

— HISTORY —

The Hilltoppers celebrate 20th anniversary in grand style

Part two of three

In May, 1897 a number of the city of Willimantic's most prominent citizens petitioned the city fathers to get a firehouse built in the Hill district. As usual, the purse strings were tightened, but one by one, the petitioners skillfully put forward their arguments. Democratic Councilman Oscar Tanner, a future city mayor, addressed the committee, and said that more protection was needed on the Hill. "Two houses might have been burned the other day if the people had had to wait for the regulars to put the fire out."

Alderman James Haggerty then stressed that the need for apparatus on the Hill was greater than in the lower village, "on account of the steep grade to climb and the low pressure of water."

The city's fire department committee was still resistant to the idea, and believed that the \$300 should be spent on new horses because that would reduce insurance rates. Chief Leonard then reminded the committee the expense of keeping the horses would just about double the

expense of maintaining the fire department. This fact seemed to sway the aldermen, and at the city aldermen's meeting the following week the first to be held in the new town



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it was recommended that a voluntary fire department of 10 unpaid members be formed, and that a firehouse be build for no more than \$50, at the corner of Chestnut and Summit.

A local architect, 37-year-old Wilton E. Little, was engaged to draw up the plans for the firehouse. No time was lost in the construction, and the city's new fire company held its first meeting at its "palatial quarters on Summit Street" on May 19, 1897. Little was a talented architect, mechanic and woodworker, who served as a city alderman. However, he was often "despondent" and suffered from "overwork and melancholia," and on

August 10, 1903, the shocking news spread around the city that Little had committed suicide by drinking a large quantity of carbolic acid. His unexpected death was a great loss to the community. He nevertheless left a great legacy to Willimantic and his hometown of Columbia.

Other than the Hilltop firehouse, he also designed and built the Columbia Free Library and several of the Hill's Victorian houses, including his own fine home at 333 Prospect St. in 1896.

At the time of Little's death in 1903, the first six years of the Hilltop House Co. had proved successful. The Hilltops' foreman was Nelson Daniels, the son of Charles N. Daniels, who had loosened the city's purse strings to get the company organized. The first assistant was Frank M. Lincoln; the second assistant was John R. Pickett; the secretary was Clarence A. J. Bowen, and the treasurer was George E. Gifford.

On May 14, 1917, the Hilltops celebrated their 20th anniversary in "a splendid manner." They had a force of 30, and their rooms at

their 209 Summit St. headquarters were decorated with American flags, "and the entire house was thrown open for entertainment of the guests." There were over 100 people present including the members of the Alert Hose Co. No. 1, Montgomery Hose Co., No. 2, Excelsior Hook and Ladder Co. No. 1, and the American Thread Fire Co.

Before the meal was served the audience were treated to a concert of vocal and instrumental music from W. A. Costello's victrola.

Costello played 14 numbers, "including the best in recent records." The patriotic World War I records caused the guests to stand to attention. Mayor Danny Dunn and members of the city council arrived at 10:30 p.m., straight from an alderman's meeting. After the music, the guests played cards and pool, and Willimantic's "well known vocalists" performed solos.

Continued next week



The Hilltop Hose Co., champions of the Willimantic Fraternal League in 1917, shows off its trophies.

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