

F.A.H.P. News, September 6, 2010

Early AACA Annual Meetings: The Antique Automobile Club of America, founded in Philadelphia in 1935, is the oldest and largest of the nationwide car clubs. Although it has sponsored the Annual Fall Meet at Hershey each year since 1954, to my knowledge the Annual Meeting has always been held in February in Philadelphia or its immediate environs.

Not all of these men were charter members, but in the early days of the club, Sam Baily, Hyde Ballard, George Hughes (father of the present George), and Tom McKean, all Philadelphians, ran the show. In order, all took their turns as president. By the end of World War II, AACA had nearly 100 members, and very prominent collectors from other parts of the country took turns in heading the club. These included M. J. “Jerry” Duryea (son of Charles E. Duryea who laid claim to building the first successful American automobile in 1892), D. Cameron Peck, and Opera Star James Melton. They were asked by those in charge to be president for one year each. My father, who disliked Duryea when he first met him on the 1947 Glidden Tour, became a close friend, so he was asked to serve as president in 1952, which he did. I remember his saying to me, “I am 66, so if ever I want to be president, I’d better do it now.” The Board of Directors was elected by the growing membership, and my father was always pleased that he got the most votes (in the 1950s, the votes were published on a blackboard in full view of those attending the Annual Meeting, including those candidates who failed to be elected).

Starting with the election of Les Henry as president in 1954, members worked their way up, by committee service on the Board and by other work they did for the club. Prior to 1950, AACA had only two regions (as I remember)—the very active Ohio Region and the Connecticut Valley Region, which may have been a joint effort with the Veteran Motor Car Club of America, then headquartered in Boston. Some of the early leaders, notably Sam Baily, opposed regions close to Philadelphia, thinking there was no need for them. This policy enabled a completely independent club, the Historical Car Club of Pennsylvania, to begin in 1949, and most local AACA leaders joined immediately, assuring its success. HCCP is still going strong as an independent club 61 years later.

AACA’s Annual Meeting itself was held at a local restaurant in or around Philadelphia on a Saturday afternoon for the first 10 years of the club. Despite the fact that it lasted only 3 or 4 hours, interested owners of early cars would come long distances to attend. As attendance increased in the years following World War II, more space was needed for meeting sites. In 1948, the meeting was held in an armory on North Broad Street, and members were encouraged to display their cars. Despite cold weather with snow on the roads, we drove a 1913 Stanley Model 65 that we had mechanically restored for A. H. Kellogg-Clarke of Buffalo (this car is in the Swigart Museum near Huntingdon, Pennsylvania), and another Stanley (I think it was our 76), and James Melton sent a 1903 White he had just had restored. The dinner was catered. E. Paul du Pont, at the urging of my father, was elected a director of AACA at this meeting.

By 1950, the tradition of having the Annual Meeting at the Franklin Institute in downtown Philadelphia began. It was still only on Saturday afternoon and evening. The dinner was catered by McCallisters, with their signature Snapper Soup served by waiters from large portable tureens. My father loved those meetings, and I would accompany him; I remember the cold drives home before the early heater got his Packard warm. In the afternoon, business would be transacted and the National Awards made. In the evening, there would be a special speaker. Once it was George Robertson, who drove the New York-to-Paris Thomas Flyer on a portion of that famous 1908 trip, and once it was a public speaker from the Ford Motor Company who held us spellbound but said absolutely nothing of note (intentional). On Sunday, several attendees from a distance would often visit the private museum at Auburn Heights.

Some time in the early 1960s, the Annual Meeting was expanded to two and then to three days, and the headquarters moved to the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel. With its many meetings and seminars, this pattern holds today, with other downtown hotels having served as headquarters.

Last week Dan Citron, Susan Randolph, Art Wallace and others polished brass and wiped down cars in preparation for the Labor Day weekend Steamin' Sunday. For several hours on Saturday, Tom took the Model 71 to Wild Birds Unlimited in Hockessin to promote our 9/5 event. Steve Bryce continued to improve the "hands-on" exhibit in the museum with help from Ted Kamen, Bob Jordan, Emil Christofano and Jeff Pollack; the newly painted boiler was returned to the exhibit along with a new mounting board for the pumps--the exhibit has come a long way in the last weeks. Work on the A.V.R.R. last week included re-paving the grade crossing in the rear. Bill Schwoebel was assisted by Bill Rule, Jonathan Rickerman, Rich Green and Tom. Bill Schwoebel further prepared the locomotives for their 9/5 operation, and the Maute brothers cleaned the flangeways at the crossings and stations. Also last week, the state boiler inspector gave us a clean bill of health on our locomotive boilers and compressed air tank.

The 607 project continued as Ted Kamen sanded and applied "Quik-Poly" on two more of the wheels, Mark Russell made new floorboards for lower front floor and Jeff Pollack cleaned trim for these floorboards. Steve Bryce and Dan Citron removed the 735's superheater for repair and shortening. Bill Schwoebel removed the steam chest cover on the 1905 Model CX, found the valves and seats well-oiled and perfect, and "buttoned it up" for the proposed trip to Chadds Ford Days on 9/11. Jim Personti and Jeff Fallows had crafted and installed a bracket on the 740 to hold the burner nozzles securely to the burner, and last week, Richard Bernard and Tim Ward sealed cracks between the burner walls and the vaporizer--hope this eliminates backfiring, which occurred on the cars last outing.

Tom's newly installed steam whistle signaled the start of another successful Steamin' Day on Sunday, and the weather could not have been more glorious. We welcomed 413 visitors and hosted a whopping 128 house tours (that's a 55% increase from Aug 1). As usual, the volunteers gave it their all -- making this Labor Day weekend memorable for every family. Thanks to one and all!