

MARCH 2, 2009 F.A.H.P. NEWS

The Burning of the du Pont Barns: In this article, I tread on dangerous ground, as I do no research for anecdotes in the “Weekly News”, and libraries at Hagley and the Delaware Historical Society will have the correct facts on the story told herewith. I relate it to you as I remember my father telling it to me about 70 years ago.

About 1889, one after another of the well-built barns on duPont family farms northwest of Wilmington were torched by an arsonist. With no fire departments except in the cities they were almost completely destroyed after massive fires, and with little available crime detection, there seemed no end to this terrible arson. One of the duPonts, possibly Colonel Henry A. duPont of Winterthur, hired the agency started 30 years before by Allan Pinkerton, to find the culprit.

A Pinkerton man came to Wilmington and checked in at the Columbus Inn on Pennsylvania Avenue. In those days it was a lodging place; in more recent years it was one of Wilmington’s best restaurants. Every day he would stroll the downtown streets, and Market Street in the center of town was usually where the action was. He would engage people in conversation, on the sidewalk and in the stores, shops, and taverns. The strategy was that sooner or later something would come out in conversation that related to the burning of the barns. After several weeks of this exercise, the Pinkerton man thought he had circumstantial evidence, and he laid his plan to implicate his suspect. He became especially friendly with him, and they exchanged stories of their adventures.

The day came for the trap to be sprung. In a state of apparent urgent distress, the detective told his suspect: “I’m in real trouble, and I need a true friend to help me get out of this! Can I count on you to help? I’ll be eternally grateful”. The suspect agreed to do what he could. “Meet me at the Columbus Inn at 7 o’clock, and I’ll explain” said the Pinkerton man. The suspect agreed to be there. When they met, the detective confided “I killed a man in a fight, and I have the body rolled up in a blanket in my room upstairs. Will you help me dispose of the body?” The suspect confirmed that he was willing to help in the devious scheme.

They went upstairs to the detective’s room, and, sure enough, there was a blanket on the floor with what looked like a corpse rolled up inside. The Pinkerton man needed to make sure his suspect would not back down. He asked “How can I be sure you will help me and will not turn me in?” Answered the suspect: “You think I can’t keep a secret? Who do you think burned all the duPont barns and never got caught?” With that the “corpse” rolled out of his blanket, became the witness to the suspect’s declaration, and the case was soon closed.

This past week, Jerry Novak and Steve Bryce brought us some more “goodies” from the estate of George Barczewski, and partially straightened up the back storage building to accommodate a parts-cleaning tub and a small air compressor. The back wall of the garage has been cleared, a new radiator installed to replace two former ones, and the new shelving will soon be ready to occupy this area. On Tuesday night, 3/3, it is hoped new backing sheets can be cut and bolted onto these shelves and 3 of these units can then be set in place. Work continued on the 607 projects, with the steering box being removed and the left rear wheel finally breaking loose from its axle. On Thursday, John McCoy of the Hagley Museum met with several FAHP volunteers to decide the best way to improve the AVRR turntable, and on Friday, Rose Ann Hoover held a meeting of the Museum Committee and many ideas for temporary improvement of exhibits were put forth.

A new gate across the driveway at Auburn Heights is now in operation. For volunteers coming and going, its operation is of importance, so I quote from Dan Citron, Historic Site Manager for the Auburn Heights Preserve. PLEASE TAKE NOTE of the following:

“The gate will be closed on weekends and at approximately 5 P.M. on NON-WORK nights. On Work Nights it will remain open until approximately 8 P.M. After that, cars can still exit, but no longer come in unless the driver calls ahead or has a gate code. We request that people who plan on coming on the property during non-work hours, and outside of scheduled on or off-site events, please let us know in advance that they are coming. It is understood that this is not always possible, and that is why some people are being issued codes.

“The gate will be open for both on and off-site events. In the case of off-site events, the gate will be closed after the last car exits and will not be opened until the cars return from the event.

“We will be closing the gate at 8 P.M. on work nights starting the week of March 9. That way, if anyone has any questions they have a week to call or E-mail me. Daniel.Citron@state.de.us”.

Two major Steam Car Tours are coming up this summer. One is celebrating the 100th anniversary of the opening of the Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, CO. The first Mountain Wagons ever built were used to transport F. O. Stanley’s guests (a dental convention) from the railhead at Loveland, 30 miles away, to and from Estes Park. 100 years later, the dates are June 14-19, 2009, and an effort is being made to have as many Mountain Wagons as possible in attendance. At least six FAHP members have expressed an interest in going. It will be expensive and time-consuming (if we trailer our Mountain Wagon, it will be away about 13 days), but it will be historic, the last of the Stanley centennials that started in 1997. I encourage any of you to go who have the urge to be a part of history! Please let me know if you are interested.

The other event is the annual Eastern Steam Car Tour to be held at Saratoga Springs, NY, July 5-11. We have the possibility of taking 4 steamers from the FAHP collection, so there should be room for any of you who are interested. Please let Bill Schwoebel know of your interest.

Tom

