

MAGIC AGE OF STEAM

Yorklyn Couple Maintains Memories of a Bygone Era

By MINDY BASARA

It's been said that Americans have a love affair with automobiles. Well, Thomas C. Marshall of Yorklyn is no exception. Automobiles — antique automobiles, that is — have become a Marshall family tradition, and they've turned their passion into a veritable antique shrine called The Magic Age of Steam.

Though the museum is now closed — and has been for over a decade — the history and wonder it once contained still remains. Stepping foot into the old one-story warehouse is like taking a magical step back in time.

The building, which currently houses 18 cars, 20 model steam engines and an assortment of antique bicycles and toys, sits unobtrusively alongside Marshall's graceful Victorian home off Route 82. Hardly noticeable from the road, the museum is nestled so comfortably into the landscape you might pass right by without even noticing it. But once inside, you are transported back to simple, turn-of-the-century America. Big and shiny, the antique cars line the inside of the building while old-time bicycles (the kind with the enormous front wheels) and other antiques are displayed here and there. Just browsing by yourself is interesting enough, but having Marshall give his own account of each item is a real treat.

Marshall explains that his father began collecting antique items many years ago, and he carried on the hobby. He purchased the majority of his cars from all along the East Coast during and after World War II. "They were not hard to come by," he

says. "People just had them lying around."

The highlight of the museum is its impressive collection of old Stanley Steamers. The last of the Stanleys was produced in 1924, Marshall says, and there are 600 to 700 still in existence. At one point, Marshall owned 40 of them. Though the Stanleys are his personal favorite steam cars, he also owned White steamers and Toledo steamers. Currently, there are 14 steam cars

in his collection, plus a trio of gas cars — two Packards and a Model T. Ford — and one electric car.

The Magic Age of Steam opened informally in the early 1960s and officially in 1971. Aside from cars, the museum featured a miniature railroad, one-eighth the actual size. Its tracks ran around the entire property. Also a part of the Magic Age of Steam were five carnival-type rides, a mini-steamboat harbored in their pond, and a toddler-sized ferris wheel. Tickets to enjoy both the cars and the rides were \$2.50 for adults and \$1.25 for children. Just to see the cars cost \$1 for adults and 50 cents for children.

Marshall says he decided to close the museum in 1977 because "it was not profitable and too confining." Though the rides were popular

too, the real attraction was always the cars. The only other museum in this area of the country with such an

antique-car clubs in this area, Marshall says, and fellow antique-car aficionados are not hard to find. Although

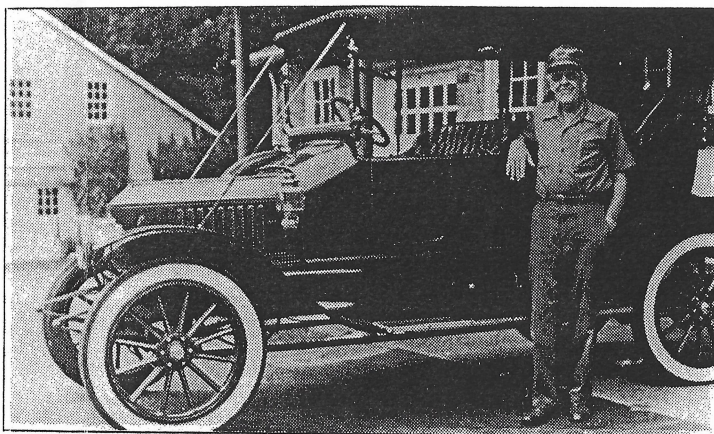
the average car tour is three to five days long and covers 75 to 100 miles a day, some have been known to go cross-country and last for over a month. Marshall claims to have traveled from Maine to Mexico in his cars. The typical procedure for longer-distance tours, he says, is to transport the car via trailer to the starting point and then drive it through the course of the tour.

Marshall admits that he "has had his share of breakdowns" on the

road, which is to be expected. He completed his latest tour to Canada in mid-August. This one was five days long, but Marshall only stayed for three, and covered about 85 miles per day.

Marshall plans on continuing with the tours, but does not expect to reopen the museum in the near future. "For the time being I would like to keep it, but not open it to the public right now," he says.

He does admit to a twinge of sentiment, though, when a passerby stops with a car full of expectant children, hoping to see the Magic Age of Steam still thriving, explaining that "they used to come here when they were kids." When this happens, Marshall says, they usually don't leave disappointed. Instead, they get a personal tour of the gone-but-not-forgotten Magic Age of Steam.



(Photo by Dave Hamill)

AHEAD OF STEAM — Thomas C. Marshall stands by one of his authentic Stanley Steamers on display in his Magic Age of Steam museum in Yorklyn.

extensive collection of cars, he explains, is the Stanley Museum in Maine.

Marshall says his cars are generally not for sale, although he admits to having sold a few off. He estimates that his steam cars are worth about \$50,000 each, and some may even go for a little more. In fact, he adds, in 1988 an Italian-made Bugati Royale steamer sold for \$8.4 million.

Even though the museum has long since closed, Marshall is still active in his hobby. His interest is now in antique car tours — a "tour" usually consisting of a few dozen cars and a few hundred people who travel from destination to destination displaying their cars in shopping malls and the like.

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