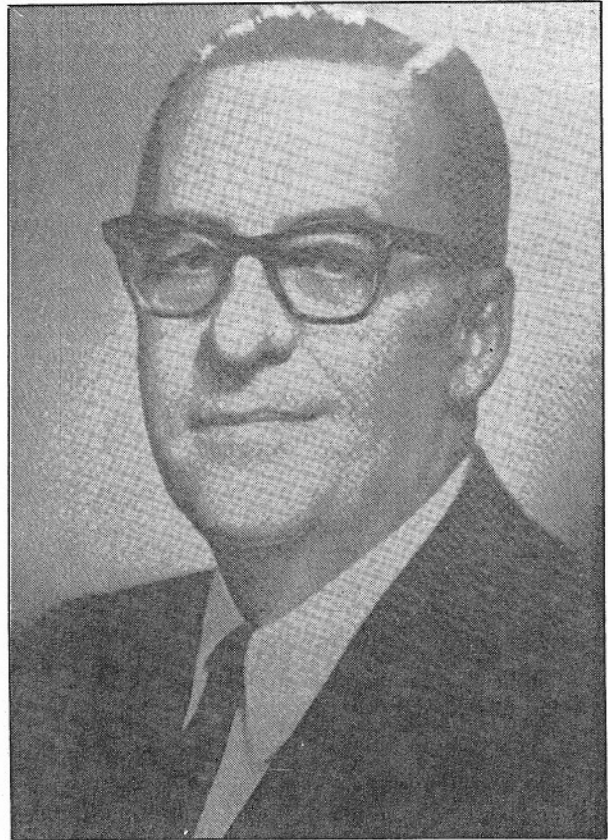


History

Magazine writer impressed by ATCO



Tom
Beardsley



Edwin Burton Shaw, American Thread Co.'s manager in 1945.

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We continue this look at Willimantic in 1945 through the eyes of several writers who visited the city to prepare a special issue of the magazine *Connecticut Circle*, featuring articles on the expanding city's people and industries. One of the writers, Thomas Phillips, was given a tour of the Willimantic plant of the American Thread Co. by its manager, Edwin B. Shaw. Phillips entitled his article, "No Strings Attached."

Phillips admitted that this was his first ever visit to the city of Willimantic. He noted that the life of the community seemed to revolve around its "gray, granite and red brick mills." He opened the piece with a brief history of Willimantic's American Thread Co., and recounted that it had begun life in 1854 as the Willimantic Linen Co., which subsequently pioneered research which produced America's first home-manufactured cotton thread. This was made possible by the inclusion in the Willimantic mills of primitive humidifiers, which reproduced the wet, damp conditions of the Yorkshire, Lancashire and Scottish valleys, famed for their high quality cotton thread.

The author entered the company's offices at 322 Main St. on a late fall day in 1945. These offices are better known today as the home of the Windham Textile and History Museum. Phillip traveled through, "a maze of desks and busy people doing payroll, expediting and other administration work, and entered into the office of Edwin B. Shaw, Plant Manager." Shaw explained to Phillips the whole process of manufacturing cotton thread in Willimantic. It began with

the bales of raw cotton from Egypt and the Mississippi Delta. The bails were carefully tested for impurities, carded for fiber parallelization, and combed to make fibers of similar length. After those processes, the cotton was one quarter of its original bail weight. The spinning and plying operations followed, and finally the thread was bleached and dyed into thousands of shades, and finished and glazed.

"Mr. Shaw invited me to see the plant, upstairs, downstairs, under streets, over streets, through miles of equipment." Phillips was greatly impressed by ATCO's, "complete and modern research division containing a mill laboratory and research department which continually develops and tests new threads, and also reproduces wear conditions in varying climates."

In 1945, ATCO was primarily engaged in the manufacture of industrial sewing threads, and only a small percentage of the plant's production was now given over to the manufacture of domestic, sewing cotton thread. The Willimantic plant was the nation's largest producer of thread for the sewing of shoes. There was also a growing section of the plant

engaged in the manufacture of synthetic threads.

The *Connecticut Circle* writer was greatly impressed with ATCO, particularly the fact that it had its own timber tracts and spool mill in Maine. It also had its own printing department wherein 15 to 20 tons of paper was printed per week, in the production of 10 million spool and box labels, paper cartons and paper boxes. In all, the Willimantic plant gave employment to 1,400 people — and manager Shaw seemed to know everyone of their names.

Shaw proudly explained to Phillips that the company had produced a special mildew-resistant thread for army uniforms, ideal for wear in jungle conditions, and that Willimantic's ATCO was the first company to deliver nylon thread to the hosiery trade after V.J. day, and this was a sign that ATCO was expanding into synthetic threads and wool knitting yarns. Edwin B. Shaw ended his tour of the plant by pointing out to the journalist that, "the future holds a greater degree of security for the employees of this concern than at any time in its 90 years of operation."