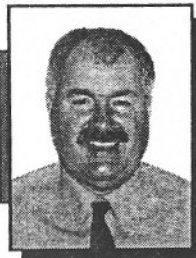


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14 ALBUM, the Chronicle, Saturday, December 9, 2000

History

Recollections of an early Main Street grocer



Tom
Beardsley

Part five of five

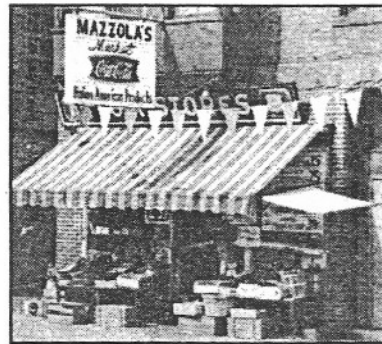
The Mazzola Block, one of Willimantic's finest Victorian business blocks, deemed to have "no historical significance," was saved from demolition this year and converted into the Thread City Café.

Research has revealed that the Mazzola Block was built in 1892 by an Irishman, was briefly owned by a Yankee from Chaplin, ran by a French Canadian and sold finally to an Italian, Michelle Mazzola (1884-1972).

His son, Michael, continued the family business until 1977. He fondly recalls his years in the business.

"We sold fresh meat," he said.

"I used to cut it up myself. We made our own sausages to sell, about 500 pounds a week. People came down from Westerly, R.I., New London and Norwich for our



The Mazzola store was the first food market to cater to the city's Italian-American population.

sausages. We specialized mostly in Italian foods: spaghetti, macaroni. We went down by the river in Middletown and bought a whole truckload of it to sell in the store. Then we went to the campground in Willimantic where people would buy 20 or 25 20-pound boxes of pasta. Although we specialized mainly in Italian foods, we had all nationalities buying from us. Don't forget, we didn't have big stores like Stop and Shop! That's how my father made a lot of money selling to everyone.

"When I was small, the building had gaslights," he continued. "My father had gaslights in the gro-

cery store and in the hallways. When the building was converted to electricity, it didn't have switches. We pulled a chain to turn on the electric light. I converted the building to electricity myself. My father kept the gaslights in the store so that if there was trouble with the power supply, he could use the gaslights.

"The building was sold in about 1978 for \$90,000 to a Mr. Ingram. We opened up another business 1028 Main, selling plants. My wife helped me in that store. Mr. Ingram was a realtor. He bought, and then sold the Capitol Theatre. Where the post office and library are now, used to be a parking lot. When those buildings were put up on the parking lot, the Capitol Theatre closed down, as people wouldn't come, as there was nowhere to park. The building was still in use two years ago. It was rented to college kids and H.R. Block was there, also Jack Rowan's Appliance Parts.

"They had to leave as the building was condemned. It was going to be torn down. The building did have a tin roof, but the new owner is replacing it.

"When I was a child, I raised chickens, rabbits and pigeons in the back yard. That's my happiest memory. I loved animals. My father bought a place up on Watson Street and built a chicken coop in the garage for me to raise chickens. My mother told me to go and get a chicken and cut its head off, and she would then pluck it. My father sold live chickens in the grocery store. People came in and bought one to take home to kill and eat. I was at the grammar school, I used to take my pigeons to school with me then release them and they'd fly home. I lived above the grocery store until I was married in 1943. I don't have any sad memories of the building, only good ones.

"Mike" Mazzola ran the household appliance business until his retirement in the late 1970s. He still lives in Willimantic with his wife, Virginia.

The Mazzola family sold the building in 1978. It went into a slow decline and various tenants rented its business and residential sections. H & R Block occupied the east store, from 1978 until 1995. Castle Furnishings were at 935 Main St. (1988-

1990), Flynn Business Services at 935 Main St. (1989-1992), Roans Appliance Services at 935 Main St., (1991-1996), Tri-City Appliance Repair at 935 Main St. (1991-1996) and D&R Business Services at 935 Main St. (1993-1998). By 1994, only one tenant remained in the apartments at 933 Main St.

A variety of tenants had occupied the apartments in the post war years, including a lumberman, trucker, letter carrier, mechanic, and shoemaker.

Also, many of the tenants were commuting to Hartford and beyond, rather than just "crossing the street" to the mills.

The Mazzola Block has seen many far-reaching changes in its 108-year-history. Willimantic has experienced more than 150 years of cultural diversity, and this is reflected in the building's residential and business tenants from many parts of the world. The present owner, David Hemenway, purchased the historic "Mazzola Block" in 1999 and saved it from demolition, and it is destined to play an important part in the revitalization of downtown Willimantic.