

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, April 5, 2010

Jacob J. Lafferty (1903–1975): The large Lafferty family, Irish-Americans who had been in this area since the mid-19th century, was centered on Kaolin, a tiny community on present-day Route 41 between Hockessin and Avondale. Kaolin was named for the high-quality clay prevalent in the Hockessin Valley, the mining of which produced the largest industry of the 19th century in this area. Kaolin was shipped on the Wilmington & Western Rail Road (later the Landenberg Branch of the B & O) from Southwood, Hockessin, and Goldings (Old Wilmington Road) to the potteries of Trenton, New Jersey, where it was made into high-quality porcelain. Although the last kaolin mined in the area was at Goldings in 1941, several of the deep clay pits, filled with water, are still in evidence. The Stone Mill office complex in Hockessin surrounds one of them, which today resembles an attractive small lake.

Jake Lafferty was a friendly comedian born into this large family. At an early age, he married Molly Toomey, and they settled in Yorklyn and raised three sons and two daughters. Jake worked for National Vulcanized Fibre Company, and they lived in the “Brick Row,” six double brick houses facing the railroad just west of the fibre mills. The 12 or so families who lived in these company houses had a small community all their own, and most were dismayed when the company tore them down to build its newest mill in 1966. With their children married by that time, Jake and Molly moved into 1/3 of the triple house across from the Marshall Brothers Paper Mill (immediately adjacent to Auburn Heights), and they continued to live there after Jake retired from NVF in 1968 at the age of 65. In retirement he worked for me and the Magic Age of Steam from that time until his death in 1975.

Like a lot of Irishmen of his generation, Jake was “comical.” He didn’t have to tell jokes, his stories just came out that way. He stuttered badly at times, as remedies to correct this in children did not exist for poor families when he grew up. He had a good baritone voice, however, and when he sang his favorite Irish ditties at the top of his lungs, there was no stuttering at all; the lyrics came out loud and clear. He polished a lot of brass in the museum, always accompanied by the “Rose of Tralee,” “My Wild Irish Rose,” or one of the several others in his repertoire. A large man with small feet, he could “cut a rug” on the dance floor.

Jake knew everyone in Yorklyn and filled me in on a lot of things that had happened in years past. He told of the fights inside the old covered bridge between the men who worked at the snuff mill and those from the fibre mill. He also identified several people in old photographs taken by my father just after 1900. The general store in Yorklyn, operated from 1913 until 1976 by Grover C. Gregg, was much like a “company store,” in that Mrs. Gregg ran a bank in the rear of the store on pay days to cash workers’ checks. Almost everyone in Yorklyn had an account at Gregg’s store and would charge food, and sometimes clothing, against this account. The hope was that the balance would go down to zero on payday, but when the depression hit in the 1930s, a lot of local people owed for food, for which they couldn’t pay. Gregg made sure they didn’t starve. Jake never forgot this. In the 1960s and ‘70s, when people were more prosperous and all local residents had cars, supermarkets had selections and prices much more attractive than did Gregg’s Store. Despite this, Jake and Molly always bought most of their food, including their Christmas turkey, from Grover Gregg. They remembered the 1930s.