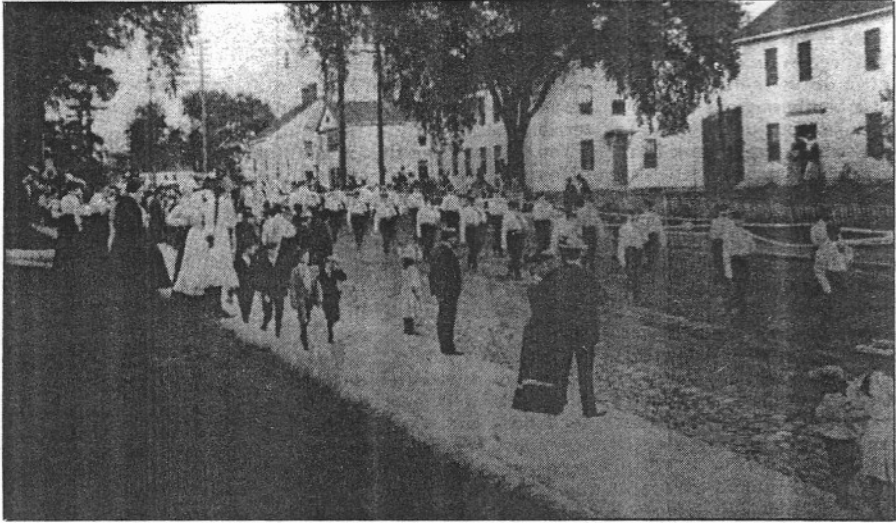


History

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Willimantic Fire Department

The New London Konomoc Fire Co. marches past the Windham Town Hall on Labor Day, 1903.

Fire companies share special day

Part One

An elaborately decorated special train brought the The Konomoc Fire Co. of New London to Willimantic on Sept. 7, 1903. They had been invited by Willimantic's four fire companies, the Alerts, Hooks, Hill Tops and Monties.

America's 19th century, urban-centered volunteer fire companies provided important social and cultural outlets for the nation's industrial working classes in the absence, or marginalization, of trade unions and organized working class political activity. Such activity was an important feature of European political culture, and well known to recent immigrants to the United States. The visit of the New London Konomoc Fire Co. to Willimantic on Sept. 7-8, 1903, provides a fascinating picture of long-forgotten American working class Labor Day traditions.

It was Labor Day, 1903, and Willimantic was crowded with visitors enjoying the holiday festivities. They had arrived in the city from surrounding districts, "on the trolley cars, over the steam roads and by team." Main Street was swathed in flags and bunting, and numerous bands marched around the streets and congregated at the Bank Street firehouse. They included the Warren Family Drum Corps of Putnam and the St. James Band of Danielson. Willimantic's own Wheeler's American Band played and marched in their distinctive maroon uniforms. The New London fire company took their name



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from New London's distributing reservoir. Lake Konomoc is located in the towns of Montville and Waterford.

This Labor Day jamboree in Willimantic was the Konomoc Fire Co.'s fourth-annual outing. And no expense was spared. The New London Day balked at the price of these ostentatious outings. It was estimated that the Willimantic trip would cost \$1,500. In 1900 the Konomocs had hired a large passenger steamer and sailed across the Sound to Port Jefferson on Long Island, where their extravagance had gained a national reputation. That Labor Day trip had lasted two days and cost \$2,000. In 1902, they traveled in similar style to Greenport, L.I. The Konomoc Fire Co. came to Willimantic with a big reputation — but the four Willimantic fire companies had no intention of being overshadowed by their illustrious guests.

When it was discovered that the New London Konomocs' special train was nearing Willimantic, the bands and local fire companies marched onto Main Street and down to the railroad depot to greet their visitors. The train, consisting of four passenger coaches and a flat car carrying

the Konomocs' hose wagon and two milk-white horses, arrived at 10:45 a.m., and was quickly unloaded. The Konomocs brought 100 men along with them, including the new London Standard Band. The Konomocs then marched up Main Street to the Hooker House Hotel, where they ate a fine lunch.

The Labor Day grand parade began at 1:00 p.m. The sidewalks of Main Street were packed. The parade formed on Valley Street, and turned onto Main via Jackson. It was led by the Willimantic police, followed by the New London Standard Band, Willimantic fire Chief Charles E. Leonard and leading officers of the local fire companies. Then came the main attraction — the 100 men of the Konomoc Hose Co. No. 4 of New London, dressed in white shirts and black pants. They were followed by the various marching bands and the men of the Willimantic fire companies. The Alert Hose Co.'s members, the Alerts, wore white shirts trimmed with blue. The Hill Top men wore red shirts, trimmed with white. The Montgomery Hose men, the Monties, also wore red shirts, but trimmed with green, and the Excelsior Hook and Ladder men, the Hooks, wore blue shirts, trimmed with white — and they also wore striking yachting caps. Not only were the Hooks proud of their handsome hats, they were also showing off their brand new fire fighting apparatus for the first time.

Continued next week