

September 4, 2006

Hello, Steam Team and Happy Labor Day:

Smoke and Whistles in Yorklyn: My father indicated that when he was young the normal work week for mill workers was 60 hours, 10 hours per day for 6 days. Fortunately over the years this was reduced and when I was young I am under the impression that it was 46-1/2 hours for most employees. Since many couldn't afford a watch, mill whistles told them when the work day was to start and when it ended. Yorklyn had four main mills, and each had its steam whistle, as big boilers were needed for their various operations. Unless hours were staggered, which they seldom were, all four whistles were supposed to go off at the same time. Since blowing the whistle was the responsibility of the fireman on duty, he alone was "on the spot" to do it on time, or he would hear about it. If he forgot, he'd better be close enough to his whistle cord to get there in a hurry, as he heard the first whistle from another mill.

Here at Auburn Heights we could tell each mill's whistle by its tone and our distance from it. The Marshall Brothers paper mill was the closest and therefore the loudest; the Snuff Mill was less shrill, and the Tape Mill (Crowell Corporation) being nearly a mile away with a hill between sounded more distant. These three whistles were high-pitched, but not so the whistle atop the National Vulcanized Fibre's boiler room. It seems that when these mills were built about 1912, my father went to Lunkenheimer or one of the companies supplying steam valves, gauges and fittings to the mills and told them he wanted them to make a whistle for the new mills that sounded like the "City of Chester", a steamboat plying the waters of the Delaware River between Wilmington and Philadelphia. This they did, and what a low, melodious sound it had! There was no question which was the Fibre Mill whistle. This whistle could be seen on top of one of the NVF buildings many years after it was used. I should have tried to get it for our collection, but I didn't, and it disappeared.

All four whistles signaled the beginning of the day at 8:00 A.M. Then they blew for lunch at 12:00. Again they went off at 12:30, time to go back to work. Finally, the sounds across the valley at 5:00 P.M. indicated it was time to go home. Most employees worked from 8:00 A.M. until noon on Saturdays, so the whistles were blown only twice on those days. By the late 1940's the work week was 40 hours for most, so the 5 o'clock whistle was blown at 4:30 instead, and there were none on Saturday. (About half the hourly workers in the paper and fibre mills were on shift work, so the whistle signals did not help them much).

First the Snuff Mills closed down in 1954, then the Tape Mill burned to the ground in 1964, never to be rebuilt. By the 1970's, NVF probably figured everyone had a watch and they need not blow their

whistles anymore, so a tradition in a mill town was gone forever.

Only when a storm was brewing and the wind was from the east did Auburn Heights get much smoke from the stacks at the mills. This was not true on Poplar Hill east of the mills, its buildings getting the brunt of black coal smoke from the prevailing west wind. Once in a while the smoke from the tall stack above #2 Fibre Mill went straight up as far as the eye could see. Of course this meant there was no wind, but my father told me it was the sign of clear weather to come.

Several projects progressed at our work sessions this past week. Bob Wilhelm and Richard Bernard continued our efforts to solve the oil pump problem on the '13 Model 78 roadster, and the liner, fabricated by Walter Higgins and Emil Christofano, is nearly finished on the Model 76's burner. Jerry Lucas finished the hydraulic brake installation on the '08 Model EX, and tested the car on Sept. 3. All is well, except for an engine knock which is not yet remedied. Rob Robison, Art Sybell and Dale Simpkins are putting finishing touches on the '18 Model 735, and we are ready to bleed the new hydraulic brakes. Ron Turochy and his team are working on the "Little Toot" project, and preparations to paint the train are progressing. Ted Simpkins removed the bonnet from the top of the boiler on the Model 740, and a slight modification will be made to the water inlet to the boiler, so it can be cleaned out easily. Bill Schwoebel and Rob Robison went over the '14 Model 607 and repacked the engine rods and some of the pumps. Bob Reilly installed another insulated section for the R.R. signal project.

Now we are looking ahead to the cars registered for the Hagley show, Sept. 17, and toward getting about 5 of them ready. In addition, the Mountain Wagon and the '05 Model CX will be going to Longwood Gardens on Saturday, the 16th, and will be on display in connection with the Gardens' 100th anniversary both Saturday and Sunday. The following two weekends, we will also have two cars there each day, with the Model 735 being the third car to be used at Longwood (substituting for one of the other two).

Finally, we expect to have two White steam car owners with us at our work session this Thursday, Sept. 7. Jim and Eleanor Weidenhammer and Lorne and Ruth Anne Richards, all of Poughkeepsie, NY, have planned to spend two nights with Ruth and me, at the invitation of Bob Reilly and ourselves. Jim, the most acknowledged White expert in the East, is not going to address us as a group, but he and Lorne will be with us during our work session, there will be the opportunity for an informal visit, and they will be happy to answer questions. Bill Rule has ridden with the Weidenhammers in their '10 White on several of the Steam Car Tours, and he will lead the questioning if desired. Unfortunately, the White steamers will not be here this time. Wait until our Steam Car Tour next summer! Best wishes to all. Tom