

F.A.H.P. News, July 25, 2011

Recreation Promotion & Service, Inc. of Wilmington: RP&S was a unique organization; to my knowledge, there was not another like it anywhere. Born in the mind of W. W. "Chick" Laird (1910-1989), it came into being in Wilmington in 1945 when George T. Sargisson was hired to organize and manage it. It is likely that Laird established more non-profit organizations for the enjoyment of the general public than anyone before or since, and he was a liberal contributor to all of them. In the 1930s, his love of theatre and musical shows was responsible for the founding of the "Brandywiners," still going strong 75 years later. He, himself, performed in some of the early musicals at Longwood Gardens. Sargisson was the right man to head RP&S. His enthusiasm for all non-profit activities, from sports to railroads to observatories to musical groups, was contagious. The idea was that RP&S would foster infant organizations, make available to them non-profit benefits before their own tax-deductible status was obtained from the IRS and then "spin them off" as they were able to stand on their own. At least 25 successful organizations got their start in this way.

Our first contact with George Sargisson and RP&S was at the Old Timers' Picnics, established in 1949 as an annual event in Josephine Gardens along the Brandywine in Wilmington. Sargisson had heard of my father's Stanley car collection, and my dad took our 1915 Mountain Wagon to give one-mile free rides to seniors who attended. City buses brought the elderly to the event without cost, and the Three Little Bakers had a huge cake and performed several of their balancing acts. Governor Elbert N. Carvel was a happy passenger in the Mountain Wagon. After three or four years, I took over from my father and took the Mountain Wagon annually until the mid-1960s.

When my dream to establish a steam passenger railroad in the Red Clay Valley would not go away, I asked George Sargisson to help me implement this farfetched idea. In the fall of 1958, he and Clayton Hoff (founder of the Brandywine Valley Association) walked the B & O freight line with me and endorsed the idea. That winter George and I met with B & O officials in Baltimore for the first time, and for the next seven years, he stood with the early Historic Red Clay Valley volunteers in their attempts to consummate a lease for 4 miles of the Landenberg Branch (the first Wilmington & Western trains ran in May 1966).

Through the 1950s and much of the 1960s, Chick Laird continued to subsidize the RP&S organization. There was a president and Board of Directors, on which I served for perhaps 10 years. It was a great board with a wide range of interests. We usually met for lunch at the University and Whist Club either monthly or bi-monthly. Some names of board members that come to mind are I. B. Finkelstein, treasurer of the Delaware Hardware Company; Nancy C. Sawin, head of Sanford School; Dorsey Kinnamon, senior partner in the insurance firm of Kinnamon, Taylor, and Dawes; E. Avery Gray; Rosalie O'Bara, perennial Clerk of the Peace for New Castle County; Thomas S. Lodge, a prominent attorney; James T. Chandler III, of Chandler Funeral Homes; James E. Beeson, also a prominent funeral director; Leroy J. Scheuerman, secretary and treasurer of Central and Southwest Corporation; and Margaret Osborne du Pont, a national tennis champion who was married to William du Pont Jr. of

Bellevue. Finkelstein, Kinnamon, Beeson, and Scheuerman each served as president of RP&S, and Scheuerman was treasurer for most of its history. Roy Scheuerman was also treasurer of Historic Red Clay Valley, Inc., operator of the Wilmington & Western Railroad for its first 25 years. My meager contribution was to print on my offset printing machine a huge calendar of events with eight pages hand typed in the RP&S office by June Dorey, Sargisson's only assistant. This calendar, updated at least 4 times each year, was the first of its kind in Delaware, and about 2,000 copies were printed.

In the 1970s, RP&S had to downsize, but a few faithfuls, such as Scheuerman and Sargisson, stayed until the end. Always operating on a "shoe string" with an office in substandard housing, RP&S provided a great service to Wilmington and its environs for nearly 40 years.

Benefit Concert Report: We are pleased to report that our inaugural fundraiser concert was a success, despite Mother Nature's cruelty in scheduling an excessive heat warning for the same day. Our volunteers, once again, excelled in making everyone who braved the heat feel welcome -- and thankfully, many still came out. Club Phred and Mark Farner played to an enthusiastic gathering of 153 visitors, plus our own Steam Team. Our friends from the Country Butcher served up their consummate grilling fare, and all enjoyed plenty of cold drinks (including LOTS of water, Vermeil wines, beer and lemonade). There was ample competition at the Silent Auction tables, and more than 30 toured the mansion. We thank everyone who attended, supported or volunteered to make the day special.

Work Nights: Last week at Auburn Heights, Brent McDougall, Jeff Pollock, and Bill Schwoebel cleaned up the locomotives from the July 17 Steamin' Sunday. Emil Christofano and Jeff continued work on the Rauch & Lang, installing the rebuilt electric motor and reconnecting the wiring. Butch Cannard continued updating the programming for the railroad signals on the AVRR. Ted Kamen applied a coat of paint to sections of the Model 607 frame. Tom Marshall repaired the hand pumps on the Model EX, and Jerry Lucas fired up the car and pronounced it okay. In preparation for last weekend's concert, Bob Jordan, Art Wallace and Bill Schwoebel polished the cars in the museum, and Dave Leon scraped a lot more paint from the museum floor and gave it a good cleaning. Jerry Novak worked all week on final preparations of the stage for the Saturday benefit and ran numerous errands for Susan in connection therewith. And a big thanks to all our volunteers, along with the exemplary work of Susan, who deserve credit for making our first concert a success.