

Hotels in Rehoboth Beach, 1930s: Since the opening of the first Chesapeake Bay Bridge in 1951, Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, has promoted itself as “The Nation’s Summer Capital,” as it is the closest ocean resort to Washington, DC. It was not always that way. Rehoboth was first established as a Methodist Camp Meeting in 1876, and for the next 75 years, it was primarily a cottage colony with few hotels and restaurants. The original section of Rehoboth covered about four blocks on each side of Rehoboth Avenue and extended three or four long blocks inland from the beach. The railroad arrived before 1900, and the tracks ran down the middle of Rehoboth Avenue to the passenger station less than ½ block from the shoreline. Also, from the late 19th century, Rehoboth had a boardwalk, originally only a few blocks long.

The “Pines” area to the north of the original town was developed before and after World War I, and in the 1920s and 1930s, Henlopen Acres to the north of that and Rehoboth Heights to the south were planned. My father was instrumental in helping Henry W. Conant, founder of the Rehoboth Heights Development Corporation, lay out 30 blocks of streets, curbs and sidewalks in 1925. Our beach-front cottage on Queen Street was completed in 1927 by local builder Ralph Pointer, and before the Depression took its toll at the end of 1929, approximately six houses had been built in each block, and the boardwalk had been extended along the beach to serve this area. Unfortunately, feeling the impact of the poor economy, new home construction ground to a standstill for the next 10 years.

I can think of only four hotels and one boarding house that existed in the 1930s. The Henlopen Hotel, built in a Spanish style and owned by the Grenoble family, was the largest and most prestigious and stood at the north end of the boardwalk about five blocks from the center of town. Its dining room was the most expensive place to eat in Rehoboth but would be considered mediocre by today’s standards. The Carlton and the Belhaven were both on Rehoboth Avenue in the first block from the boardwalk. In fact, the Belhaven, run by Mrs. Barnett, fronted on the boardwalk, with its dining room tight along the sidewalk on the south side of the avenue. It was probably built about 1900, was entirely of frame construction and had either two or three floors and about 30 rooms, with a few of them overlooking the boardwalk and the ocean.

In the 1920s, Carlton Bryan, formerly of Wilmington, bought an old frame hotel on the north side of the street more than ½ block from the boardwalk and modernized his hostelry by attaching modern rooms in a several-story brick building close to the sidewalk. Bryan had bought one or more Stanleys from my father in the 1912-1916 period, and he named his newly rebuilt hotel the Carlton. The food in the Carlton and the Belhaven may have been better, and a lot more reasonable, than that of the Hotel Henlopen. On Brooklyn Avenue, three blocks to the south and facing the boardwalk, was the Star of the Sea, a small hotel possibly owned by the Catholic Diocese. At First Street and Olive Avenue, three blocks north of Rehoboth Avenue, was Boddy’s Boarding House, a frame building having its dining room with white tablecloths easily visible from the sidewalk. It is obvious from the above that all hotels of those days required dining rooms offering full-course meals, quite formal regardless of their modest prices and mediocre quality.

By the late 1920s, passenger trains ceased to serve Rehoboth, and the station was moved from the center of Rehoboth Avenue to the south side of the street and became a bus station, Railway Express agency, and telegraph office. Short Line and Red Star buses stopped there before terminating their runs at the Henlopen Hotel. Of the hotels mentioned, only the Henlopen exists today, having been enlarged and modernized to include many condominiums. After World War II, the Carlton became a retail store that is still in business (I think). The other buildings are long-since gone. By the late 1930s, Rehoboth had an excellent restaurant, the Dinner Bell, operated by Ruth Cowgill Emmert. Much more commercialization was soon to come.

Work Report: On Tuesday, September 2, 13 volunteers were on hand, viz: Dave Leon (in charge), Bill Schwoebel, Steve Bryce, Bob Jordan, Ted Kamen, Jerry Lucas, Tom Marshall, Ken Ricketts, Mac Taylor, Mark Russell, Lou Mandich, Emil Christofano, and John Bacino.

The Mountain Wagon, the Ford Model T, and the Stanley Model 71 were prepped for use in the coming days. On the 71, the water tank was drained and flushed out, and a lot of flaky solid material was extracted. The switch box on the Model 607 is now complete, with 12-v. bulbs and a circuit breaker installed. Considerable work was done on the electric trains, and one of the standard-gauge locomotives was removed for motor repair.

The original mercury-vapor charger for the Rauch & Lang electric was removed from its rough and heavy unfinished base and placed on a new base fabricated by Mark Russell. Although not operable, this will become an exhibit alongside our 1916 R & L electric. The brass was polished on our Stanley Model K in anticipation of its trip to Hagley on Sept. 14. Our newest volunteer, John Bacino, had his first “run-through” of the Stanley system, as he has expressed an interest in becoming a steam car operator.

On Thursday, September 4, 17 volunteers including five who worked on the roadbed of the A.V.R.R. in preparation for our Steamin’ Sunday and one who prepared the parking lot were on hand, as follows: Bob Jordan, Jim Personti, Geoff Fallows, Steve Bryce, Tim Ward, Bob Stransky, Bill Schwoebel, Brent McDougall, Bob McGovern, Jerry Novak, Gary Green, Dave Leon, Eugene Maute, Gerhard Maute, Devon Hall, Jared Schoenly, and Tom Marshall (in charge).

The Stanley Model 607 was essentially finished, the switches and electric lights are working properly, and the car was moved back to its place in the museum. The museum floor was swept and the area tidied up for our Steamin’ Day on September 7. The Model 71 had its fuel tank cleaned out by syphoning collected solid debris out of the well at the bottom. The project of rebuilding the engine for the Model H-5 was studied, including the installation of new crosshead slides and the cutting of the oversize pistons down to fit the new cylinders (3-5/8” diameter). One of the pistons has been completed, and everything is on hand to finish the job.

Jared Schoenly and Devon Hall, also interested in becoming steam car operators, were subjected to the same “run-through” that John Bacino experienced on Tuesday. The next step for John, Devon, and Jared will be taking them through the firing-up process. The railroad crew checked elevations around the A.V.R.R. track, blew debris off the right-of-way, and cleaned the crossing flange-ways. A slight improvement was made to the switch behind the museum. The parking spaces were lined in the parking area across the road, despite the failure of the normal spraying machine.

On Friday, the Model CX was checked over and fired up by Dan Citron, and successful runs around the driveway were completed. Fuel pressure was lost at the end, so this will be checked out. This car may or may not be driven to the Hagley Show on 9/14. On Saturday, Sept. 6, Jerry Novak and Rich Gregg took the ’37 Packard, Tim Ward took the Model 725, and Dan Citron took the Rauch & Lang to the Chadds Ford Days celebration. They had a good day and returned early because of the impending storm. It had been intended to take the Model 735, but in trying to take up the banjo bolt on the pilot, it broke off. It is believed that Tom Marshall made this bolt too long, and it was bottoming. The 725 was substituted and ran well, as usual.

On Sunday, Sept. 7, a beautiful day, 273 visitors were welcomed to Auburn Heights for our September Steamin’ Sunday, and nine new memberships were sold, most of them family memberships. We had plenty of volunteers working, and our patrons enjoyed the day very much. At the end of the afternoon Don Davidson and Sarah Stanley arrived with Don’s immaculate 1917 Detroit electric car, which will be housed in our Carriage House until the Invitational on 9/21. We welcomed also Leon Brewer, our member from Minneapolis, with his daughter and grandson who are Delawareans.