

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, July 25, 2011

**Recreation Promotion & Service, Inc. (RP&S) of Wilmington:** RP&S was a unique organization; to my knowledge, there was not another like it anywhere. Born in the mind of W. W. "Chick" Laird (1910–1989), it came into being in Wilmington in 1945 when George T. Sargisson was hired to organize and manage it. It is likely that Laird established more non-profit organizations for the enjoyment of the general public than anyone before or since, and he was a liberal contributor to all of them. In the 1930s, his love of theater and musical shows was responsible for the founding of the "Brandywiners," still going strong 75 years later. He, himself, performed in some of the early musicals at Longwood Gardens. Sargisson was the right man to head RP&S. His enthusiasm for all non-profit activities, from sports to railroads to observatories to musical groups, was contagious. The idea was that RP&S would foster infant organizations, make available to them non-profit benefits before their own tax-deductible status was obtained from the IRS, and then "spin them off" as they were able to stand on their own. At least 25 successful organizations got their start in this way.

Our first contact with George Sargisson and RP&S was at the Old Timers' Picnics, established in 1949 as an annual event in Josephine Gardens along the Brandywine in Wilmington. Sargisson had heard of my father's Stanley car collection, and my dad took our 1915 Mountain Wagon to give 1-mile free rides to seniors who attended. City buses brought the elderly to the event without cost, and the Three Little Bakers had a huge cake and performed several of their balancing acts. Governor Elbert N. Carvel was a happy passenger in the Mountain Wagon. After three or four years, I took over from my father and took the Mountain Wagon annually until the mid-1960s.

When my dream to establish a steam passenger railroad in the Red Clay Valley would not go away, I asked George Sargisson to help me implement this farfetched idea. In the fall of 1958, he and Clayton Hoff (founder of the Brandywine Valley Association) walked the B & O freight line with me and endorsed the idea. That winter George and I met with B & O officials in Baltimore for the first time, and for the next seven years, he stood with the early Historic Red Clay Valley volunteers in their attempts to consummate a lease for 4 miles of the Landenberg Branch (the first Wilmington & Western trains ran in May 1966).

Through the 1950s and much of the 1960s, Chick Laird continued to subsidize the RP&S organization. There was a president and Board of Directors, on which I served for perhaps 10 years. It was a great board with a wide range of interests. We usually met for lunch at the University and Whist Club either monthly or bi-monthly. Some names of board members that come to mind are I. B. Finkelstein, treasurer of the Delaware Hardware Company; Nancy C. Sawin, head of Sanford School; Dorsey Kinnamon, senior partner in the insurance firm of Kinnamon, Taylor, and Dawes; E. Avery Gray; Rosalie O'Bara, perennial Clerk of the Peace for New Castle County; Thomas S. Lodge, a prominent attorney; James T. Chandler III, of Chandler Funeral Homes; James E. Beeson, also a prominent funeral director; Leroy J. Scheuerman, secretary and treasurer of Central and Southwest Corporation; and Margaret Osborne du Pont, a national tennis champion who was married to William du Pont Jr. of Bellevue. Finkelstein, Kinnamon, Beeson, and Scheuerman each served as president of RP&S, and Scheuerman was treasurer for most of its history. Roy Scheuerman was also treasurer of Historic Red Clay Valley, Inc., operator of the Wilmington & Western Railroad for its first 25 years. My meager contribution was to print on my offset printing machine a huge calendar of events with eight pages hand typed in the RP&S office by June Dorey, Sargisson's only assistant. This calendar, updated at least 4 times each year, was the first of its kind in Delaware, and about 2,000 copies were printed.

In the 1970s, RP&S had to downsize, but a few faithfuls, such as Scheuerman and Sargisson, stayed until the end. Always operating on a shoestring with an office in substandard housing, RP&S provided a great service to Wilmington and its environs for nearly 40 years.