



HERITAGE CORRIDOR

History On The Hill

The Newsletter of the South Hill Historical Society

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To School in a Double Decker

by Jerry Bates



Illustration by Jerry Bates
South Hill Historical Society ©

This is an early version of the Pickwick NiteCoach double-decker bus. A later model Pickwick Duplex bus of similar design was used by the Blue-Gray line of Puyallup to bus South Hill students to Puyallup High School during and after WWII.

Nothing may seem very exciting about a school bus—certainly not something to reminisce about! But don't tell that to a certain group of South Hill old timers. They have fond memories of riding to Puyallup High School in a very unique bus, many years ago, during and following World War II. The bus was a double-decker, called a Pickwick.

Why such an unusual ride? Puyallup High School students living on South Hill in the 1940s had school bus service contracted from a private bus company. The school systems did not have their own buses, so local bus companies bid on student transport for different communities.

During and shortly after the Second World War new buses were impossible to get, the number of people depending on bus transportation was growing. Due to this shortage, old buses had to be patched up and kept in service. This effort resurrected and extended the service life of many vintage buses.

A Puyallup bus company named Blue-Gray Lines had the contract with the Puyallup School district to supply school transport for South Hill high school students. The Blue-Gray Lines had purchased four of the unique old Pickwick buses, two NiteCoaches and two Duplex models. In addition to getting wartime workers to and from Tacoma, these buses served the South Hill high school students to and from Puyallup High School.

In those days normal bus service for residents of Pierce County was largely supplied by numerous small independent carriers with their own unique routes to and from small towns and communities, most connecting to Tacoma (The Woodland Bus Company, also covered in this issue, is a good example of this). World War II was a busy time for the local bus companies. With gasoline rationing and commuting war production workers—buses were loaded. Sometimes 60 to 70 people packed into 30 seat buses. In the Summer, Puyallup, South Hill area most people of working age, not in the military, were commuting to and from the Todd Pacific Shipyards in Tacoma, where escort aircraft carriers were being built. All available buses including the old Pickwicks were busy, many around the clock, transporting wartime shift workers.

About the Pickwick double-deckers

Although the name, plus the fact they were double-deckers, may conjure up thoughts of Dickens and buses on busy London streets, Pickwick buses were an American invention manufactured at El Segundo, California by Pickwick Stage Lines. The name "Pickwick" came from the Pickwick Theater in San Diego, where in the early years, before the young bus company had its own terminals, the buses would park to take on customers. The Pickwick Stages Co., begun in 1912, would grow into an empire operating bus routes up and down the West Coast with routes stretching to Mexico City and the East Coast. At one point it was larger than Greyhound, which would eventually absorb Pickwick Stages.

Besides a vast network of bus routes and impressive terminals, Pickwick also manufactured buses. The first Pickwick NiteCoach was introduced to the public in 1928 and was quite a sensation. It had 13 separate compartments that would accommodate two people each. A separate compartment had upper and lower berths similar to the Pullman cars used by the railroad. In addition to the berths there were compartments with seats, running water, dressing room and storage space. Two lavatories and a kitchen were elsewhere in the bus. Each bus had a crew of three. The idea was to shorten travel time for upper class travelers on long western routes avoiding overnight stays in hotels. At one point in its history Pickwick operated 10 tri-motor 10-passenger airplanes for day travel, switching to the NiteCoach bus for nighttime travel. Flying during the night was considered too risky for passenger travel in those days.

However, when the Depression came, such expensive luxury buses had few takers. The crash of 1929 eliminated the upscale bus market. Not many Pickwick NiteCoaches were ever made. The concept was reintroduced in 1932, but only 18 were made at that time. Again economic conditions doomed these large costly vehicles. In 1930 a day-coach version of the NiteCoach sleeper was introduced. Instead of cabins with berths, it had two decks of seats. Only forty of these buses were built. They were called the Pickwick Duplex, accommodating 53 passengers. The buses that were made continued to evolve in outward appearance; the later models followed the modern more squared-off look.

Dwight Austin was the inventor of the NiteCoach and Duplex Pickwick buses; he was also vice president of Pickwick Stages Co. He continued in his lifetime to introduce many innovations into American bus manufacturing: reclining seats, integral frame/body design, baggage stowage on a level under the passenger compartment versus strapped on top of the bus. He also patented an angle drive power-train that contributed to the rear engine, flat front bus design used today.

The Depression finished off Pickwick. In following years Greyhound eventually absorbed the company and the El Segundo factory. The Pickwick NiteCoach continued to be used by Greyhound until 1942 when seats became more valuable than berths.

Chances are slim to non-existent that any Pickwick bus survives today. However, there is an avid collector market for the old 1930s "toy" Pickwick buses. Today hundreds of dollars are paid for these old original cast iron toys on the Internet. One company currently makes model replicas of the Pickwick Greyhound version, 10"H x 8"W x 32.5" L. These will set you back \$895 each. Who wants to buy one for the South Hill Historical Society?

Special thanks goes to Cecil Herbert for furnish-

ing material for this article plus Vern Rockstad and Don Glaser for their recollections. Info for this article was also obtained from the National Bus Trader, May 2002 issue and www.coachbuilt.com

History of the Woodland Bus Co. 1934-1952

by Cecil Herbert

In 1934 Dad (W.H. Herbert) was working in Gig Harbor at the John Dower Lumber Company as a truck driver/crane operator, earning about \$80.00 a month.

My Uncle Russell (R.E. Smith) was driving buses for the Tacoma Bus Company, that operated several bus routes from Tacoma out to various communities, including Midland-Collins-Summit View-Woodland and the Willows. The driver pay then was about \$4.00 a day. The drivers went on strike, demanding \$6.00 a day. The bus company declined the raise in pay and filed for abandonment of the bus routes. Uncle Russell



Cecil Herbert shares his extensive knowledge of Pierce County bus history, at the March 2005 SHHS general meeting. His sister Marilyn Burnett accompanied Cecil. Cecil and Marilyn's uncle, father and mother owned and operated the Woodland Bus Co.

During a drivers' strike for higher wages in the 1930s, The Tacoma Bus Co. shut down, leaving outlying areas of the county such as American Lake, Fort Lewis, Dupont, Steilacoom, Woodland, Lakota Beach, Dash Point etc. with no bus service and the drivers without a job. The enterprising unemployed drivers formed their own bus companies to serve these areas. One of these new businesses was the Woodland Bus Company with routes connecting Tacoma, Midland-Collins-Summit View-Woodland and The Willows.

and several bus drivers for the Tacoma Bus Co. decided to split up the routes and apply to the then Washington Department of Public Works (W.D.P.W.) who regulated all of the bus routes in the state. Application was made to the agency by

R.E. Smith and W.H. Herbert—D/B/A Woodland Bus Company. After several months the application was granted.

In November of 1934, Mom and Dad moved from Gig Harbor to a house on Woodland Road. On December the 11, 1934, the new bus company started operations with a 1923 White 33-passenger bus, purchased from the Longview Public Service Co. for \$900.00.

The communities served were Tacoma to Midland-Collins-Summit View-Woodland-The Willows. The company was totally operated by Dad and Uncle Russell—Uncle Russell as main driver, and Dad as a driver and mechanic. An old three-stall garage, located next to the Woodland Grocery was leased for \$1.00 per year. Business was slow getting started but picked up fairly rapidly.

In 1935 the company, was able to purchase a new bus, an International C-40 33-passenger bus, with a body built by Modern Auto Body Works of Tacoma. The bus was delivered and put into service in late 1935. As 1935-1936 went by, business was stable enough for the company to purchase another new bus. The new bus ordered was the same model as the one purchased in 1935. The new bus was delivered and put into service in the late summer of 1937. From 1937 to early 1941 business went along at a fairly steady pace. By late 1941 when World War Two broke out and gas rationing started, all transportation companies were deluged with crowds of riders. Small transportation companies were unable to purchase new buses, and had to patch the old ones and keep them running to handle

the crowds. The Woodland Bus Company was no exception. Some older buses were purchased from other bus companies. Dad and Uncle Russell would work 15-hour days to keep the buses running.

A new bus garage was built during the war, located on property Mom and Dad had purchased in about 1936. The old garage building still stands at about 105th and Woodland Road. After World War Two (about 1945) the then U.S. Office of Defense Transportation allowed small bus companies to purchase new buses. An application was made to the O.D.T, to purchase a new Ford 29-passenger transit bus. The application was approved, and the new bus was delivered in late 1945.

Business leveled off after the war ended. Another new Ford transit bus was ordered, delivered and placed in service in late 1946. From 1946 to 1949 business remained steady. One day in 1949 Uncle Russell came to me with an offer to sell his interest in the bus company. I had just turned 21 and had been doing service work on the buses. I jumped at the chance and purchased Uncle Russell's interest in the bus company. I worked with Dad running the company until I was called into the military in November of 1950. Dad stayed with the business until 1952. The company was then sold to Stan Ratcliff. Later Stan also purchased the Waller Road-Summit Bus Company-Flossie Howell, and then merged the two companies. Stan operated the two companies as Woodland Bus Company for a number of years. The company changed hands a couple of times until it became a part of Pierce-Transit operations.

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In Memoriam

The South Hill Historical Society
 regrets the passing of

Eunice Barth Gilliam

South Hill Historical Society Membership/Renewal Form

Name _____

Address _____

Phone _____

City _____

State _____

Zip _____

Home E-mail Address _____

Signature _____

Date _____

Renewal, check here

Annual Dues: Society membership \$25.00

Note Please do not send cash.

Make check or M.O. payable to South Hill Historical Society and mail with this application to:

SHHS Membership, 11711 92ND AV E, Puyallup, WA 98373

From the Treasurer

by Ben Peters

As we start a new year, we are extremely grateful for you, our membership, for the support you give our society.

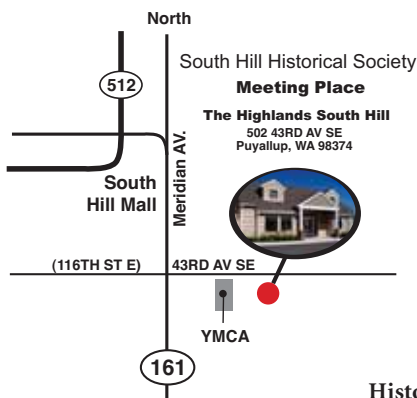
Membership dues and donations are our only source of income so we can publish the newsletter, tape interviews, make displays, pay for the paper, stamps, storage material, and so on. A sticky note reminder is inserted into your newsletter if you are at or near your renewal date.

Please don't forget that we are a 501(C) (3) non-profit organization. Dues, donations, etc. are fully deductible from your income taxes, if you are able to do so.

Where to Find Us

The South Hill Historical Society meets regularly on the **THIRD TUESDAY** of the month 11:15 AM (*No meetings July and August*) at the Highlands in the Community Center . This complex is located at 502 43RD AV SE, adjacent to and east of the Mel Korum YMCA.

We welcome you to our monthly meetings. For more information contact our former president, Paul Hackett, at **(253) 845-7691**.



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To: