

The Recollections of Marshall Jones, Jr.

by Dave Walter, Chairman, Westtown Twp. Historical Commission



Photo from Marshall Jones farm

A hundred years ago, Westtown Township was a farming community. In 1913, Marshall Jones, Sr. purchased a farm here. Jones and his son and grandson, all named Marshall, operated "Maple Shade Farm" on Shiloh Road. Their farm is now Bayard Rustin High School and much of the Pleasant Grove community. The Old Taylor Farm was once theirs as well, and included a landing strip for the Jones' airplane.

Marshall, Jr., chronicled Chester County's transformation from a rural farming region to a suburban landscape in a series of essays he wrote for the *Daily Local News* and other publications. A booklet, "Recollections," published by Helen Stapleton in 1992, was a compilation of these memories. Mr. Jones died 3/31/1997, at age 88.

Here are a few remembrances of farm life in Westtown:

"In 1913 my father purchased a 200 acre farm in Westtown Township from Mr. Edward Twaddell. After building an addition to the barn and remodeling the old stone farm house, it was ready for occupancy in January 1914. It was decided to move (from Upper Darby) when the weather would be more suitable during the January thaw. It was decided to move on January 28. Accordingly, the furniture was loaded on two large splay bed

hay wagons the day before. The drivers had instructions to wait at Newtown Square because the West Chester Pike was only paved that far west. Later in the morning our family left in my uncle's Stanley Steamer. It was such a warm day the top was folded down. When we arrived at Newtown Square, the teams were tied up at the hotel. The car was attached to the rear wagon by a tow chain because the mud was too deep for the car. In this manner we completed the journey to Westtown, making the 20 mile journey in 10 hours."

"Before World War I, farm life was much the same as in Delaware County, but with the following exceptions; we had a telephone but there were no electric lines in the community so we made our own. It was a large generator or dynamo powered by a one-cylinder gas engine. It made a rather dim light by today's standards, but was better than kerosene lamps."

"The cows were milked by hand and the milk cooled in the spring house. In hot weather ice harvested the winter before from Westtown Lake was added. The milk cans were loaded on a two-horse wagon early in the morning to take to the 5:28am milk train at Westtown Station."

"Nearly every farm had a small orchard, a flock of chickens and a few pigs for home consumption. Saturday night was shopping night in West Chester. Entertainment consisted of a visit to the Opera House (now the courthouse annex) to see a silent movie and a live vaudeville show."

"There were over 30 dairy farms in the township at that time and Clarence 'Cad' Yearsley was the community thresherman. His entire outfit, steam engine, threshing machine, baler and water wagon, was made by the J.I. Case Company. He even had a Case touring car to transport his crew from farm to farm. At threshing time, the farmer provided soft coal and water for the engine and food for the hungry crew."

"In 1915, I started school in the one-room Centre School on Shiloh Road. The teacher, Miss Ranck, from Honey Brook, boarded in the community and taught all eight grades.

The heating system was a coal stove in the classroom and the water supply a hand pump in the yard. Of course, everyone walked to school, regardless of weather.”

“Also in 1915 we had our first automobile. It was a big Cadillac touring car with a V-8 engine. This car had many uses before our first truck was purchased a few years later. This car was not used between Thanksgiving and Easter because the dirt roads were impassable in the winter time due to mud or snow.”

“Our first truck was an International with solid rubber tires and the radiator located between the motor and the cab. The first tractor was purchased about 1918 or 1919.”

“From 1931 to 1947 we raised about 50 acres (of potatoes) annually. We sold potatoes at the farm retail and wholesale and delivered to stores, two hospitals and the Mansion House Hotel in West Chester. We also delivered a five ton truck load weekly to hospitals in Philadelphia. On the way several hundred pounds were delivered to Swarthmore College and Chester Hospital.”

“When World War II started, cheap labor went into the Armed Services and defense industries and farm machinery manufacturers changed to war production. This caused a tremendous shortage of labor and machinery on farms. The wartime demand for food caused prices to escalate sharply. Meat, butter and sugar were rationed. President Roosevelt created the Office of Price Administration (OPA) to control prices. When farmers hold potatoes in frost proof storage over winter they expect higher prices the following spring to cover storage costs such as spoilage, shrinkage, etc.”

“The OPA bureaucrats in their ‘wisdom’ made no provisions for this in the fall of 1943 when they put a price ceiling on potatoes. As a result all growers sold their crop as quickly as possible to save storage costs and by the spring of 1944 there were no potatoes available at any price.”

“By 1944 the U.S. was scraping the bottom of the manpower barrel and some Jamaicans were imported to harvest field and orchard crops in Chester and Delaware Counties. They were housed in the old jail in Media and I hauled about 10 each day to work in a canvas covered stake body truck with straw bales for seats.”

“In 1945 there were a large number of German war prisoners at an Army barracks near the Philadelphia Airport. They were transported by school buses to work on Chester and Delaware County farms and orchards. We had about a dozen. They had no guards but there was an interpreter in each group who helped them learn English. There was only one farmer in the group. The others were doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc. in civilian life but all were very good workers.”

“They did not get much food at the barracks and only brought a few sandwiches with them. We quickly learned that they couldn’t do much hard work on these meager rations so regardless of orders we gave them a hot noon meal with lots of meat and the work output more than doubled. They were very thankful that they had been captured by the Americans instead of the Russians as they did not expect the German prisoners to ever return from Russia. They were by far the best crew we ever had.”

The Westtown Historical Commission (HC) was established to foster a community appreciation of the rich and varied history of the Township. The Historical Commission invites those who lived or worked in Westtown prior to 1960 to share stories, old photographs, anecdotes, or remembrances about life in our community more than 50 years ago. These will be shared and stored in the Township archives to further educate present and future residents on the Township’s rich and diverse past.

The HC is currently seeking to fill an unexpired vacancy on the commission. Interested residents should send their resume and letter of interest to Township Manager, Rob Pingar at rpingar@westtown.org.