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Willimantic Fire Department

The Union Street fire of 1953 was finally brought under control, but Milevitz's Men's Clothing Store and Lindy's Restaurant were temporarily put out of business.

'53 fire damaged 2 historic buildings



Tom
Beardsley

On Jan. 30, 1953, St. Mary's Parochial School on Valley Street burned to the ground. The fire shocked the city, and stimulated a supreme community effort which led to the historic school being rebuilt within a year.

However on Feb. 28, 1953, exactly four weeks and one day after the St. Mary School blaze, the people of Willimantic awoke to learn of another serious fire, which seriously damaged two historic buildings located on Union Street.

Union Street was laid through to the east end of the borough in the years following the Civil War. It rapidly developed into an important commercial area, and by the 1880s the narrow strip of land that divided Main and Union, east of Lincoln Square, was packed with businesses. This section of Willimantic was demolished in 1974 during redevelopment, but that area may have been destroyed 21 years earlier, if not for the swift response of the Willimantic Fire

Department.

The alarm was sounded in the fire department's Bank Street headquarters at 8:36 a.m. Fire Chief J. Leo Rivard and his men arrived to see the flames licking across Union Street from the front of Lindy's Restaurant on the north side of Union Street. The Willimantic firemen were quickly joined by men from the volunteer fire departments from Columbia and Eagleville. They aimed their hoses at the blazing wood frame building occupied by Lindy's and three second-story tenements. But it was too late. The flames had gutted the restaurant building and were quickly spreading to the neighboring building, occupied by Albert Milevitz's Men's Clothing Store.

The fire began in Lindy's kitchen and rapidly engulfed the building. One of the residents of the apartments was rescued by firemen. Thomas Knott was treated at Windham Hospital as an outpatient. He suffered from eye and throat irritation caused by the dense smoke.

The fire attracted several hundred spectators, and the Police Chief Frederick R. Laramie and his men found it necessary to cordon off the area. The black, billowing smoke made the area adjacent

to the stretch of the railroad tracks from Main to Union almost unrecognizable.

The blaze destroyed the apartments above Lindy's, but left the restaurant relatively untouched. But the smoke and water damage made the restaurant unusable. The fire also gutted Milevitz's, but the firemen rescued large amounts of clothing and placed it beneath tarpaulin sheets before the fire spread from the neighboring restaurant building.

The department's first-aid man, George Farley, was at the scene with an emergency unit and treated several of the firemen for smoke inhalation and minor injuries. Kenneth McCall of the Eagleville department had a nail removed from his foot, local firemen Louis Attardo and Francis Smith were treated for smoke inhalation, George Thompson suffered a burnt right hand, and hoseman Francis O'Brien had an eye injury.

The western end of Union Street thus escaped the flames — but it was helpless in the face of the 1970s redevelopment bulldozers.

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