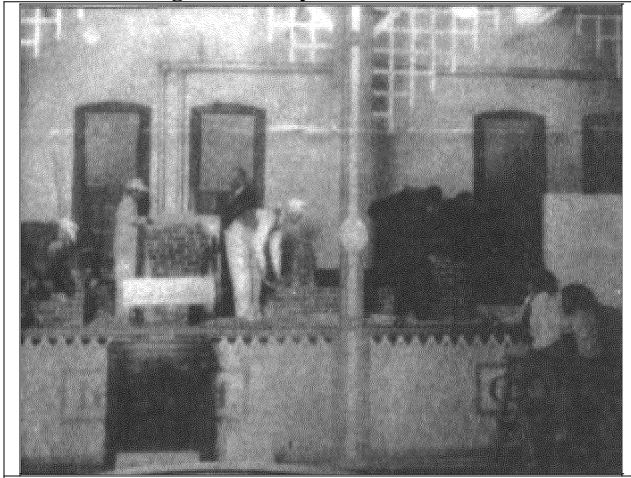


School Was a Resounding Success (Part 2 of 7)

This interior photograph of the remodeled Turner silk mill was taken in 1928, shortly after it opened as the Willimantic Trade School. Students are at work training as bricklayers.



The Willimantic Trade school opened in September, 1928, as a building trades facility under the directorship of Otto Nyffler. A masonry department was located in the mill basement, the first floor housed a carpentry department, and the second floor was converted into plumbing and painting departments. Electrical and drafting Departments were installed on the third floor, along with a classroom. Initially, the students studied and trained for 44 hours each week, and enjoyed a two week vacation in the summer. School hours were from 8 am until noon, and 1 pm until 5 pm. Monday

through Friday, and 8 am until noon on Saturdays.

The school's first year, 1928/29 was reported as a resounding success. One hundred and two students had enrolled in that year, 72 from Willimantic and 30 from adjacent towns. Director Nyffler organized a school "Inspection Night" on May 7, 1929, and an estimated 1,500 people tour the new Trade School facility located in the city's historic Turner Silk Mill. Nyffler explained to reporters, and to the school's fiscally-conservative critics, that the town of Windham furnished the schools heat, light, water and power, and paid for a janitor. The state paid for all other equipment and operating expenses. Also, the school's student's had provided the majority of the labor to convert the old mill into a modern training facility. After taking the tour, guests were invited to a concert held by the trade School's band, conducted by Charles Wheeler in the second floor carpentry facility. Willimantic Trade School students had to complete 4,800 clock hours of instruction to earn their trade apprentice certificate. Evening classes commenced in December, 1928. Full time students were involved also involved in music and athletic pastimes, and director Otto Nyffler established an athletic field on land owned by him in Ridges district of Mansfield next to the Willimantic River. Basketball and baseball teams were also established. The basketball team played their games in the Center Street Armory, and the YMCA building on Valley Street.

The school's band was particularly popular. A. E. Lyman and N. C. Wheeler were the bands first directors, and rehearsals were held every Wednesday afternoon. By 1929, almost 25% of the school's entire enrollment was playing in its band. Concerts were held in the local community and in April, 1932 the band made its debut on the radio when it played a half hour concert transmitted live by Storrs radio station WCAC s.

The Wall Street Stock market had crashed just one year after the opening of the Willimantic Trade

School Was a Resounding Success

School, and the resultant Depression hit its operation. During the early 1930s, the school was criticized by the local Chamber of Commerce, labor organizations and the NRA for siphoning business away from established tradesmen and companies. It was claimed that some of the high unemployment rates among builders was caused by the low labor costs of trade school students. The school's trade was building, and new construction always comes to a stop during economic downturns. At the root of the criticism, was the trade school labor used in building local realtor Zepherin Coutu's new house at 55 Summit Street in 1931.

The Willimantic Trade School's director was furious that his students should come under such an attack, and he responded in a letter published in the Chronicle in October 1933. Director Nyffler, while insisting that his school lived up to the spirit of the NRA, also strongly defended the overall role of trade schools. He believed that they were helping boys turn away from the hoodlumism that was sweeping the country, and helping them to apply their knowledge and skills to earn a living, instead of having to turn to the "jimmy" or radical politics.

END OF PART TWO: TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK