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ALBUM, the Chronicle, Saturday, February 19, 2000 17

History

Rumors rise from 1944 fire

On Dec. 10, 1944, one of Main Street's oldest buildings, the Shea Block, was virtually destroyed by fire. Rumors quickly spread around town that the fire was caused by German-American saboteurs. Similar stories were told when a fire had destroyed the Normal School in 1943. The Shea Block was originally built in 1862. It was known for many years as the European House Hotel, and was located on the western corner of Main Street and the original Railroad Street.

Policeman Raymond Tatro first spotted the fire at 10 p.m. He noticed smoke billowing from the Railroad Street side of the building, and promptly called the fire department by means of a bell alarm and call box located at nearby Lincoln Square. Three sisters, the Misses Annie and Mary Shea and Mrs. Walton Lund owned the building.

There was considerable water damage in Curran's Drug store on the main floor of the building, and to a temporary postal substation. Also receiving dam-



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age from the fire were the Frontenac Restaurant, the Ideal Taxi Co.'s offices and Abraham Osso's store on the Railroad Street side of the building.

The fire and smoke also affected many adjacent businesses, including the Sears Roebuck store, the Firestone Accessory store, Philip Viens' barber shop, Hudson Barrows' Optometrical offices, and the offices of Dr. Thomas Keegan and Attorney Alva Loiselle. The Knights of Columbus rooms on the third floor were also damaged.

A fireman, Nelson Flagg, was overcome by smoke, but he quickly recovered and was not hospitalized.

Insurance estimators on the

scene reckoned that the total cost of the fire would come to more than \$40,000.

Willimantic's Fire Chief Amos Barber said that this was the toughest fire his men had faced for many years, including the 1943 Normal School, because of the immediate danger to surrounding buildings. This section of Willimantic was the center of the city's business district, and there were many buildings in close proximity. The historic Hurley Grant building on the opposite side of the footbridge and Railroad Street was hosed down to prevent sparks setting a fire there.

The Coventry, Eagleville, North Windham and Mansfield fire departments responded to the Willimantic emergency. The Coventry crew was stationed at the Bank Street headquarters, ready to respond to any subsequent call that night.

It was established that the fire had originated in the offices of the Ideal Taxi Co. on Railroad Street, probably caused by an oil heater.

The Ideal Taxi Co.'s offices were handily placed on Rail-



The Shea Block was partially rebuilt after the 1944 fire. It is seen here several years later in the early 1950s, still the home of Curran's Drugs store.

road Street to convey arriving passengers from the Railroad Depot. The Shea Block was eventually demolished, and its main occupants, Curran's Pharmacy, was relocated on the same site in a smaller brick structure that, like the adjacent Hurley Grant building would be demolished in early

1970s redevelopment.

The 1944 fire was deemed accidental, and was not sabotage. It could be argued that redevelopment was a different kind of sabotage.

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