

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, September 1, 2008 (Labor Day)

James H. Wagenhorst (ca. 1869–ca. 1957): “Wag,” as he was affectionately called by all who knew him, was born near the headwaters of the Lehigh River at Gouldsboro, Pennsylvania. He went to the University of Pennsylvania and played on its football team in the early 1890s. Graduating as an engineer, he loved to tinker and had all kinds of inventions to his credit, many of them quite humorous. When the newborn auto industry settled in Detroit, he moved there and met most of the early automotive giants, working for many of them. He considered Walter P. Chrysler a close friend.

About 1920, Wag married my mother's second cousin, Ada Tygert. Ada and my mother had played together as children, and they were very close in age. Wag was about 50 and Ada in her mid-30s when they were married. They never had children but enjoyed life together until Wag's death nearly 40 years later. Wag was the chief designer for the Kelsey Wheel Corporation in Detroit, and he held patents on numerous types of early automobile rims. Kelsey supplied many auto manufacturers with their wheels and rims, and Wag had a part in designing them. He and Ada lived in a lavish apartment overlooking the Detroit River, where Gar Wood and others raced their high-powered speed boats in the 1930s.

Returning from the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago in early September 1934, my parents and I stopped in Detroit, where we visited Wag and Ada, and they entertained us royally. A few years later, when drop-center rims became the norm except on trucks, the need for Wag's inventions was greatly diminished on the many types of rims that were becoming obsolete. In his late 60s, he retired from automotive work, and he and Ada moved to Washington, D.C., where they had another fine apartment just off Connecticut Avenue.

After World War II, my mother invited the Wagenhorsts to spend Christmas at Auburn Heights on at least two occasions. They would usually spend about three days (or as long as my father could stand Wag's stories). I think they still owned a car, but they would come by train, usually first class on the B & O. I remember meeting them about 1947 as they arrived at the Delaware Avenue Station in Wilmington on the *Capitol Limited*. Both were dressed to the hilt; they were attired as if to attend a formal ball of the period. After all, Christmas was coming.

The last time I saw Wag was in 1952, when the Glidden Tour ended in Washington to help the AAA celebrate its 50th anniversary. He was in his glory talking to such pioneers as Colonel Augustus Post about the early days of motoring. I recall one afternoon the two of them sitting in the back seat of our Model 87 parked at the Shoreham Hotel and talking “old times.” It's impossible to find characters like Post and Wag in the 21st century.