

(Much of the content was copied from the “News” of 8/13/12)

In most families of the 19th and 20th centuries, Christmastime was very special, made possible largely by the women in such families. In addition to being a part of the church-related celebrations of Christ’s birth, these women usually did the planning and much of the hard work around their homes, and they enjoyed the element of surprise that surrounded the legend of Santa Claus. Many of them prepared a sumptuous Christmas dinner for their extended families. The men in the greater family, young and old, were the recipients of the many festivities surrounding December 25. A portion of our tiny Auburn Valley Railroad is dedicated to the women in Ruth’s and my families, who never received proper recognition.

The Pullman Cars on the Auburn Valley: Before World War II, most crack trains carried heavyweight Pullman cars for first-class passengers. These cars were built by the Pullman Company, not by the railroad on which they were used, and nearly all had both names and numbers. Although many were named for individuals, usually well-known male Americans, there was no coordination between the name and the number on the car, the latter used for railroad recognition in making up a train and for reservation purposes. Many of these cars had a number of “sections” (upper and lower berths) and one or two drawing rooms for more deluxe accommodations.

The passenger-carrying cars on the 1/8th size Auburn Valley Railroad at Auburn Heights did not look like real passenger cars in the 1960s and 1970s, and the railroad did not operate in the 1980s. I wanted one train, at least, to look like a real passenger train of bygone days, so in the early 1990s this project began, along with the rebuilding of the railroad. Fabricated parts were purchased for three scale-model “Pullmans” from Mountain Car Company of Salem, Virginia, including the six-wheel trucks equipped with vacuum brakes. Mike McDevitt assembled and painted these three cars a dark but brilliant red, similar to the Tuscan red used by the Pennsylvania Railroad. Since these cars were scale in every external detail, they were barely 16” wide, suitable only for young people and thin adults, so two more cars for this “set” were built by Herb Kephart with the width increased to 20” and with doors that opened on one side of each car. The five cars were lettered by Jim Sank, and in addition to “Auburn Valley,” they were named and numbered, as were their full-size ancestors.

In earlier times, women did not get a fair shake in a male society, so I wanted to name the cars for women in our family, namely the mothers and grandmothers of my wife, Ruth, and me. The car numbers would correspond to the dates of their births, with the initial “one” being dropped (car #870 for example, the “Laura R. Sharpless,” is named for Ruth’s maternal grandmother and indicates the year of her birth, 1870). Following is a brief description of those for whom the cars are named.

Car #852, the “Mary E. Shallcross,” was named for my maternal grandmother, Mary Ellen Vandegrift Shallcross (1852-1944), who married James T. Shallcross (1847-1911) in 1872 and

whose six children were born on Belleview Farm northwest of Odessa. Widowed in 1911, she held her family together with her home in Middletown being a perennial place for happy family gatherings. I was her youngest grandchild, and we had a special relationship. Car #896, the “Emma S. Pierson,” was named for Ruth’s mother, Sara Emma Sharpless Pierson (1896-1985), who married Wilson T. Pierson (1891-1979) in 1922 and who died three months after Ruth and I were married. Born on the Sharpless Farm on Yorklyn Road, she spent her married life on the old Pierson farmstead on Southwood Road near Hockessin and outlived her husband by six years.

Car #854, the “Elizabeth C. Marshall,” was named for my paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Cloud Mitchell Marshall (1854-1930), who was the hostess of Auburn Heights from 1897 until 1921. Married to Israel W. Marshall (1850-1911) in 1877, she moved into a Wilmington apartment when my parents were married, and although I remember her, I really did not know her very well. Car #885, the “Esther S. Marshall,” was named for my mother, Esther Livezey Shallcross Marshall (1885-1979), who was born on Belleview Farm near Odessa. She married Thomas Clarence Marshall (1885-1969) in 1921 and was the hostess of Auburn Heights for 58 years who made many improvements to the horticulture of the property and the furnishings of the big house. And finally, Car #870, the “Laura R. Sharpless” mentioned above, has an observation platform and brings up the rear of the five-car train. Laura Rachel Yeatman Sharpless (1870-1942) was born at the Yeatman homestead at the north end of Nine Gates Road in Kennett Township, Pennsylvania and married William P. Sharpless (1867-1928) about 1894. She was Ruth’s maternal grandmother and lived her married life on the Sharpless farm on Yorklyn Road.