

History

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Sunday Herald changes the journalistic scene



Tom
Beardsley

Part One

During the 1890s, the growing city of Willimantic boasted three newspapers, *the Chronicle*, *Journal*, and *Allen Lincoln's Connecticut Home*, a prohibitionist newspaper. But in 1897, a newcomer disrupted the local journalistic scene. The *Hartford Sunday Journal*, a forerunner of today's sensationalist tabloid journalism, had hired a Willimantic correspondent to report the weekly events of the city.

Kate Collins-Warner was also the local correspondent for the *Middletown Press*, and she soon became a controversial figure in Willimantic, because of her no-holds-barred style of

journalism. She was determined to expose political wrongdoings in the booming city. Kate soon began to ruffle the feathers of the Frog City's political and commercial elite.

On a cold morning in January 1897, an enraged Collins-Warner walked into the store occupied by Nelson W. French, the local agent of the Singer Sewing Machine Co. at 734 Main St., and severely horse-whipped him. His crime? He had gossiped that Kate was having an affair with a local public official. The fiery journalist hit French some 15 times across his nose and forehead, badly cutting him. She was also furious that French had revealed her identity as the *Hartford Sunday Journal's* local correspondent. Understandably, Kate had wished to keep her identity a secret as she undertook her investigative journalism — but Willimantic was a small city.

On Jan. 26, 1897, the *Willimantic Sunday Herald*, edited by Collins-Warner, and backed

by a Hartford concern, appeared on the city streets. It cost five cents and was published from the Franklin Block on Main Street. The *Herald* was determined to expose corruption and scandal in the Thread City. Controversy soon raged over the paper's reporting, and in March 1897, Capt. Charles Grady of the Willimantic-based Connecticut National Guard, Company E, Third Regiment, complained bitterly about the paper's scurrilous personal attacks upon him and his soldiers.

Willimantic's yellow journalism continued unabated. The May 9, 1897 edition of the *Willimantic Sunday Herald* was too much for local attorney William Bennet. The *Herald* accused him of drunkenness and corruption. Bennet claimed that he was sober and industrious, and that the newspaper owed him money. The following day Bennet lodged a libel complaint and Constable Mowry of the Willimantic



Future Willimantic Mayor Danny Dunn was enraged when his close friend and local attorney William Bennet was accused of drunkenness and corruption by the Willimantic Sunday Herald.

police was sent to arrest the newspaper's local staff, William F. Graham of the *Hartford Sunday Journal* and James Frank Warner, Kate's husband. Graham and

Warner charged that Bennet was drunk when he came to their office with Constable Mowry. Several local worthies, Danny Dunn, Capt. Hillhouse and George Hinman, came to Walter Bennet's defense. Bennet's attorney was Thomas J. Kelley.

The continuing controversy was all too much for reporter William Graham, who resigned from the controversial newspaper shortly afterwards. James Warner accused Graham of stealing letters. Warner was arrested outside the Loomer Opera House, for using scurrilous and abusive language towards Graham, and was fined \$4. Later that summer, A.T. Walker, a "leading merchant of the city" and a public official was accused of hurling foul and abusive language at Kate at the Willimantic railroad depot. Walker refused to advertise in her paper, and accused Kate of being meddling and a disgrace to the name of womanhood.