

DECEMBER 14, 2009 F.A.H.P. NEWS

The Coolidges of Vermont: Ruth and I, accompanied by Marge and Lindsay Greenplate, have just returned from three days in New England, mostly in Massachusetts and Vermont. In Northampton, MA, and later a few miles from Plymouth Notch, VT, we were in “Calvin Coolidge country”. “Silent Cal”, 30th president of the United States, was born at Plymouth in 1872, and died at his home in Northampton in 1933. A very simple and conservative man, he would have great difficulty in dealing with the complexities of today. After his death, William Allen White, a writer and publisher from Emporia, Kansas, wrote a biography entitled “A Puritan in Babylon”, and indeed he was, even in the Nation’s capital of the 1920’s. Seldom smiling and almost never laughing, the comedian Will Rogers was challenged to make the president laugh. Having secured an appointment, as he was ushered into Coolidge’s White House office, Rogers asked in very audible tones, “What is the gentleman’s name?” Coolidge broke into a good laugh.

Coolidge’s mother was thrown from a horse and died a few days later when young Calvin was 13. About two years later his father entered him in the Black River Academy at Ludlow, nearly 20 miles away. Other than a trip to Montpelier when his father was in the Vermont legislature, it was the first time the young Coolidge had been away from Plymouth. From the Academy he went to the University of Vermont and then to Law School, and with his young wife, Grace Goodhue of Burlington, VT, moved to Northampton, MA, where he began the practice of Law. Getting into Republican politics, he was elected Mayor of Northampton and Governor of Massachusetts, and became famous when he broke up the Boston Police strike soon after the Armistice that ended World War I. He was the vice-presidential candidate on the national Republican ticket of 1920, headed by Warren G. Harding of Ohio. While he was visiting his father in Plymouth in early August of 1923, Harding died suddenly in San Francisco, and “Colonel” John Coolidge, who was a local justice of the peace, swore in his son as president in the middle of the night by the light of a kerosene lantern. While we did not visit Plymouth on this trip, I have been there several times, mostly on steam car hub tours from Woodstock, about 15 miles away. Our ’32 Packard caught fire here in 1974 and the paint on its hood was badly scorched. Our 1908 Stanley Model EX has been called the Coolidge car, as its original owner was a Mr. Coolidge of Vermont. We do not know his relationship to the 30th president.

We had lunch in the Coolidge Room of the Northampton Inn, with the Calvin Theatre immediately across the street. The historic Wiggins Tavern is also in the Inn. In the first few days of 1933, the ex-president had spent his usual mid-day hours at his office in Northampton, and walked home to spend a leisurely afternoon. A severe heart attack ended his life very quickly. He was 6 months past his 60th birthday (the same age as Israel Marshall when he died).

Reference to our New England trip began this week's "story". Although I made contacts in Southbridge, MA, regarding the original owner of our 1915 Stanley Mountain Wagon, I have learned nothing new so far. Our visit to Don and Nancy Bourdon's home, farm, sugaring house, and Stanley shop about 3 miles west of Woodstock, VT, was much more rewarding. We came home with a new 20-H.P. Stanley boiler, and a new burner built for our active member Kelly Williams. Don also lent us a photo album on Richard Dickey's 1914 Model 607, identical to our car, which Don recently restored for its owner. It will be our objective to make ours as nice as the Dickey car. In his shop we saw his new 1912 Model 87, for which Don made the frame and, along with Mike May (who is building an identical car) the aluminum body. The wood is still in prime and the aluminum unpainted, but what a beauty it will be! There were 3 other cars belonging to others in his shop, for complete or partial restoration. A spacious new building with radiant heat in the floor is a great place to work, but the work turned out has a lot to do with the management. Don has built and sold an estimated 400 Stanley boilers!

Don and Nancy are in the process of moving from another attractive house on the property to the old farmhouse, over 100 years old, restored recently mostly by Don himself. His parents, Paul and Connie Bourdon, now deceased, bought the property in 1943 and lived here for the remainder of their lives. Paul A. Bourdon (1913-2001), a country lawyer in Woodstock, bought his first Stanley at the age of 17 in 1930, and with his future wife and two friends, drove it to the New York World's Fair and back in 1939. Don still owns this car, a 1912 Model 63. We toured the first floor of the farmhouse, and then went to the sugaring house, where the sap from 5,000 maple trees on the property is distilled each year into maple syrup. It takes about 100 gallons of sap to make 1 gallon of syrup. The trees are all tapped anew each year in late February, and the sap runs by gravity and with the help of vacuum pumps through plastic lines into the big tanks in the central sugaring house. It runs best when the temperature is below freezing overnight and above freezing in the daytime. Basically through two operations the water is removed, the syrup tested, and drums are filled for wholesale pick-up. The operation concludes each year by mid-April (on average). Don admits it is hard work, but he likes to do it. We brought several quarts of the finished product home to Delaware.

We had productive work sessions last week with 13 volunteers taking part Thursday evening in my absence. A new 30-H.P. Bourdon boiler we had in stock is being readied for installation in our Model K. The fuel has been drained from all our gasoline-burning steamers except the Model K, and the two locomotive boilers were washed. Good but unrewarding preparation work continued on the Model 607. A Collections Committee meeting called to assess the work on the Rauch & Lang made some decisions on how to proceed to get this car back in service in an excellent mechanical and acceptable cosmetic condition. Final decisions will be made depending on the success of our fund-raising efforts.

On Saturday, the three top candidates for the Executive Director position were interviewed for the second time. We are edging ever closer to a final decision. Rob Robison has the fall edition of the "Herald" almost ready for the printer, and, with good luck, we may have the final product by week's end. Our work sessions will continue this week, Tuesday and Thursday evenings, and then we will recess for the Christmas-New Year holiday, resuming on January 5, '10. Tom

