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The Costello family name is permanently linked to city

Part Three

It came as a tremendous shock for the workers at Willimantic's S.P.S. Silk Co. when owner Walter J. Costello announced that the business had to be liquidated. Costello had just returned home from a business trip in 1928, only to discover that his partner had absconded with the company's funds.

Walter J. Costello was a central figure in Willimantic's silk industry for more than 40 years. He had began work in the A. G. Turner Co.'s Bank Street silk mill in 1891. But now his company was in liquidation. Costello hoped his long experience in silk manufacturing could be used by other companies in town.

Willimantic's silk industry had began by the transference of small industries from neighboring Mansfield to the growing borough after the Civil War. The Holland, Natchaug, Windham, Chaffee and Turner Cos. dominated the local industry until the 1920s, when smaller companies such as the Washburn, S.P.S., Uncas, Corn, Domestic and Kobe, companies took their place, until their closure before and during World War II.

Walter Costello, a respected figure, found employment as a salesman for several of those companies. His entrepreneurial



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spirit then also led to the publication of the Willimantic News, an undertaking that even his daughter Alice was not aware of. Costello also worked as a manager of a theater in Plainfield. When World War II broke out, he was 65, but was determined to play a part in the war effort, and worked at the Colts arms factory in Hartford. He carried on working into the 1950s as a city assessor.

After a long and active life, this considerable figure in the city's community and industrial life, passed away at the Hillside Convalescent Home in South Windham, at age 90. His funeral was held from 71 Prospect St., followed by a solemn requiem high mass at St. Joseph's. The service was conducted by the Rev. Father Flynn. Mrs. E.R. Portelance was organist, and Arthur J. Roy, Ernest John and Dennis Tormey were soloists. There was a large contingent from the Knights of Columbus Council No. 14, San Jose Assembly. Costello was buried in the St.

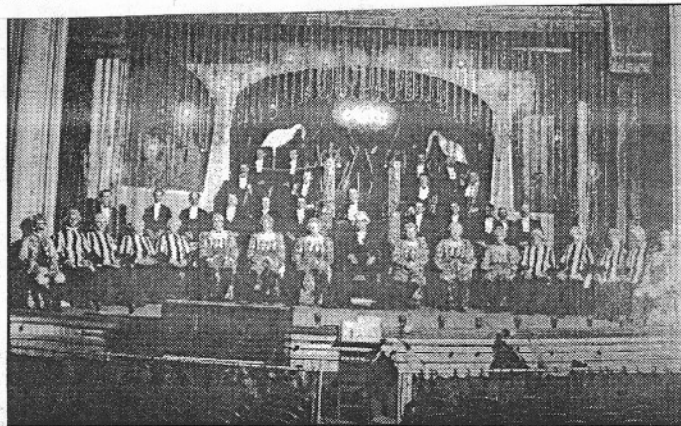
Joseph's Cemetery, and the coffin bearers were his grandsons, Francis St. George, George Parker, James Parker, Richard Costello, Michael Costello and Donald Costello.

The Costello story may have been forgotten if not for Walter's daughter, Alice. Alice, born in 1914, recognized the family name in a previous article that discussed the publication of a Willimantic newspaper in 1937 by her 62-year-old father Walter Costello.

She was educated at St. Joseph School and Windham High School. She graduated in 1933, at the height of the Depression, but found a job working in childcare for a family on North Street for \$3 a week. The following year she was hired by the city of Willimantic as secretary to Windham engineer John Collins, whose office was located on the second floor of the Loomer Opera House block.

Alice recalled Willimantic's famous theater well. She had performed there as one of Charlie Wheeler's minstrels, and sang duos with Dennis Tormey. She was following in her father's footsteps, as Walter had performed there in the early years of the century in shows that had originally been performed on Broadway.

The Opera House theater was built by lumber magnate Silas



Willimantic Fire Department

This rare photograph reveals the interior of the Loomer Opera House, Willimantic's theater from 1879-1940, and the scene of many Costello family performances. Featured in the photograph are members of the Willimantic Fire Department, taking part in a 1910 minstrel show.

Loomer in 1879, and became the center of entertainment in eastern Connecticut, seating more than 1,100 people. It was a favorite location of traveling vaudeville shows in the 19th century, until the cinema came along and bit into its audience. The Loomer Opera house was demolished in 1940, but Alice remembers the theater's impressive large chandelier, its private boxes and plush sheets.

Thanks to John Coffins, Alice's name became permanently linked with the old city of Willimantic and the town of Windham in the 1930s, when the town engineer decided to name two new roads for his secretary. The new road being built on the South Windham Road was named Alice Street. Collins also named the new street he laid through from Route 32 to Route 6 after his

young secretary. It's now known as Capital Drive, and was recently re-laid, but it was originally named Alice Street.

Alice Costello was married on January 13, 1940, at St. Joseph Church to Ernest Parker, the son of a paper mill supervisor from Versailles, who she had met at an event at Recreation Park. The couple lived at 30 Oak St. until 1959, when they built a house just over the town line at Adams Height Road in Lebanon.

Alice had also worked for Brand Rex in their North Street factory, and for an accountant. In 1960 she began work as a librarian at the Willimantic State College, a job she held until her retirement in 1980. Alice is living in retirement, just over the border in Lebanon, a representative of Willimantic