

— HISTORY —

First a period of growth and then a period of decline, but still alive

Part six of seven

The First Baptist Church of Willimantic's growth continued into the 20th century, as demonstrated by a gathering that took place there on January 5, 1916. Both vestries were full when the pastor, Rev. W. F. Rowley, called the session to order and offered prayer. The church's healthy constitution was reflected in its numerous active organizations.

Reports were given by the Christian Endeavor Society, the Church Missionary Society, and the Missionary Committee of the Sunday school, the Ladies Aid Society, the Thimble Club, the Good Cheer Circle, and the True Blue Circle. Between them the organizations had raised over \$1,000 in the past year.

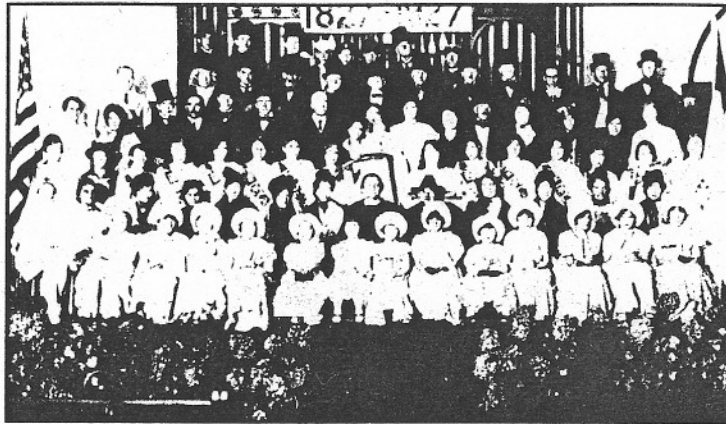
When the official business was completed, James Harries gave a brief concert with his graphophone. The graphophone was the predecessor to the gramophone, and used wax tablets in the shape of a cylinder. This was followed by a selection of Scottish songs from George Paton, the boss dyer at American Thread. Paton was born in Scotland and was the

grandfather of one of the church's current longest serving members, Barbara McSweeney.

Barbara's mother, Grace James, was also a long-serving member of the church. She was interviewed in 1990, at 91, as part of an oral history program. She was asked her what she did for fun.

She replied, "I went to church. I'm a Baptist, and they used to have a few things going on. Most of our parties and social activities used to revolve around the church. I started in Sunday school when I was three years old. We had to walk there because we did not have a car. You must remember that this was in the early years of this century."

In 1925-26, Willimantic suffered the trauma of a year-long strike at American Thread, and all the churches in Willimantic gave charitable assistance to the strikers. The Baptist Church's assistance was minimal however, as one of its leading members was Englishman David Moxon, the agent at American Thread, who bitterly engaged the strikers and unions, and who evicted hundreds of families from company hous-



Baptist Church members in a historic pageant celebrating their 1927 centenary.

ing across the city. Furthermore many of the American Thread management were Baptists, including the head of the dye house, Scotsman George Paton.

One of the most active branches of the Willimantic's first Baptist church was the Woman's Mission Society.

Its program for 1926-27 included meetings and discussions about medical aid, Moslem women, China, Mexico, and Alaska. In October, 1927, the church proudly celebrated its centenary, and William Niles Potter, the clerk of the church society for 51 years, from 1871 until 1922, went through the church records in 1919 and wrote a church histo-

ry that was published in Allen Lincoln's "History of Windham County (1920)", and reproduced in the *Willimantic Chronicle* at the time of the anniversary. In 1927, it was reported that the church was in excellent condition, and that was in many ways thanks to the latest pastor, the Rev. David Winslow Lovett, a native of Pomfret, Vt. Lovett had taken over the church from Canadian-born Arthur Deming Carpenter, who arrived at the Willimantic's First Baptist Church in 1917. Carpenter resigned in 1926 because of ill health.

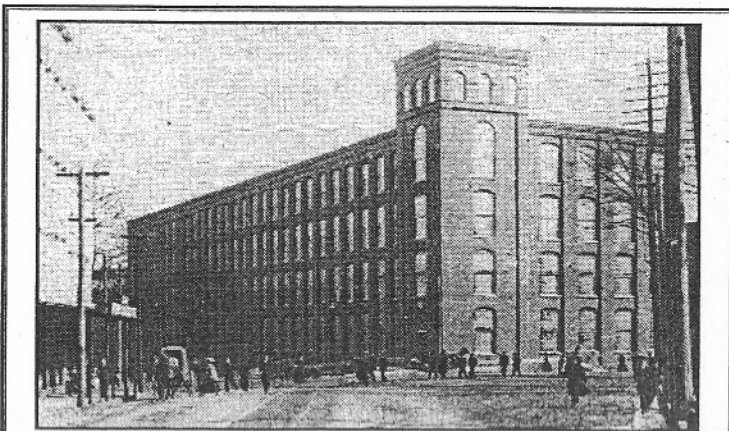
The First Baptist Church maintained its membership and activities until World War II. Since that

time, the church, like most protestant denominations, has suffered a slow decline, and membership has dropped to an all time loss of between 30 and 40, and it was recently discussed whether the historic church should be closed, thus ending 176 years as an important moral and cultural force in the industrial village, borough and city of Willimantic.

In 1994, the then pastor of the church, Rev. Raymond Foster, reflected on 30 years of decline in mainstream Protestantism. He believed that the First Baptist Church reflected the decline as much as it has reflected what had happened to the downtown in Willimantic. He revealed that the church had an opportunity to sell after the Valentine's Day fire in 1968 destroyed the historic 1865 Union Block, but "it chose not to do so and has suffered since, as the rest of the downtown has." However, he preferred churches such as his that focused on the faith of its membership rather than to strive for large congregations and wealth.

Thankfully, the decision to stay open, and stay in Willimantic was recently taken. Let's hope this historic church benefits from the long awaited renaissance of downtown Willimantic.

Concluded next week



The American Thread Company's Mill Number Six is pic-

An everyday collectible

By **ROSEMARY MCKITTRICK**
Special to the Chronicle

Most people don't think much about everyday objects like glassware. It's simply there to be used.

But for the astute observer, glassware, like Native American baskets and rare books, tells a story. It's a story about how differ-

unique culture and way of life on each piece.

The color, composition and workmanship of glassware are as varied as the hands that made it. It's all in the looking. For early glass collectors, the looking and fascination seldom ends, and constant handling of old glass is