

History

Living memories hold key to Willimantic's past



Tom Beardsley

By delving into town records, old newspapers and city directories, it's possible to recall Willimantic's rich history. However, living memories are also important in recreating the past. To illustrate this point, the discussion forum on the threadcity.com web site has recently hosted a debate about Willimantic's first pizza restaurant and the city's Connecticut School of Music. Thanks to Joe Bealieu, Ernie Gesner, Robert Thompson, William Brainard, Tom Brainard, Ed Gervais and Robin Rice for sharing their memories.

The opening of Willimantic's first pizza restaurant is described by William Brainard as, "a sensation for northeast Connecticut." He recalls that, "in the earl '50s, probably 1953, my aunt and uncle wanted something different for my mother's birthday. This was before I was born.

"As I have been told, there was a place called 'Danny's' and it sold the here before unseen and unknown food called pizza pies. My memories go to 10 years later when we went on Wednesdays to the old pizza house, where Tyler Square is now, and ordered up to six small plain pizzas to go."

William's brother Tom paints an interesting picture of 1950s Willimantic.

Tom Brainard believes the restaurant was "Don's" either on Union or North Street.

"Don actually spun the dough over his head, before he put it in the oven. It was a sight I will never forget. At that time (1953) I was just a kid. Willimantic was for regular shopping. Expensive shopping was Manchester. Elite shopping was Fox's in Hartford. But I loved Willimantic. It had three movie theatres. The Capitol had 'dressed help.' The second floor had an exquisite lounge."

The "Gem" and "Cameo" or "Scratch House" were a "step down" in quality. Tom further recalls Willimantic's white-haired cop with two hearing aids, the best nuts in Connecticut at Grants, and the lunch counter in F.W. Woolworth's.

Joe Bealieu agrees with Tom that "Don" sold early pizzas in

the city, but he recalls that pizzas had been available in Willimantic before 1953.

"Don's Pizza was located on the right side of Jackson Street going towards Valley Street. The first store after the intersection of Union Street on the right was a small shoe repair shop. Then came Don's Pizza. After that was Frenchy's Tavern."

According to Joe, Willimantic's first pizzas were available at the Santa Lucia grinder shop (Pop's Grinders) at the intersection of Main and Bridge ztreet, "where, between 1935 and 1940, Mrs. Santa Lucia made pizza in a regular oven in the back of the store. In 1946 the Italian Garden Restaurant started making great pizzas 'til they closed up."

Ernie Gesner recalls the pizzas made by the Santa Lucia family.

"I bought my first pizza from Mrs. Santa Lucia in 1951. She made the pizza at her home on Valley Street and I had to pick it up there. It was really different from anything I had ever tasted but it was delicious and I haven't had one as good since.

All this discussion of food in Willimantic inspired Ed Gervais to recall the city's best grinders. "Remy was his name and grinders were his game. His store

was affectionately called "The Hole in the Wall" and is cousin Remy Handfield ran it with pleasure for many years after his in-laws the Santa Lucias handed over the reins. The second best place, anywhere, for a real grinder was at the "Grinder Shop" (formerly Joe's) that the gentleman from Latvia and his lovely wife ran from early morning until after the dinner hour. They walked to and from work every day, from across the river, no matter the weather, to open their shop for the neighbors and kids at school. They didn't speak English very well but they understood customer service."

As well as having the best pizza and grinders in America, Willimantic also boasted the top-notch "Connecticut School of Music."

Tom Brainard fondly recalls those days. "My music teacher was Olga Frohman, from sixth grade through high school during the late 1950s. The school was in the house on Prospect Street, next to Bacon's Funeral Home. Olga, always known as "Miss Frohman" presided in her studio, the first door on the right.

"Catherine Wade was directly down the hall in the living room. Miss Frohman was the great

inspiration of my life. Like a snow sleigh ride in Russia ... 'Make the music sing. . . Tommy tsa!'

"I did the best I could. I remember Olga so well ... henna red hair, Cheshire cat smiles ... love and the faint smell of lavender and discipline.

Tom's recollections bought back memories for Robin Rice.

"I certainly remember the Connecticut School of Music. It was on the corner of Prospect and Turner streets. In the lovely white house facing Prospect, the music lessons were taught. In the big red barn behind the house, the ballet lessons were taught. I took lessons from Madame Frohman when I was 15 (1966-67). She danced with Anna Pavlova, spoke broken English with a Russian accent and taught the ballet classes talking almost all French.

"She would sit in a wicker chair as she taught and tapped a stick to the floor in time to the music. She was fascinating, and I'll never forget her.

If you've enjoyed this little excursion to the Willimantic of the 1950s, and its food, cinemas and music teachers, be sure to log on to www.threadcity.com and share your memories.

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