



HANGING OUT AT THE NEWTOWN SQUARE HOTEL – 1903

By Doug Humes

I just came upon this photo – actually a larger photo of which this is a cropped section. With a good clean old photo, I have found that you can scan it at a high quality and pull up things in it that you didn't notice at the outset. So I cropped the most interesting part of this photo to focus on the people who are in it.

According to a handwritten notation on the back, the gentlemen at the center of the photo is Dr. M.P. Dickeson of Media, Pennsylvania. He is sitting in a “horseless carriage”, which was probably one of the first ones seen in Delaware County. According to the Chester Times of Aug 8, 1902: “Dr. M. P. Dickeson has purchased the first Locomobile or horseless carriage that has ever come to Rockdale to stay. He arrived home from Philadelphia with it on Tuesday night and will find it very convenient for going on his round of visits and his many trips of various other kinds. The doctor is thoroughly up-to-date in every particular and the handsome new vehicle is the very latest. It is regarded by the denizens of this community as a great curiosity.”

And then just a week later: “Dr. M. P. Dickeson of Chester had a mishap while out riding his automobile. Near Lees Mill in Lenni a horse became frightened at the horseless machine and started to rear and plunge, forcing the doctor's machine into a ditch where it upset. After he righted the machine Dr. Dickeson relighted the fire without replenishing the boiler which was empty and the thing exploded causing a lot of damage.”

But he appears to be back in business in this 1903 photo, tooling around in his new carriage, and stopping to show off to the boys hanging out at the old Newtown Square Hotel. And of course, doctors in those days made house calls, and so while most of his contemporaries were still doing so with a horse and buggy, Dickeson was out on the cutting edge, making his rounds in this new device. But the roads in those days were not paved. On a good dry summer day, they would be firm, but dusty. On a spring day after weeks of rain, the roads would be rutted and muddy. We take our smooth paved roads for granted these days, but in 1903, the roads were there for horses and horse-drawn carts and wagons. And the horses, fueled by hay and oats, would leave their spent fuel on the roads that they passed along, which added a certain aroma to travel as well. Dr. Dickeson had his work cut out for himself to take the carriage out in less than perfect weather conditions.

They gathering of boys – they are a serious and rough looking bunch. The tallest one, dressed in a suit, looks like someone who has a job. Another relatively new invention sits in the foreground, a bicycle. The dangerous high wheelers of the 1870's had given way to the “safety bicycle” of the 1890's – equal size wheels, a steerable front wheel, a chain drive, and pneumatic tires – all dramatic improvements over the earlier versions which resulted in a safer, smoother ride, and a wider popularity as a means of transportation in the early 20th century. So perhaps the boy in the suit owns the bike – a messenger perhaps. When you had to get an important message to someone in those days, you sent a telegram – which went across telegraph wires from one Western Union Office to another one, but was then printed out close to the destination and dispatched to its intended recipient by uniformed messenger boys like this, who would then be tipped. To receive a telegram in those days was an exciting event – though like a late night phone call these days – it could be good or more likely bad news.

The other boys – perhaps they heard the noise of the horseless carriage and ran out to follow the doctor and his carriage up to the hotel. Newtown Square was farm country before World War I, and so these were all boys who likely lived on nearby farms. There was not a lot of action out on the farm. An 1891 newspaper article described the town as follows:

“The village at the present day consists of a general country store, which is also the Newtown Square post office, a country tavern, a town hall, the usual blacksmith shop and wheelwright, and about a dozen dwelling houses. In addition, it has the new “test” station of the long distance telephone company. Such is Newtown Square at the present time.”

As to the hotel and tavern that they are standing in front of, the same visitor had this to say:

“At the present day the old inn has degenerated to an old country tavern, a mere stopping place for the few who still travel the almost deserted turnpike, while the outside benches and bar room chairs offer



circa 1903



Hotel in 1895

a gathering place for the idle gossips of the vicinity – the only exception to the humdrum routine being the days when cattle sales are cried from the tavern porch, or in the winter when some merry sleighing party wakes up the nooks and crannies of the old hostelry for the time being.”

So to be a young boy in those days, and see Doc Dickeson in his new-fangled carriage, and perhaps a Western Union delivery boy, would be a memorable day. And to top it off, someone with a camera was there to take their picture.

This picture walked into our historical society board meeting a few years ago – someone in the community had given it to someone to give to the Society. We love receiving photos like this, or even simply borrowing them so we can scan them and give them back. A picture can be worth a thousand words. This one definitely is. It captures a lot going on in a single moment with a single image. If you have old photos like this – of Marple or Newtown or other local areas or simply undetermined – contact me to see about getting them scanned. We add them to our collection, and it preserves people like Dr. Dickeson and these boys of 1903 for posterity.