

Reader comments bring out this region's rich history



Aug 1, 1995

Tom Beardsley

Thanks to those who have contacted me about this column since it began in May. Today it is turned over to them.

Margaret Lombardo, the granddaughter of "Paul" Francis Moriarty (1851-1943), called to say that his first name was "Patrick." Patrick was the "Moriarty" in the plumbing firm Moriarty and Rafferty. Patrick's father had emigrated to Canada from Dingle, Ireland, in the 1840s and later worked a farm in Merrow. Patrick often recalled the day in 1865 when someone rode to their farm to tell them of Abraham Lincoln's assassination.

Margaret explained that her grandfather's partner was the father of Brae and Bob Rafferty, the surgeon and dentist who served the community for many years. Brae Rafferty was an active member of the Windham Historical Society.

Margaret (Donahue) Lombardo was a "Fairview player" in the 1950s in Dr. Spector's theater in his Fairview Avenue house. She remembered that Dr. Spector cut a hole in the floor of the large room to locate a floodlight. Dr. Spector's son,

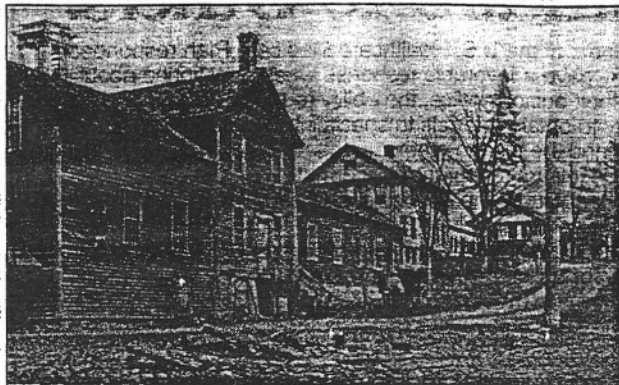


Calista Whitehouse, shown at left in an 1883 photograph, worked at the Atwoodville silk mill. She lived in the boarding house next to the mill, which can be seen, right, in a 1906 photograph.

Barney, sent me a fascinating letter about that building, recalling that it was inspired by Mark Twain's house in Hartford. The rooms had chestnut paneling and fireplaces built of tiles specially imported from England.

Harriet Lyman called to say that Willimantic had a hospital not mentioned in my June 6 article. Clark Hospital operated on Jackson Street from the early 1920s until 1933. It was administered by Harriet's maternal aunts, Leola and Leone Clark, who were registered nurses. It is now the site of the Potter Funeral Home.

Alice Porter's mother, Calista Whitehouse (1864-1942), and father, Edwin H. Jacobs (1861-1929), worked in the Atwoodville silk mill in the 1880s. They later worked a farm in Windham, off Route



203. Alice recalls her father hitching sleds and wagons to ride into Willimantic to visit fairs, movie houses and the Loomer opera house. Edwin Jacobs peddled milk, cream and vegetables in Willimantic in the early 1900s. Alice worked in Hartson's mill in North Windham from 1926 until 1942, when she moved to Willimantic's newest industry, the Electro-Motive Co. on Park Street. She retired from there in 1971.

Walt Phillips believes that the Electro-Motive Co. located in Willimantic some years before 1939; the year in the May 31 Josephine Greer article. He thinks it began in the old Rossie Velvet mill on Park Street in the late 1920s or the early 1930s. However, records reveal that Electro-Motive arrived in Willimantic from New

York in April 1939. No trace can be located of the company in Willimantic before that date.

Tony Clark thinks the tunnel recently located under Church Street may not have been, as I suggested, a communication tunnel between the Holland silk mills, but part of a culvert to divert a small river or stream. Valley Street was laid out in 1860 in a very wet and marshy area and numerous freshwater springs supplied the village with its drinking water. Indeed, Goodridge Holland built a spring-fed fountain in his Church Street home, and directed the flow into his nearby silk mill for workers' refreshment.

Joe Kirby reminded me that the Atwood Co., which left Willimantic in 1876, returned

to the city in the early 1900s. In 1910, George Stiles' Willimantic Machine Co. merged with the Stonington-based Atwood Co. and built a new factory on Milk Street adjacent to the railroad, and manufactured silk machinery in it until 1931. In 1935 the vacant factory was purchased by the Roselin Co.

Kirby has a passion for Willimantic. He was born in St. Joseph's Hospital in 1914, the son of an Irish-American railroad worker. His mother had lived in the Quidnick-Windham Cotton Co.'s boarding houses, which stood on Memorial Park. His first job was an NRA-sponsored position as a reeler in American Thread's giant Mill No. 4. He regrets that *the Chronicle* and the Savings Institute have dropped the name "Willimantic." And he believes that Windham Mills should be called "Willimantic Mills." As far as he's concerned, the town of Windham would be nothing had it not been for the wealth generated by the old borough and city of Willimantic.

Keep those phone calls and letters coming. Please contact me to correct any errors, and to resurrect long-forgotten information.

Tom Beardsley, a free lance public historian, was the scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum from 1990 to 1995.

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