



Window To Yesterday

Father, Sons Possess Close Ties To Trolley, Rail Systems

By Frank Woodring

It was 100 years ago that the fabled trollies began to traverse hill and dale in both Washington and Frederick counties and eventually revolutionized the way farmer and villager viewed their worlds.

It was on March 12, 1896, that the Hagerstown Railway was incorporated. Ironically, the initial run occurred on August 7 when the trolley made its way to Williamsport. Almost 51 years later on Aug. 4, 1947, No. 172 visited Williamsport for one last time carrying signs that stated, "Last trolley to run in Washington County."

One of the myriad of men who helped to make the trolley a reality was Theophilus Calvin Pryor, a farmer who lived on Black Rock Road (now Loy Wolfe Road, named after Pryor's brother-in-law) south of Smithsburg. Pryor, who was born in 1871, took advantage of the abundance of trees on his 120-acre farm to supply the trolley with cross-ties.

Two of Pryor's sons recall that their father sold cross-ties to both the trolley and to the Western Maryland Railroad. According to 85-year-old Albert Pryor, his father did most of the work himself. He remembers his father dragging the trees in through the woods to skids where he used a broad ax to square the ties.

Albert's brother, 81-year-old Maurice, concurs with his older brother. "None of us helped. We were very small at the time." He recalls that for the trolley cross-ties "two sides had to be squared. You had to have a six-inch face on two sides. For the railroad you had to have the cross-ties squared on all four sides."

Albert recalls that their father hauled the cross-ties for the trolley via horse and wagon to Myersville while the ties for the railroad were taken to the station in Smithsburg.

"I remember going down a steep hill you would lock one of the wagon wheels with a chain so that it couldn't turn going downhill. That way the wagon wouldn't push too hard on the horses," Maurice added.

Theophilus and his wife Rosa Mae were the parents of 13 children, most of whom were born in the log cabin on Black Rock Road. According to the brothers, Theophilus built the log structure himself after felling and hewing the logs for the house, which has since been remodeled and is owned today by Maurice's son Richard.

Work was no stranger to the elder Pryor. "I remember Papa saying that he used to walk over to the ridge on the other side of Wolfsville Road and cut three cords of wood with an ax and then walk home," reiterated Maurice.

In order to help provide for his large family, Pryor also sold produce at City Market in Hagerstown and door-to-door in Waynesboro. "I remember a couple of times he went to Market in Hagerstown with a horse and wagon," stated Albert, who noted that at that time the Market was located at the corner of North Potomac and East Franklin streets. (In 1821 the Commissioners selected this site, which was known as Stump's Lot. In 1928 the Market was moved to its present location at 11 West Church Street.)



Former Smithsburg area resident Theophilus Pryor is pictured with his family in front of the log cabin that he built. The same broad ax that Pryor used to hew the logs was also used to cut cross-ties for the H&F trolley and the Western Maryland Railroad. Pictured in the front row of this 1913 photo are Albert and Vera. Middle row: Mary, Edgar, Theophilus, Nettie, and Pryor's wife Rosa Mae, who is holding Harry. Back row: Lillie, Ina, and Susie. The Pryor homestead is owned today by Richard Pryor, Theophilus' grandson. (Photo courtesy of Maurice/Edna Pryor)

"He sold out of the wagon. The wagon would be backed up to the curb, and you'd pull the shafts off so they didn't stick out too far. You'd slide them back under the wagon," commented Albert, who added that the horses were kept in a nearby stable.

Albert and Maurice along with their brothers Edgar (1903-1959) and Harry (1913-1974) carried on the family tradition of providing crossties for the trolley and the railroad. "We hauled them over there (to the railroad station in Smithsburg) until the early 1950's," related Maurice. "We sold to the trolley until the early 1940's."

The brothers, however, had two distinct advantages over their father as they used trucks to transport their crossties and had a sawmill operated by a steam engine to cut logs into ties. According to Maurice, the first steam engine was a Geiser. "We had to quit that one because the boiler went bad." A Frick steam engine replaced the Geiser. "The steam was good, but it took more help."

Timbering their beloved mountain was not without its price for the Pryor brothers, especially Albert, who suffered a broken leg when a dead chestnut fell on him while cutting crossties at Harry's farm, also situated on Black Rock Road, which was and still is a stronghold for the Pryor clan.

A more serious accident occurred in 1947 when Albert was cutting pulpwood by himself on his farm adjacent to the homeplace. In this incident an unknown object struck Albert's left eye, leaving him permanently blinded. Maurice recalls the incident quite well as he told his older brother, "I remember you had just bought a new 1947 Ford, and you drove that down there for me to take you to the doctor!"

A third and potentially more serious incident happened while Albert was dragging out trees on his farm. His son Dennis remembers that a blight had killed the chestnut trees throughout the area. As his father was operating his tractor in the woods, a large chestnut tree several feet in diameter fell, shoving him into the steering wheel, which was broken by the impact.

Despite blacking out several times, Pryor was able to make his way back to the house. As a result of this mishap, he was hospitalized with a broken collarbone and several fractured ribs. Dennis laughs as he noted that his father could not eat liver for several years afterwards because that's what he had for lunch on that eventful day.

As for Maurice, he smiled when he noted that "nothing serious" ever happened to him in the woods, nothing except numerous cuts from his chain saw. He did recall, however, an accident that happened when he was about 14 or 15. "Papa always warned us about watching out for



Brothers Albert (left) and Maurice Pryor remember their father Theophilus supplying crossties for the trolley system operated by the Hagerstown & Frederick Railway. The Pryor brothers themselves later cut crossties for the trolley. In the above photo Albert is holding the broad ax that their father used to hew crossties for both the trolley system and the Western Maryland Railroad. (Photo by the Maryland Cracker Barrel Staff)

branches that might catch the ax." Despite the warning, Maurice's ax did catch some brush and hit his foot. "I could never work my toes separately after that!"

In another twist of irony, chestnut trees have not been kind to Albert, but a split rail fence made of chestnut by his father still stands along Loy Wolfe Road as a reminder to the quiet pioneer spirit that Theophilus Pryor instilled in his family!



Trolley car #169 is pictured in the first block of West Washington Street in downtown Hagerstown. In the background can be seen the Keystone Drug Store on the southwest corner of the square. Car #169 was purchased by the Hagerstown & Frederick Railway in 1917 four years after the Hagerstown and Frederick systems merged. (Photo courtesy of Carroll Spitzer)