,” the only mountain in Delaware. Certain recreational facilities with temporary buildings were expected, and these were being built even as railroad construction continued west toward Chandlerville, soon to have its new name, “Landenberg,” adopted by the railroad. By August, the line had been built from its passenger station at South Market and C streets, with a swinging bridge across the Christina Creek and new trackage through the present Wilmington Riverfront area, westward alongside the main line of the Philadelphia, Wilmington & Baltimore (toward Baltimore), and also the Wilmington & Northern through Elsmere Junction (toward Reading, PA). The new route of the Wilmington & Western toward Marshallton, Greenbank, Faulkland, and Wooddale was to follow Red Clay Creek to Auburn (soon to become Yorklyn). The directors of the railroad wanted to show its shareholders how their money was being spent, so they ran a short passenger train to the unfinished “grove” at Mount Cuba. As the railroad was completed to its western end at Landenberg by mid-October, work continued on temporary structures in the Mount Cuba Grove (to be continued next week).