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History

Baseball fun at Willimantic's Recreation Park



Tom
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The historic Willimantic Fairgrounds closed down in 1913 amid rumor and accusation. We will probably never know why ATCO decided to pull the plug on the historic Willimantic Fair, a local institution that brought crowds and a great deal of trade to the city for more than a quarter of a century.

On May 15, 1914, General F.E. Kaley, one of three members of ATCO's executive committee, arrived in Willimantic from New York City to officially open the third season of the American Thread Mill League. Kaley announced that construction would shortly begin on the Recreation Grounds, formerly the Fairgrounds, of a 500-seat grandstand, along with changing room facilities, showers and baths for the base-

ball players, a "house of comfort" for women and girls and an ice skating rink.

Kaley told a reporter that ATCO was not a soulless corporation and wanted to do everything for people in its employ. "By providing baseball facilities in the summer and skating in the winter for the young men and women of the city, and playgrounds for the children, the company feels that it will make good, healthy, clean citizens."

The teams assembled outside the Hotel Hooker, and a motorcade procession started down Main Street, headed for the fairgrounds. The Willimantic American Band led the way, followed by the Mill 6 team captained by Ernest Melody, Mill 3 team captained by Joe Hammel, Dye House team captained by Timothy McGillicuddy, and various junior teams. The leading ATCO officials and local politicians in automobiles followed the marchers.

The teams arrived at the grounds and commenced practice. A large crowd saw Mayor Danny Dunn and Kaley pitch



The members of the No. 3 Mill baseball team were the American Thread Co. League champions in 1914. Front row: Eddy Ryan, Danny Lillourey, Lefty Smith and Joe Hammel; back row: Oscar Garceau, Bill Gorman, Augustus Arbor, Alex Delude, Toss Cote and Cooky Belair.

the first balls for the first game between Mills 5 and 6 at 2 p.m. Mill 6 had won the pennant in 1913. The second game was between Mill 3 and the "Dyers," who had won the first pennant in 1912. Mill 3 had added "Lefty" Smith to its roster. Smith had played two seasons for Baltimore in the majors. The Dyers had signed Art

Nichols, a well-known local player who also had played in the majors.

ATCO had laid a new diamond adjacent to the old diamond, used for many years by the Willimantic Colts and other semi-professional teams from 1883 until 1901. The junior teams played on the old diamond, which was rather soggy

as it had been flooded to provide a skating rink in the winters. ATCO announced that its mill league would provide young players with a chance to catch the eye of major league scouts.

Recreation Park was officially opened the following season in 1915 during the Old Home Week celebrations. Mill League baseball continued until 1916 when it was decided to form one team from the leagues best players. Art Nichols was appointed coach and contests were arranged with the best semi-professional teams in the state. In 1918, ATCO defeated a strong Boston Red Sox team in front of a crowd estimated at 8,000. The American Thread Athletic Association, which organized baseball, was disbanded after the bitter 1925 strike when funds from the Association were used to support strikers.

Recreation Park became city property during the Depression. The old racetrack, dating from 1883, can still be detected, but the wooden bleachers and grandstands are long gone.