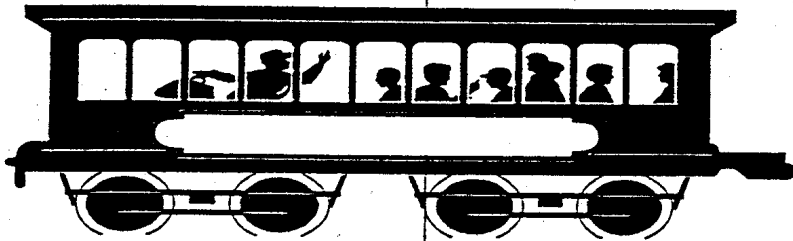


The Trolley Park at Valley Forge

by Dr. John Lukacs

(Part 4 of a series of Articles)

In the history of the United States, the four decades from about 1890 to 1930 were marked, among other things, by the rapid spreading (and then the sudden ending) of urban, suburban and rural electric trolley lines. To some extent their functions resembled those of the public service busses now. They were relatively easy to run, and they were much cheaper than the trains. One could travel from Philadelphia to New York, or from Philadelphia to



Allentown or Reading by trolley. Trolleys were slower than trains and had frequent changes along their routes. One of the functions of the small-town and rural trolley lines was to attract their customers to small amusement parks serviced by their tracks. There were at least fifteen such "trolley parks" in Philadelphia, Montgomery, Chester and Berks counties.

The only trolley line across our township was that of the "Phoenixville, Valley Forge and Strafford Electric Railway", built in 1911-1912. Its promoter and president was an ambitious man, Thomas O'Connell, who had planned a number of other lines in southern Chester County, none of which materialized. But the Valley Forge line did. His idea was to connect the Valley Forge end of it with another

line running from there to Strafford which did not come about, nor did his project to build a line from Valley Forge to West Chester through Malvern. Today, the still running high-speed Norristown-Strafford-69th Street line continues to exist. He also had his battles with the Phoenixville Borough council about where the tracks in Phoenixville would start. But his line was built, with some grading that had to be done in our Township. Two bridges were built for the tracks, one crossing Pickering Creek, the other Valley Creek. And in August 1912 an amusement park, known as Valley Park - whence the present name of Valley Park Road - was inaugurated, with a ceremony featuring the Phoenix Military Band.

The fare was five cents and included entertainments in the park, which consisted at times of moving pictures shown on an outdoor screen and vaudeville acts as well as eating and picnic facilities. A stone building, once for the purpose of providing food and drinks and comfort facilities, still stands.

The park lay immediately west of the Anderson Burial Ground, opposite to the present Pasquale property. The trolleys clattered and screeched along a single track up White Horse Road to Williams' Corner (where there was a temporary repair barn and an electric transformer), then along the high southern berm of the present road, crossing to the northern side beyond the amusement park. O'Connell's optimism seems to have been finally warranted: in 1912 he arranged, by way

of a switch in Phoenixville, to run two cars from Valley Forge through to Bonnie Brae Park, another trolley park outside Spring City. In 1915 the terminus of the Valley Forge line was moved down Starr Street to Bridge Street. By that time the park had provided opportunities for boating, baseball, and a merry-go-round. The trolley cars (many of them open-sided) ran each hour in the late spring, summer and fall. Winter traffic was limited, though it continued to exist.

What killed both park and trolley was the automobile. By 1927 more than 60 percent of American families owned cars - many of which were used for short rides, especially on Sundays. On Christmas Day in 1923, the trolleys stopped running. No one wished to buy either the equipment or the rails. They were then junked. The amusement park too went out of existence soon thereafter, in a year that I cannot now ascertain. One day automobiles will also disappear; and what will follow them? A new kind of trolley? Another thing that I cannot tell.

The Township will continue to run this series of articles on various points of interest throughout the Township. Submittals are welcome for upcoming newsletters. Please submit articles to the Township Secretary.