

FAHP News, November 14, 2016

Arthur Harmon (1882-1942): All of us who attended Wilmington Friends School in the 1930s knew “Arthur.” It turned out so did students from the 1900s, 1910s, and 1920s. Arthur drove a horse-drawn jitney owned by the school at Fourth and West Streets to pick up pupils all over the city and take them from home to school and vice versa. By the end of World War I, he was driving a small school bus with two bench seats facing each other with a capacity of about 12 pupils. I use the word “pupil” rather than “student,” as a teacher once told me she had many pupils but very few students. Arthur must have had a newer bus by the time I was in school, but it, too, was small and antiquated. One day he drove some elementary school pupils to Sunny Hills School (Sanford) near Hockessin and parked next to the small elementary school building there. He left his bus for a few minutes, and when he returned the bus was in the pond at the bottom of the hill. It was pulled out successfully, but I’m not sure whether it was serviceable to return to Wilmington Friends that day.

Since my cousin Eleanor and I were from the country, Arthur’s services were not available to us except on short school trips as part of the curriculum. Even so, we knew he was a very special person, always smiling, and loved by all who came in contact with him. He did janitorial work around the school when the bus was not in use.

Arthur was a black man who grew up with white boys, most of whom were members of prominent ship-building families who lived in mansions along Pennsylvania Avenue in Wilmington. He was treated like one of them and participated in most of their activities. As they became teenagers, however, it became harder for Arthur to go and do what his friends were doing because he was black. The white boys were saddened by this, but Arthur took it with his usual good humor, as he knew that was how things were. As his friends went off to college, Arthur settled on driving a horse pulling a small school wagon.

Arthur had musical talents, and he founded an all-black band of which he was the conductor. They had bright uniforms in John Philip Sousa style and played for many events around the city, with all types of audiences. Charles W. Bush, principal of Wilmington Friends when I was in elementary school, engaged Arthur and his band to entertain the school body occasionally. For such occasions a temporary stage would be set up in the gym at 5th and West Streets, and Arthur and his band provided a fun program for all.

In the early 1930s, the school purchased a second bus, slightly larger, built on a Model A Ford frame. A man named Ermont (as well as Coach Herschel Loomis) drove the Model A, but Arthur stuck to his old bus. When the school moved to Alapocas at the edge of the city in 1937, Arthur and his bus went with it.

I was graduated from Wilmington Friends in June 1941, and Arthur was still working and seemingly well. However, he died the next year at age 60. He and many in his generation made major contributions to the life of our country, but in their time they never received proper recognition.

Work Report: On Tuesday, November 8, six volunteers attended the Events Committee Meeting, and 15 attended the work session, as follows: Events: Anne Cleary (Chair), Steve Bryce, Jerry Novak, Mark Bodenstab, Rose Ann Hoover, and Brent McDougall. Work Session: Mark Bodenstab (in charge), John Bacino, Steve Bryce, Ken Hilbeck, Bob Jordan, Ted Kamen, Dave Leon, Mike Ciosek, Jerry Lucas, Tom Marshall, Brent McDougall, Edwin Paschall, Matt Richard, Tom Sandbrook, and Dennis Tile. (McDougall, Bryce, and Bodenstab attended both.)

Work was done on the ’37 Packard, and the engine of the Model H-5 was tested running on the jack with good results. The cross brace on the perch poles was attached. Gaskets were made for the water gauge glass on the Model 87. The locomotives were cleaned up from their runs on November 6, the battery terminal was repaired on the AVRR “Diesel,” and the air grates were glued to the body on this locomotive.

On Wednesday, November 9, three volunteers were on hand, viz: Jerry Novak (in charge), Bob Jordan, and Tom Marshall. The main drawers under the bench in the shop were further refined, and the cabinets in this area rearranged. We now have all portable drills and grinders in one double cabinet. Bob Jordan brought a visitor, Russ Potter, from Prescott, AZ, who was given a tour of the shop, engine house, and museum. He was much interested in the operation of a Stanley and the small locomotives.

On Thursday, November 10, seven volunteers answered the call, while the quarterly Board meeting was being held in the conference room. Those at the session were: Dave Leon (in charge), Bob Jordan, Ted Kamen, Neal Sobocinski, Bob Stransky, Jim Personti, and Geoff Fallows.

Several things were accomplished on the '37 Packard. The front floor boards were installed, as well as the carpet and the front seat cushion. Some final touches on the new wiring were accomplished. The sorting of electrical tools continued. Locomotive 402 was inspected, and it was found that the pin holding the front truck was not in place, causing the truck to carry too much weight. This reduced the locomotive's traction, which had been noticed on November 6. It was easily repaired.

Tuesday, November 15 will be a regular work session. On Thursday, November 17 and again on Tuesday, November 22, the second shop forum with Tom Marshall, this time on bolts, nuts, and screws, will take place in the shop from 7:00 to 7:30. It is requested that all mechanical volunteers attend one of these nights.