

History

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Rolley article paints colorful picture of city

Part One

This series, which looks at Willimantic through the eyes of the December 1945 edition of the magazine *Connecticut Circle*, continues with a review of an article written by William Rolley, and entitled "Willimantic, the Thread City."



Tom
Beardsley

Rolley introduced his readers to 1945 Willimantic by describing the city as he entered it from the west. He pointed out the numerous tenements connected to the extensive cotton mills which had once operated on Bridge Street, and named the yellow, white, stone, and brick rows. And parallel to Main Street, next to the river, he recounted that there once stood duck, paper and grist mills.

Although Rolley did not refer to "Sodom," the name given to the raucous, early 19th century community which grew

around Willimantic's first cotton mill in the 1820s, he wrote of the birth of industrialism in Willimantic by stating that, "the somewhat aristocratic folk of the easy-going and conservative town of Windham Center rather looked upon the Willimantic dwellers as hopelessly plebeian, but the hopeless plebeians were not disturbed by this attitude, and the tables were turned." Rolley was referring to the fact that Windham Center was then in decline, whereas Willimantic was booming in the post-war period.

Research into the 19th century history of Willimantic reveals a great deal of Yankee discrimination towards the incoming Irish and French-Canadian immigrants. By 1945 the Irish community was wholly integrated, whereas the city still had a distinct French-Canadian flavor. Rolley mentioned Willimantic's first French-Canadian immigrants of the 1860s, and referred to their 1945 descendants as "frugal, industrious and hard working."

He also mentions Willimantic's rugged and beautiful countryside, and alludes to an old Willimantic tradition of "hanging May baskets." These



Main Street, Willimantic, looking west from Lincoln Square in the fall of 1945.

baskets were filled with sweets and love notes, and hung at prospective sweetheart's doors on May 1 each year. "It was a gay night, and sad indeed was the boy and girl who failed to receive a May basket."

Rolley interviewed locals for the article, and many mentioned the swimming hole for young men called the "Yellow Sand," which was located one half mile up the Willimantic River above the Windham Co.'s dam. This was one of the several wide coves which also pro-

vided fine skating parks during the winter months.

Rolley outlined the history of the old borough of Willimantic, formed in 1833. The railroad arrived in 1849, new streets were laid out in 1862, and in 1885 the borough was provided with a public water works and a sewage system. The borough became a city in 1893, and electric lights, modern fire-fighting equipment and trolley cars quickly followed. The first telephone was installed in 1880, but in 1945 "lines stretch out into rural districts so that

most farm houses are within as close touch of everything in Willimantic as if they were in the city limits."

Rolley was impressed with the offices of the American Thread Co. In those days they were located in the building which today houses the Windham Textile and History Museum. He referred to the Dunham Hall Library, which had closed during World War II. The library had operated between 1878 and 1941. When it closed it had more than 8,000 books.