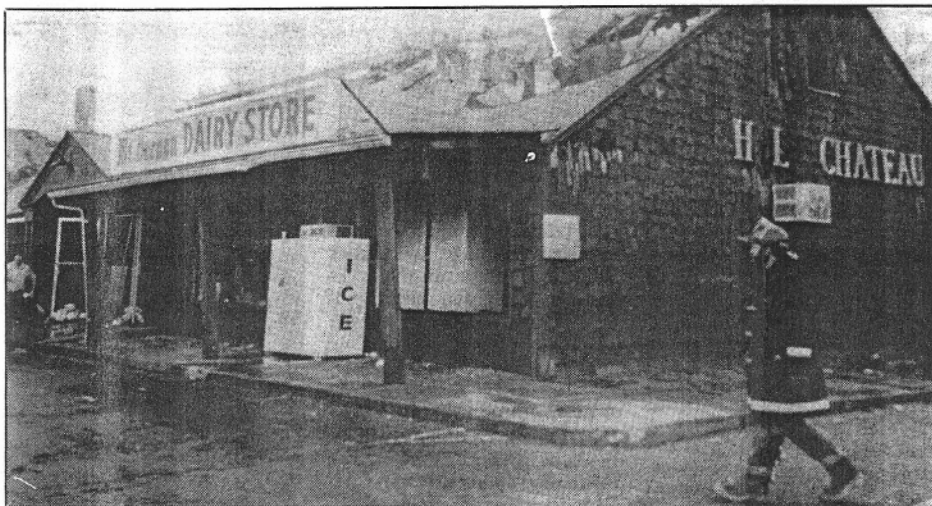


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Willimantic Fire Department

A fireman surveys the scene of the Shell Chateau fire, shortly after it had been brought under control.

Shell Chateau goes up in flames

On July 14, 1979, Willimantic tragically lost one of its famous landmarks, a highly popular restaurant and watering hole known as the Shell Chateau. It had been located at the junction of routes 32 and 6 since 1936 when it was built by Benny Hotchberg.

In 1979, the famous restaurant and bar was owned by Angela Blossick, whose father, William Sledjeski, had purchased it from Hotchberg in the 1940s. In its heyday, the Shell Chateau was Willimantic's premier night spot with live music and ballroom dancing. It was located in a perfect position on the main New York-to-Boston highway before the interstates were built, and it attracted much business from passing trade. Al Saba, "Mr. Willimantic," worked at the Shell Chateau as a singing waiter when it first opened, and he recalled the tremendous crowds they used to get for Sunday night polka dances.

Around 20 or so patrons in the Shell Chateau were just completing their late-night cocktails in the early hours of the morning of July 14, 1979, when the odor of smoke was detected. A visitor to the restroom noticed flames shooting from the ceiling, and bartender Steve Byrne quickly evacuated the building.

The restaurant's phone was dead, but local policeman Cliff Spinner was passing by and radioed the Willimantic Fire Department, but by the time they had arrived a few minutes later, the flames had spread to the upper part of the building and were shooting through the roof. As the fire took hold, the flames leapt more than 40 feet



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into the air — and attracted a crowd estimated at more than 500 people. The fire totally destroyed the Shell Chateau bar, restaurant and a convenience store.

It was estimated that more than 100 firemen fought the blaze, many traveling the short distances from adjacent towns. There were only two slight injuries — back strains sustained by the heavily-clad men fighting the blaze in the humid night air.

Fire Chief Charles Monzillo told reporters that the blaze started in the building's attic. The original section of the Shell Chateau building was partially destroyed, but the recent western addition to the building was saved. This section contained the offices of Fireside Realty and Maryann's Haircraft. Joni's Ceramic Studio, located in the west corner of the original building, received heavier damage, but owner Joni Healy managed to save much of her stock.

The firefighting operation began at 1:41 a.m., but it was not until 4:21 a.m. that the fire was brought under control. The Mount Vernon Dairy Store at the east end of the building was totally destroyed.

Joni Healy was not deterred by the fire, and quickly contacted Max Foster about her insurance, and to check if he

had anything to rent. Bob Goric, the district manager of the Mount Vernon store, said he had no idea whether the company would locate elsewhere in Willimantic or not. Tom Riquier owned the vending machines in the restaurant's bar and grill, and he was delighted that none of his equipment, valued at \$6,500, was damaged, save for a cigarette machine in a back room. Maryann Haddad of Columbia announced that she would be open for business since the fire had not touched her business. Gene Samartino owned Fireside Realty, but it was obvious that the business would not be reopening there since a hole had been knocked in the back wall of the office to assist firefighting, and the office floors were flooded.

The Shell Chateau fire had generated two noticeable ironies. Several months previously, the "S" in the Shell Chateau sign had fallen off, presenting passersby with the name "Hell Chateau." This sign was soon engulfed in flames, providing an hellish vision! And it did not escape anyone's notice that the insurance company in the building had an apt name, "Fireside Realty."

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