

December 10, 2007

Hello, Steam Team: **Learning to Drive:** Almost everyone will remember learning to drive, although many on the road never did. My experience was probably typical of a young man growing up in the 1930's whose father had a car. I loved to ride on the front seat with my father and watch his every movement as he used the clutch, foot brake, and accelerator pedal, and shifted gears. If we had occasion to go to Rehoboth in the off-season, there would be practically no traffic on the road from Dover to the shore, and he would let me sit in the middle and steer with his oversight. Not much steering was required, as the road was straight.

One day in the fall of 1931 when I was seven, his big 1928 Packard Model 543 7-passenger sedan was setting outside the garage in our Rehoboth driveway. No one was around, so I decided I would put it in the small 2-car garage, just long enough for the big Packard. I really couldn't sit on the seat and reach the pedals, but by stretching out straight and hanging on the steering wheel, my feet would just reach the brake and clutch. In that posture I could only see the headliner of the sedan. Nevertheless I got the motor started, put the car in low gear, and let out the clutch. Into the garage we headed, just where I wanted to go! But whoa, the far end of the garage was coming up fast and there was little chance to stop. I closed my eyes, slid off the seat, and went down on both clutch and brake with all my might. The motor stalled and the car came to a stop, only a few inches from where it would have smashed into the end of the garage. Breathing a sigh of relief, I got out and feared the next step: what my father would say when he noticed his car had been moved. A few minutes later he came out, said he thought he had left the Packard outside (he knew he had), and wondered how it got in the garage. I confessed ignorance. I didn't try to drive again for about a year.

For men who worked around Auburn Heights, my father always had a car or small truck that he never drove himself. My first recollection was "Bate" Dennis and a Model T Ford that ended up down the race bank when he left it running by the kitchen door. The next was a '29 Model A Ford Station Wagon, a model that became a "Woodie" in the early '70's. We used this Model A as a light truck with the seats removed. On this car, I really learned to drive at the age of 8 or 9, whipping around the driveway after school, and learning all the tight places that would accommodate this great little car. I even had one or two places I could drive under the rose arbor and out onto the lawn in dry weather. When I became a little more adventuresome, I went down the steep driveway behind the present Museum, made a sharp turn at the bottom, and drove all over the meadow between the creek and the mill race. My father did not encourage these escapades, and occasionally he would put a stop to it, but I suppose he remembered how he wanted to operate anything mechanical when he was a boy. Anyway, he was always too easy on me; most of the disciplining came from my mother.

In 1937, Mary Leonard Chalfant and her daughter, Sara Bowers, both of Kennett Square, bought a new Packard 120 sedan and traded in a 1931 Packard Standard Eight sedan with very low mileage. Neither ever drove a car. My dad bought the old one and it became the "school car" with License #154. When I was 14 or 15, I snuck out onto a public road which was great fun. I remember traveling what is now Bengel Road as far as the Pennsylvania line and back, a round-trip of about 3 miles. One time I met John C. Mitchell, owner of a 200-acre farm, who was out inspecting his field. I was sure he would tell on me, but he didn't. Another favorite route was across a back field from the Yorklyn Gun Club to Sharpless Road, and up and down that lightly-traveled road for a short distance. During all this illegal driving time I was lucky, but soon after getting my license in February, 1940, my previous cockiness caught up with me and I had 3 fender-benders before 1940 was over.

Those members of FAHP who attended the Robison holiday party last Saturday night were in for a real treat, and there were 81 of us. Their beautiful home on Yorklyn Road about 7/10 of a mile from Auburn Heights was elaborately decorated for the season, and the wonderful food was prepared by Chevonne and served on china plates with real silverware utensils. If the festive surroundings and good fellowship were not enough, each of those in attendance was presented with a special gift, a very attractive Christmas tree ornament with either Auburn Heights or the Stanley Mountain Wagon embossed thereon. Ann Bryce, the Reillys, and Ruth helped the night before and with a few food items, but aside from that, the Robisons did it all. Thank you very much, Rob and Chevonne, for our outstanding social event of the year.

Last week, several work projects included finishing the burner for the Model CX, punching out about 5,500 holes in the 735's burner grate, repairing the leak in the 735's vaporizer, and removing the superheater from this car for re-configuration. We are waiting for mixing tube material to move ahead on the burner. Several areas of future work were studied: track re-alignment in the basement of the shop, proper repairs to the engine from the Stanley Museum's Model 70, and modification of the above-mentioned superheater. Our advisor, Charlie Johnson, was here Sunday and gave us advice on the Stanley projects. All these things will continue to move ahead soon.

Today I got word that Robert Reese of E & S Lines in Ellenton, FL, who was building our "Diesel" locomotive, died suddenly of a massive heart attack on November 15. Reportedly, the engine is "partly completed", and we are investigating our options. In any event, we are sure the finished locomotive will not be with us for several more months.

The Annual Fund drive is coming along well, and we have reached 83% of our financial goal. We still hope to hear from those of you who have not yet participated- there are still a number of active volunteers and Board members we would like to include in this very important effort. It's not too late to join in the fun.

I would suggest that work sessions continue through December 20, and then terminate for 2 weeks over the holidays. If some of you want to work on special projects during this "vacation", you are certainly welcome to do so. Best wishes to all.

Tom