

## APRIL 28, 2008 F.A.H.P. NEWS

**The History of Gun Club Hill:** “Gun Club Hill” has been in the local news lately as CCS Developers want to build 16 homes on former NVF land under contract from the Bankruptcy Court. The total area comprises about 45 acres on high ground southeast of the fibre mills in Yorklyn. From the early 1930’s until 1971, I had a major interest in the Gun Club, owned and operated by my father at the very top of the hill, although no trapshooting occurred there after 1950.

Old timers called it “Poplar Hill”. It was part of a farm of at least 150 acres bought by the Marshall brothers about 1902, so they could expand their fibre-making business. Entirely in Mill Creek Hundred (west of Red Clay Creek), it extended from the Marshall Brothers paper mill property on Bengue Road, across Yorklyn Road, and up the hill to a common line with the Sharpless lands to the south. The National Fibre and Insulation Company was founded in 1904 and the first fibre mill, later known as #1 Mill, was built the same year opposite the Yorklyn Station on the Landenberg Branch of the B & O Railroad (originally the Wilmington & Western). The old brick farmhouse and presumably its barn, part way up the hill, were the only buildings south of the railroad before 1904.

In 1908, J. Warren Marshall, age 27, and his wife Bertha moved into a bungalow they had built northeast of the old farmhouse and barn. In 1921, T. Clarence Marshall, Warren’s younger brother, having become an avid trapshooter, located three traps (now called “fields”) up the hill from the barn and southwest of it. No permanent buildings were erected here; several tents were pitched for the 3-day trapshooting tournament in August. Within a year, however, National Fibre wanted this location, with its commanding view of the mills, for superintendents’ homes. Coming up the cinder drive from the barn, the first house, a 2-1/2 story frame dwelling, was located. It was moved in one piece by mule teams and block-and-falls from its original location next to the railroad station, where it had served as Ed Dennison’s store and the Yorklyn Post Office. J. Burtwell White soon became the occupant, and he and his wife were here until he retired during World War II. The second house, also frame, was a Sears Roebuck pre-fab, soon occupied by efficiency expert Manley P. Northam. The third was stucco and built for Frank Cronin and his family. White and Cronin were superintendents in different departments of the mills. These three homes, improved over the years, stood alone for 15 years, until about 1937 when a fourth house of Avondale stone was built for manager William D. Marsey. These four houses still stand in a row, the newest being the present home of William J. Campbell, manager of Yorklyn operations for NVF.

In 1922, the Gun Club moved to the very top of the hill, with four traps located so the contestants shot directly toward the mills (and almost toward the houses mentioned above). Utilizing tents in 1922 and 1923, the first club house building was erected in 1924, immediately behind the traps. This building along with the traps were close to the property line, so a few adjoining acres were rented from William P. Sharpless (Ruth Marshall’s grandfather) for parking, as automobiles were fast becoming the favored way to travel to the shoots. My father, Clarence Marshall, rented 10 acres from National Fibre on a 50-year lease in 1925, and was able to buy 18 acres from Mr. Sharpless (\$100 per acre) before the latter died in 1928, and the Gun Club grounds extended over both properties. From the Sharpless purchase,  $\frac{3}{4}$  acre was sold in 1929 to Palmer D. “Pete” Guest, who built a home later owned by his daughter and son-in-law, Marguerite and James Marsey. Their property was enlarged about 1972 when Esther Marshall, my mother, sold them an additional 60,000 square feet, making the total just over 2 acres. By 1929 the clubhouse had been enlarged to include a dining room and a kitchen, and there were seven traps facing Yorklyn and one called a “practice trap” facing the present Ashland Nature Center. In 1938, two more traps were added, making a total of 10.

About 1930, John P. Eckles, purchasing agent for National Fibre, bought a hillside east of the Gun Club property and built a home at the top, very close to the clubhouse building. He built a steel truss bridge across Red Clay Creek with a serpentine driveway up the hill which provided access from Route 82 between Yorklyn and Ashland. Unfortunately the flood of July, 1938, took out his bridge, and from then on he used a right-of-way obtained from National Fibre and from my father up the hill and close to the Gun Club. When he died about 1956, Mrs. Eckles sold the property to K. Edward Lefren. It is now owned by Bud Thomas.

The annual 5-day trapshoots held at the Yorklyn Gun Club were attended by the best marksmen in the U.S., who came from as far away as Portland, OR, Sydney, Nova Scotia, and the Canal Zone. Night shooting under the lights was always on the program for Wednesday and Friday. My father never allowed shooting on Sunday. The high point was in the 1930's, when the Yorklyn shoot was the second largest in the country, second only to the Grand American Tournament in Ohio, where all the national championships were decided. In 1931, Steve Crothers of Chestnut Hill, PA, won the 500-target "Marshall Marathon" with a score of 499; in 1935, Joe Hiestand of Hillsboro, OH, duplicated this feat. In 1935, a squad of five shooters broke 498 out of 500, breaking a 19-year-old squad record of 497 (made at Maplewood, NH), and in 1936 the same squad broke 499 to eclipse their record of the previous year. The tournament of August, 1946, was the largest ever held at Yorklyn when nearly 600 shooters participated.

Harold E. Thomforde leased the building and grounds for his chicken barbecues and Sunday Smorgasbords from 1959 through 1967. In 1971, I surrendered the 1925 lease on the 10 acres to NVF, and the company converted the old clubhouse into a management center. The 16 acres remaining in the Sharpless tract were sold to Amad E. Amer in 1987. The latter built a large home on the old parking lot with a spectacular view facing the Ashland Nature Center.

Yesterday, April 27, the Wilmington Friends School charter event at Auburn Heights was quite successful despite the cool and cloudy day. 141 visitors enjoyed the steam train ride, the Museum with its operating electric trains, steam-made popcorn and lemonade, and rides in the Stanley Mountain Wagon and the Rauch & Lang electric car. We are grateful for the work of many volunteers who got everything ready, to Richard Bernard for organizing the event, and to the 18 volunteers who manned the operation on Sunday. Today the Steering Committee of the Strategic Plan group is meeting at 4 P.M. to receive input from 4 active sub-committees and formulate the first draft of a plan to be presented to the Board on May 15. Tuesday night, April 29, the Events and Scheduling Committee, chaired by Anne Cleary, meets in the F.A.H.P. office at 7:00. Next Saturday, May 3, our Models 87 and 735 will be trailered to Dover to participate in the Dover Days parade Saturday morning and give rides around the Green in the afternoon.

Our big project this week is preparing for our first-ever appearance with our cars at Winterthur's Point-to-Point races next Sunday, May 4. We think 10 Stanleys plus our electric car will be going over and back on their own power. Our costumes seem to be of equal importance to the successful operation of our cars. We must leave here no later than 8 A.M. There is room in the cars for those who want to go, but WE MUST KNOW by tomorrow, and we urge all interested to dress up in appropriate vintage clothing. We will also be offering our F.A.H.P. special lunch for about \$15, and we need to know whether you'd like that as well (it's not mandatory that you buy lunch). Please call Catherine Coin (302) 239-2385 to reserve your place. I promised that things would be getting busy! Tom