

A steamy kind of summer

From cars to trains, all things steam-powered to be featured at weekend events

By ROBIN BROWN
The News Journal

When Kelly Williams of Mount Joy, Pa., went to Winterthur's Point-to-Point races last month, he was among a select few behind the wheels of historic Stanley Steamers.

Answering guests' questions, he was as quick with structural, mechanical and operational details as he was exuberant about the vehicles he called "fascinating pieces of machinery."

More volunteers are being sought to learn to tend and drive such steam-powered antiques in the Marshall family collection at Auburn Heights, where Sunday starts a season of public "Steamin' Days" programs, said Catherine Coin, recently hired as the first executive director and sole staffer of the nonprofit Friends of Auburn Heights Preserve.

The group was formed five years ago when owner Thomas Marshall, whose father amassed the world-class collection, worked out an arrangement to transfer the collection and sell the land to the state.

Marshall and his wife still live in his family's home on the preserve, which he said will become part of the park after they move to Cokesbury Village near Hockessin at the end of the year.

Marshall, who still works on the cars at age 84, in 1997 formed the "Steam Team" of volunteers to pass along the knowledge and legacy of the vehicles, including a steam-powered bus, dating from the dawn of the automotive age.

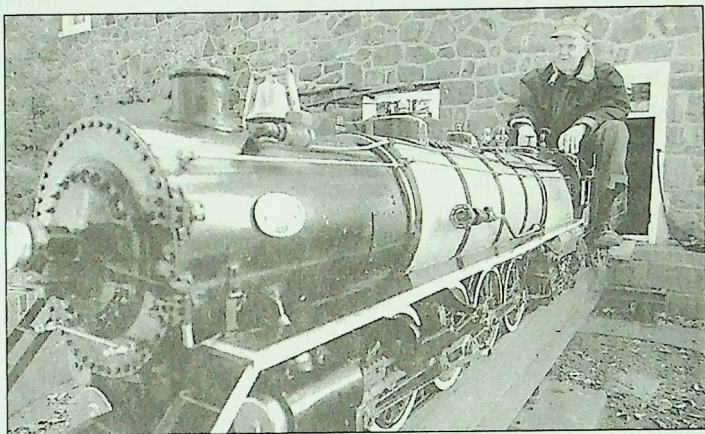
The Steam Team founded the Friends of Auburn Heights Preserve, assisted by the state Division of Parks and Recreation.

Longtime Delawareans may recall Auburn Heights from childhood visits to the Magic Age of Steam, a public attraction Marshall's father held on weekends to share the collection a generation or so ago.

For decades after the attraction closed, the public rarely saw the collection, but Coin said the friends' group is "doing more events this year than ever."

Also like something from a childhood memory, the preserve's one-eighth-size coal-burning steam locomotive still gives guests rides around the picturesque estate - its odd scale creating a hard-to-resist photo opportunity for parents.

State officials said the preserve's collection of operating Stanley Steamer cars has been documented as



News Journal file

Auburn Heights owner Tom Marshall drives a small-scale steam train in his father's collection in October 2006 at Auburn Heights Preserve in Yorklyn, where a season of public programs start Sunday.

the world's largest, but the fleet has other makes, as well as a kerosene-powered car Marshall's father drove during wartime gasoline rationing.

Visitors may ride around the Victorian estate in vintage Stanley Steamer and electric cars, Coin said, or aboard the open-sided 1915 Stanley Mountain Wagon, Delaware's only steam-powered bus in service.

Fans of smaller-scale attractions enjoy the collection of antique toys, with a 1930s Lionel electric train set racing around a layout, she said.

And all guests are invited to sample a perennial favorite treat rarely made by steam.

"We have a steam-powered popcorn popper," Coin said.

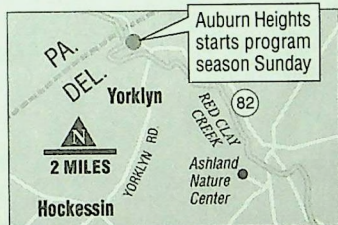
A little steam engine does the trick for the preserve's Cretors popcorn wagon, manufactured in the 1920s and still poppin'.

The popper stays put, but the collection's cars often hit the road, such as a June 14 run for display at the Separation Day celebration in New Castle.

When Marshall and the Friends drove most of the collection's steam cars to Winterthur Museum & Country Estate last month, their presence prompted retired judge David Coggins of Haddonfield, N.J., to attend Point-to-Point for the first time.

"The cars are why I came," he said, eyeing a 1908 Stanley Model H-5. He called the cars "just marvelous."

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AUBURN HEIGHTS

Steamin' Days public programs start Sunday at the Auburn Heights Preserve off Del. 82 in Yorklyn.

The 1-4:30 p.m. programs feature Stanley Steamer cars, other antique vehicles and steam trains. Other Steamin' Days Sundays are July 27, Aug. 31 and Sept. 28. The site also is to open 1-4:30 p.m. on the weekend of Oct. 25-26 and Nov. 28-29.

Admission to any of the events, hosted by the nonprofit Friends of Auburn Heights Preserve, is \$10 for adults and \$7 for children ages 2-12, with younger children admitted free.

For more information, including membership in the Friends of Auburn Heights Preserve, which is hosting the events, visit www.AuburnHeights.org, e-mail events@AuburnHeights.org or call 239-2385 or (800) 349-2134.

The group that supports the site welcomes tax-deductible donations, which may be sent in checks payable to Friends of Auburn Heights Inc. at Box 61, Yorklyn, DE 19736.