

Search for:

[Advanced Search](#)

Showing postings 1 - 22 of 22 in the thread: Local folks who made it big.

Posting: Local folks who made it big	Posting 1
Poster: John B	
Date: 21 August 2005 9:47 PM	
I'd be interested in knowing who from the Willi area made it big (semi or otherwise) , for example in sports , arts , entertainment ... There was Eileen Farrell , the opera singer . Brian Vertifeuille (sp. ?) , who graduated from WHS with me , played in the NFL for a time ...There was a guy who played Major League baseball years ago but his name escapes me ...Who else ?	
Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big	Posting 2
Poster: Ernie Gesner	
Date: 21 August 2005 10:49 PM	
How about Walt Dropo, the Moosup Moose	
Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big	Posting 3
Poster: Godfrey Postlethwaite	
Date: 22 August 2005 7:06 AM	
There's also a famous Willimantic-born baseball player from a century ago called Art Nichols who played for the Chicago Cubs and the St Louis Cardinals in the majors between 1899 and 1903. The family name was actually Meikle, and it was changed at Ellis Island by an immigration officer. Art played in the minor leagues, and for a few Willimantic teams. In one of the local teams was a player called Penney who played with Art and two of Art's brothers. Locals would say the team had three nickels and a penny. This is from a 1936 booklet called the Sports Review: A Resume of Athletic Endeavour in the City of Willimantic, which was reprinted by Claire Meikle in 1983.	
Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big	Posting 4
Poster: mammabear	
Date: 22 August 2005 7:56 AM	
I'm not famous. I will never be on the cover of Time or People magazine, but I think I've made it big... I was born and raised in Windham/Willimantic area, I graduated from Windham High. I was married here 40 years ago. I raised four wonderful children in this area and I am now enjoying the tremendous fulfillment of being a grandmother of five... all of whom are close enough to be with often. No... I'm not famous, and I'm certainly not rich, but in my eyes, I have it all... All that's important anyhow...	
Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big	Posting 5
Poster: Frogpond	
Date: 22 August 2005 9:49 AM	
Great post mammabear. Right on. However, there is a very famous stage and silent movie actor called Charles Smith Abbe (1859-1932) from Windham. He also drew portraits of actors which appeared in magazine, and he published a book of his drawings called "Our Greatest Actors". There's also a opera singer who currently performs at the Metropolitan Opera House in NYC called Maria Donaldi (stage name) who grew up on Pleasant Street.	
Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big	Posting 6
Poster: JayJay	
Date: 22 August 2005 8:15 PM	
How about Ray Beller who played alto sax with the Ray McKinley and Ray Anthony big bands during the '40s & '50s! He was featured many times, but once in particular that I recall in Ray Mc's recording of "Beat Me Daddy, Eight To The Bar" (Ray introducing him as "Mr. Ray Beller and his alto sax") Those were the days of musicians playing music!!!	
Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big	Posting 7
Poster: JayJay	
Date: 22 August 2005 8:22 PM	
Dear Frogpond, Maria is surprised and complimented by your recognition. I thank you for her.	
Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big	Posting 8
Poster: The Threadcity.org Team	
Date: 22 August 2005 10:11 PM	
Ray Beller Oral History conducted May, 1997	
"I was born in New York City in 1920. My father Abraham Beller was born in Russia in 1889, and emigrated to the United States in	

his youth. He arrived in New York City and got a job picking up laundry by horse and wagon from hotels. He made enough money to eventually buy three of the small hotels he was servicing with the laundry. My parents decided it was time to leave New York, as they had a young family, and Pop wound up in Willimantic having purchased a soda plant, the Hosmer Mountain Bottling Company, without knowing a thing about soda—but he had a good business sense and made a go of it.

My two brothers Bernie and Sidney were older and they worked with Dad in the business, but I was more involved in practicing my music. I do recall the spring up on the hill, and every year Pop would send some people up there to clean it out, and keep it flowing. There were several houses attached to that spring, and they were supplied with water. And there was a house way up the hill called the Eagle's Nest. I think it could have been something to do with an old mica mine that was up by the reservoir.

My father also had a great singing voice, and he was involved with the Temple B'nai Israel. He was a great music lover. Back in New York, when he was only making three dollars a week, he would spend 50 cents, for standing room only, to hear Caruso sing in the New York Hippodrome. That's where he spent his Saturday afternoons in those days. He found it difficult when he first came to Connecticut, because he experienced a certain amount of prejudice, a wall of silence in places, but he worked very hard, and became deeply involved and respected in the local community

I was only a young boy when we arrived in Connecticut, but it was in Willimantic that I first started playing the saxophone, when I was about nine or ten years old. I saw a parade in Willimantic and saw this guy playing a saxophone, and I told Pop that that was what I wanted to play. I went to the Windham Street Model School and Windham High School. I started playing the saxophone in high school, and one of the first jobs I had playing was at a strip joint in Danielson. One of the players was Ted Haddad, and we played for a couple of dollars per night at Bill Sledjeski's Shell Chateau. Then I started playing with the Matty Mattison Orchestra in Willimantic. Lester Foster was a singer, and Bill Sledjeski's brother was a fine piano player with that band. There was also a girl singer called Evette, and she eventually married Lester. Matty was in the automobile business, and Tommy Provone, who had the Cadillac agency, also played in that band. There were 16 musicians, and we played more dance music than jazz. We played all over New England. We played down in Misquamicut in the old dance hall there, before the hurricane blew it down, and we played in Hartford at the Women's club.

I studied music in Willimantic with Charlie Wheeler, the local impresario who put on minstrel shows at the Gem Theater. When I was a kid I was a boy soprano singer, and did a radio show on WDRG and was known as the "Boy Soprano of Willimantic." I was in fifth or sixth grade, and my dad drove me over to Hartford to do the show, every other week. So I was singing before I started playing. Charlie Wheeler took an interest in me, and taught me how to play the saxophone. He lived on Pleasant Street, and was a highly schooled musician who had graduated from the Conservatory in Boston. He also ran a local orchestra. My voice changed when I was about 12 or 13, so then I concentrated on the saxophone.

Willimantic was a lively little town in the 1930s. There was Lindy's Restaurant, but I had little chance to socialize because I was out two or three nights a week playing in the band. We played at the "Tab" on Valley Street. It was a wonderful place for people to meet, dance and make friends.

I left Willimantic in 1938, and went out to Indiana University to study music. It was a great school. I majored in clarinet. When the war broke out, I went to New York City to join up. But before I went into the Navy, I played in several bands. I eventually enlisted in Norfolk, Virginia, with a good friend of mine, Dean Kincaid, who was a big-time arranger who wrote some wonderful things for Tommy Dorsey. We played in the Navy Band. I played lead alto sax and Dean did the arranging. Every Friday we did a radio show, "This is your Navy" which went coast to coast. We did a lot of recruiting on Barbara Hutton's yacht (the Woolworth heiress) around the Chesapeake Bay area. We were then recruited to go on a new aircraft carrier called the Franklin. The leader of the band then was called Saxy Dowell, who wrote a lot of songs. We went out to the Pacific and had a rough time there. But we survived that and came back to New York City at the end of 1945.

I checked in the Piccadilly Hotel up on 45th street in New York, and soon afterward Benny Goodman's band manager came to see me. I was unemployed at the time, just having left the navy. He asked me what I was doing, and then said that I had to go over to the band as Goodman's lead alto player, Bill Shine, was laid in the hotel elevator, unable to go on. I went over to the Paramount Theater, and a not long afterwards I was on stage with the Benny Goodman Orchestra! After the show, Goodman came over and asked what I was doing, and I explained that I had just left the Navy. He asked me to join the band full-time. After the that engagement, we played the 500 club in New York for eight weeks. It was a marvelous experience.

I later got the opportunity to play for Glenn Gray's Casa Loma Orchestra, out in California. I think it was in 1947 that we played at the Hollywood Academy Awards at the theater out there, but it wasn't the big thing then, that it is now. But we wore white tie and tails. I can't recall who won the awards that year, because I was too involved in my music. I was with the Glen Gray outfit for about 18 months, then Ray McKinley, from Glenn Miller's Orchestra, called me to tell me that he was starting a band and asked me if I'd like to join him. I had a good reputation as a sax player and was highly rated for years in the Down Beat magazine, reaching as high as number five in the country in 1948. We traveled coast-to-coast playing at hotels and one night stands, even locally like the State Theater in Hartford. I got sick of the one night stands, and the band music, which was becoming too commercial, and gave McKinley one month's notice and came back to Willimantic.

I arrived back in Willimantic around 1950 and took over the Rock Garden Restaurant. I met my wife, who is from Holyoke, Mass, when I was at the restaurant. I used to have some top name artists at the Rock Garden, and people came from miles around to see them perform; people I had known in the Big Band days, like Buddy Hackett, Glenn Miller's trumpet player, and Horace Silver, a famous jazz pianist. We had a big following from Hartford, particularly among the Black population there, who would travel all the way to Willimantic for the performances, at "the hottest spot in Connecticut!" He needed a operation. I later worked as a salesman for smoking (tobacco) pipes, doing a complete West Coast tour for them with my wife before returning to Connecticut to settle down, and opening a music store in Manchester."

Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big
Poster: Julie

Posting 9

Date: 23 August 2005 6:12 AM

Fascinating stuff! And Ray Beller was from Willimantic? Who knew?

A quick web search for Ray Beller found this cd

http://www.worldsrecords.com/pages/artists/m/mckinley_ray/ray_mckinley_31946.html

Talking of music, but coming forward in time, I think Mansfield's Peter Torkelson (Peter Tork of Monkees fame) deserves a mention. I know he wasn't born in Willimantic, but when he was at college I think he worked in Willimantic at American Thread

Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big
Poster: Tony Insalaco
Date: 23 August 2005 8:12 PM

Posting 10

When I was in law school years ago I discovered that the famous Judge Zepheniah Swift (1759-1823) was from Windham -- so I guess he counts as local! He compiled "Swift's Digest," which still ranks among the classics of American law. Its full title is "A System of Laws of the State of Connecticut (Windham: the author, 1795)". It was the first comprehensive treatise on American law of any kind. Swift lived in a big mansion in Windham, which burnt down years ago. I was told that it stood on the east side of Ballamahack Road.

OK, he's no Monkee, but he's a famous local!

Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big
Poster: Kate Fortier
Date: 23 August 2005 8:43 PM

Posting 11

For those of use who are into current pop music, two members of the band Weezer graduated from E.O. Smith High School the year I started, back in '88. Today, they're kind of alternative pop guys who's stage image is kind of a throwback to '60s era boy bands.

But, I remember them with giant, teased-up, sprayed-out metal haircuts. My fondest memory of them was that they were in a barbershop quartet and they performed at an end-of-year school assembly. They nailed their performance and I remember them literally jumping and hugging each other off stage with excitement. Who knew where that would take them!?

Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big
Poster: Dagmar Noll
Date: 24 August 2005 7:03 AM

Posting 12

Julie -

Peter Tork's band, the Mansfield Hollow Promises, will be playing at Mansfield Hollow State Park Saturday, Sept. 24, 4:00 p.m. (raindate, Oct. 1). Fireworks will start at dark. And the event is free!

Dagmar

Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big
Poster: Dagmar Noll
Date: 24 August 2005 7:07 AM

Posting 13

Kate -

Weezer did the sweater song, right? "If you want to destroy my sweater (Whoaaa-O) pull this thread as I walk away (as I walk away!)..."

Or was that someone else...

Dagmar

Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big
Poster: Kate Fortier
Date: 24 August 2005 11:53 AM

Posting 14

Dagmar ... You got it ... The Sweater Song, Buddy Holly (remember the video was set in Al's diner from Happy Days?), and they've got one out right now, in fact (plays on I98 daily), that I can't remember the name of. Their music is totally fun.

Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big
Poster: Kate Fortier
Date: 24 August 2005 11:59 AM

Posting 15

Speaking of Peter Tork ... I remember going to the library at E.O. Smith with my best friend, Jamie, (who's parents knew Mr. Tork back in the day and told me about him) to look at old yearbooks to find him. Sure enough, there he was ... A member of one of the first few classes to graduate from the school, which was built in '55. A very handsome picture of a young man with short (yes, short) wavy hair. I was GIDDY about it, being a HUGE Monkees fan. (I have the entire series on video and all their albums.) Big excitement for a 15/16-year-old girl. ;)

Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big Posting 16
 Poster: Julie
 Date: 24 August 2005 2:12 PM

Eleazer Wheelock? Born in Windham, the founder of Dartmouth College!

Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big Posting 17
 Poster: Godfrey Postlethwaite
 Date: 25 August 2005 5:49 AM

This isn't quite in the category of "making it big" but when I was a kid there was lots of talk of a Willimantic boy named Stanley Morrill who was an ace fighter pilot. He was based in England during World War 2, and I think his job was to protect the flying fortresses conducting daytime bombing raids over Germany. I think he was killed in action towards the end of the war. Years ago I saw his gravestone, and it had a plane on it. His father ran a printing business in town, on Church street I think. Can anyone else recall him?

Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big Posting 18
 Poster: JayJay
 Date: 27 August 2005 8:40 PM

Stanley Morrill was a "big brother" to a lot of us in the neighborhood back in the mid & late 30's. He built a 'double-ripper sled" on which 5 or 6 of us could sit down on, with him as the driver and we had many a great ride down South Street hill, which, when conditions were right, was set aside for sledding, with a wide sand strip near South Park Street. Some months back there were some Forum entries about favorite sledding spots in the city. I was tempted to relate this story then. Yes, Stan was one of Willimantic's wartime heroes. The Chronical would carry the reports of his "kills", (total 9) and we were all devastated the day his death was reported. It was rather like a movie script, the build up to tragedy. The family lived on upper John Street and I believe his sister, Marion was in my sister's WHS class of 1936. Check out the following link:

http://www.web-birds.com/8th/56/62nd/62nd_squadron.htm
 (8th Air Force, 56th Fighter Group, 62nd Fighter Squadron)

There is a listing of the members of the squadron, and a click on the squadron logo (a bulldog) will take you to a series of photos. Way down you'll find Stan, with a big grin, standing on the wing of his P47 Thunderbolt. A tragic way to "make it big" Thank you, Stan.

Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big Posting 19
 Poster: Godfrey Postlethwaite
 Date: 28 August 2005 8:51 AM

Thanks for that Jay Jay. What wonderful photographs of Stanley, too. A true Willimantic hero! And what wonderful remembrances of sledding in the old days. This has made my day.

Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big Posting 20
 Poster: bill PHD MEEHAN
 Date: 28 August 2005 11:07 AM

Lester Foster made it big singing all over new england. He is still with use.

He also was very successful in the real-state business as well. He also gave a great deal to the community of willimantic Mr. foster was chairperson of the board of finance, the hospital and foster development.

Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big Posting 21
 Poster: Frogpond
 Date: 28 August 2005 2:47 PM

The real Frogpond here -- not the spammer who posed as me, ironic and julie.

Willimantic was home to someone who was big when he was born! Many years ago I came upon a reference at Yale about Austrian archduke, Leopold Lorraine, who lived in Willimantic from about 1953. He was part of the Hapsburg dynasty, but fell on hard times. He worked at American Screw Company, lived on Valley Street, and died in Willimantic in 1958.

He's noted here:

<http://www.antiquesatoz.com/habsburg/h-l.htm> (scroll down to leopold)

He's mentioned here also:

<http://www.newgotha.org/part1/austscgn.htm>

Here's an excerpt from the above. I see he was married to Baroness Dagmar. Now, that names rings a bell:

1). Archduke Leopold Maria Alphons Blanka Karl Anton Beatrix Raphael Michael Joseph Peter Ignatz, b at Agram 30 Jan 1897; d at Willimantic, Connecticut, USA 14 Mar 1958 (became a naturalized citizen of the USA May 1953 as Leopold Lorraine); m (non-dynastic) 1stly at Vienna 12 Apr 1919 (m diss by div 1931), Baroness Dagmar (b at Agram 15 Jul 1898; d at Lausanne 15 Nov 1967), created Baroness v. Wolfenau by the Emperor Karl 12 Feb 1922 but did not use this title, dau of Wladimir, Baron Nicolic-

Podrinska and Baroness Ella Scotti. He m (non-dynastic) 2ndly atUSA, Alice (b New York State 20 Jan 1894; d at New York 25 Aug 1960), dau of Alexander LyndenCoburn and Ann Desmore Gibson, and had issue by his first wife.

Posting: Re: Local folks who made it big
Poster: John B
Date: 29 August 2005 7:05 AM

Posting 22

Bill , TC Team ...

This from Michael Foster , Les' son . Thanks to the internet , we re-established contact about a year ago :

" Yep...my Dad is Lester...and he and my Mom were both vocalists in their teens and twenties with some pretty good Big Bands. At one time...my Dad was offered a job as vocalist with Tommy Dorsey...but I think it wasn't in the cards...the family was starting to happen...so he turned it down. He was a very good singer (still is actually, considering he is 86.) The two of them did a lot of work around Eastern Connecticut and Massachusetts...primarily with the Mattie Mattison Big Band. "

BTW , Michael is still very active musically , and still recording . I hope he'll chime in here once he gets back from Hawaii in about a week