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History

Willimantic Fair was considered best in area

Each autumn, New Englanders flock to the region's popular country and agricultural fairs. Eastern Connecticut folk can choose from several fairs. The most well-known fairs are in Brooklyn, Lebanon, Hebron and Woodstock.

It is largely forgotten that between 1883 and 1913, Willimantic held one of the largest agricultural fairs in the Northeast. The Willimantic Fair midway was considered to be the best in the Northeast, replete with snake charmers, magicians, snake oil salesmen and belly dancers.

The first Willimantic Fair took place in October 1883, thanks to the generosity of the Willimantic Linen Co. It expended more than \$12,000 to build the Willimantic Fairgrounds in the area known today as Recreation Park. The linen company installed one of the best horse-trotting tracks in the Northeast, and installed 34 large electric arc lamps and illuminated the trotting course, thus allowing racing to take place at night.



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It was previously understood that the fair came to an end when the successors to the linen company, the American Thread Co., informed the fairground authorities that it intended to develop the area as a recreational park for their employees. Recent research reveals that there may have been other reasons why the famous Willimantic Fair was disbanded.

A week before the commencement of the 1913 Willimantic Fair, it was sensationally announced that the National Trotting Association had black-listed the Horseshoe Park Agricultural Association, the authorities that administered the Willimantic Fairgrounds, and banned them from holding

trotting races. The vice president of the HPAC, Truman R. Sadd, a well-known local businessman, had raced a champion trotter, Billiken, under a false name during the 1911 fair meeting. The NTA disallowed trotting in Willimantic until Sadd returned the purse money won by his "ringer." Sadd subsequently resigned and the fair went ahead.

The 1913 Willimantic Fair was a huge success and featured the appearance of a flying machine, a Burgess-Wright aeroplane, flown by the famous Rhode Island aviator Jack McGee who thrilled the Willimantic crowd with his aerobatics. It came as a shock to many in town when, one month later, the HPAC announced it would auction all of its buildings and property on the fairgrounds. S.B. Harvey, secretary of the HPAC, claimed that ATCO wanted to redevelop the area, but there were rumors that ATCO was not pleased with the illegal gambling taking place at trotting meetings, a subject brought up by the Sadd scandal.

The fairgrounds auction went ahead on Oct. 29, 1913. The details reveal what an extensive complex existed on Recreation Park. The auctioneer was Chauncey E. Macfarlane, a member of the association and the father of now-95-year-old Florence Macfarlane, the only woman ever to serve as Willimantic's mayor in 1971-72. More than 100 people attended the auction.

William Hastings purchased the exhibition building for \$500. John Andrews purchased the grandstand for \$270. The four barns were sold for a total of \$480, and the fence enclosing the grounds was sold for \$80. Dominic Meniditto purchased the bleachers, the vaudeville platform, a stable, 10 stalls and three outhouses for \$180. Napoleon Bacon picked up the bandstand for \$3. The net proceeds of the auction came to \$1,413.25. The HPAC was disappointed with the amount, stating that the property sold was worth closer to \$20,000.

The HPAC were confident that the 1914 fair would go



Florence Macfarlane
Jack McGee, the famed aeronaut from Pawtucket, R.I., thrilled the Willimantic Fair crowds in 1913.

ahead on new grounds adjacent to the trolley tracks on the Coventry road. It didn't. The blow of being ejected from the fairgrounds led to the demise of the HPAC and the famous Willimantic Fair after a highly successful run of 31 years.

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