

History

Willimantic's VFW encampment was a success



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The first live radio broadcast from Willimantic took place at 9 p.m. on Saturday, June 20, 1931. Radio station WDRC set up its equipment in the State Armory on Pleasant Street to broadcast the banquet of that year's 11th Annual Convention and Encampment of the Connecticut Department of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Local VFW Encampment Chairman James J. Lee had the honor of being the first person to speak over the air from Willimantic, and New London's Coast Guard Academy Band performed the first live music broadcast from the city. The armory was converted into a lush banquet hall. For those without radio sets, the addresses and music were relayed to loud speakers placed on Main

Street.

VFW encampments were lush affairs. Willimantic was decked out in red, white and blue, and virtually every building on Main flew the Stars and Stripes. Musical concerts were held on Soldier and Sailor Field — now known as Memorial Park. The state delegates arrived in town on Friday and were welcomed to their rooms and headquarters in the Hotel Hooker. That evening the Capitol Cinema hosted a grand vaudeville show for the 1,000 Connecticut veterans visiting the town from across the country. The encampment's grand parade began the following day at 2:30 p.m., and the banquet commenced at 6:30 p.m. in the armory.

It was estimated that more than 20,000 people witnessed the VFW parade around the city. It consisted of 2,500 soldiers and veterans, along with their accompanying military hardware. The highlight was a massive float depicting the VFW National Home. The parade took 33 minutes to pass a given point. More than 50



The VFW parade heads west down Main Street on June 20, 1931. The tractor is pulling a mortar cannon, a machine gun and an artillery gun. This photograph was taken in front of the town hall. The buildings on the south side of Main were tenements belonging to the Smithville Manufacturing Co. Its mills were located on the west side of Bridge Street.

units took part, and a reviewing stand was located on the porches of the Hotel Hooker. There were 11 bands and 12 bugle and drum corps. Another highlight was Civil War veteran James Haggerty of Willimantic, age 80, who marched in the parade behind three tanks to the delight of the locals. Following Haggerty was 96-year-old George Herrick, the oldest

Civil War veteran in the state.

The evening's banquet in the armory was also a grand affair, with more than 500 in attendance. The audience listened intently to the principal speaker, Admiral Robert E. Coontz (1864-1935), one of the most well known military figures of the period.

The idea for the Navy to develop a useful landing boat,

to train personnel to man them, and to provide gunfire support for landing forces, came from Coontz. He was commander in chief of the U.S. fleet from November 1919 until July 1923. Coontz's autobiography, "From the Mississippi to the Sea," had been published in 1930. He was born in Hannibal, Mo., and his father attended school with Samuel Clemens. Coontz enrolled in the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Class of 1885. When he was a naval cadet, Coontz visited Clemens in Hartford. Coontz retired June 11, 1928, after 47 years with the U.S. Navy. In his Willimantic address, Coontz strongly urged for preparedness as the only safeguard against war.

The encampment's main business took place on Sunday, June 21 in the Gem Theater and the Elks Home, where officers were chosen for the ensuing year. Everyone agreed that the 11th VFW encampment had been one of the best, and the VFW officers thanked all in Willimantic for their hospitality.

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