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14 ALBUM, the Chronicle, Saturday, July 8, 2000

## History

# 1910's Fourth of July parade was a grand spectacle



Tom Beardsley

Last week, we enjoyed Willimantic's famous Boom Box Parade, organized in the 1980s because of the lack of a suitable marching band. There were bigger problems in 1909 when the Willimantic Board of Trade, the forerunners of the present-day Chamber of Commerce, realized that thousands of local people were boarding trains to visit Independence Day celebrations in other parts of the state. In 1910, the board organized a number of committees to arrange a grand Fourth of July parade. It was forecast that it would be the most successful and notable event in the history of Willimantic.

There had not been a Fourth of July celebration in the city since the 1890s. From 1901 to 1905, the July 4 highlight in the city was a baseball game held on Windham Field by the

professional baseball nine, the Willimantic Colts. The Colts were wound up in June 1906, and a letter in *the Chronicle* revealed how boring summer weekends would now be without a baseball game, particularly on the Fourth of July. The letter pointed out that Willimantic was hardly patriotic. The only people to celebrate the day in 1906 were the town's Chinese laundrymen, who had put on an impressive display of fireworks. "It was strange to see a big crowd of American people looking on and two Chinamen and their fireworks being the old show."

The chairman of the celebration committees was James Haggerty, a well-known Civil War veteran. He asked that all participants in the parade should not drink alcohol, chew gum or spit tobacco. The Rev. W.S. Beard organized a mass choir of 500 local schoolchildren to sing patriotic songs in the Windham Field baseball stadium. The choir sang from music books provided free-of-charge by A.C. Andrew's music store. The gatherers present for the concert were then addressed by John L. Sewall, the executive



Francois J. Gamache

*The Hilltop Fire Co. is seen marching eastward along Main Street. Note the repair work on the trolley lines.*

secretary of Boston's 1915 Movement, a civic improvement organization.

Jean Deveuq coordinated the local French societies. The Council Florimond of the Union St. Jean de Baptiste marched in full uniform and regalia. The Thread City Cyclers, led by Charles Hill, rode their contraptions down Main Street. The local Rotary Club's fife and drum corps was well received. They had been practicing for two weeks on Young's Grove "over-the-river." Two of the cities fire companies, the Montgomery Hose Co. and the Hill-

top Hose Co., marched in full uniform.

The vast parade was organized in three sections. It was led by the local military company, followed by the fire departments; the second section contained the numerous French Canadian societies, and the final group consisted of all other local societies and voluntary organizations. Highlights were the Woman's Float, with called for female suffrage, and the colorful Knights of King Arthur from the Congregational Church. The local Syrian population dressed in national

costume and took part. Not to be outdone, the Polish population contributed a colorful and impressive section. Eighty men were dressed in special uniforms of black pants, white shirts, black bow ties and white yachting caps. It had been reported that both groups had been marching in the woods for weeks to perfect their marches.

For many of the estimated 10,000 spectators lining Main Street, the highlight of the parade were the 75 automobiles driven by the city's leading citizens. It was estimated that the parade was over 1 mile in length.

The celebrations continued into the evening. There was a fireworks display on Windham Field at dark, and then several hundred people went down to the Willimantic River. Electric lights and Japanese lanterns illuminated the banks, and the crowds were treated to a demonstration of aquatic sports organized by the Nipnet Canoe Club, that included swimming races, tub races, a canoe race and an exhibition of dancing. All agreed that the event should be repeated in 1911.