

— HISTORY —

# The old Hilltop fire house: a best kept secret

*Part three of three*

In May 1917, Willimantic's Hilltop Hose Fire Co. proudly celebrated its 20th anniversary at its 209 Summit St. headquarters. The fine banquet commenced and consisted of little necks, olives, fried chicken Maryland, peas, creamed potatoes, tomato and cucumber salad, ice cream, cakes and coffee.

After the meal had commenced, the Hilltop foreman, Esdras C. Cyr, called on Mayor Dunn for remarks. Dunn complemented the firemen on their work over the past 20 years, and looked forward to the time when every company would have auto apparatus. William P. Jordan, the Hilltop's first foreman back in 1897, gave a short history of the company and presented the Hilltops with his framed photograph. The city aldermen gave short addresses, and Attorney General George Hinman recalled his early years of service with the Hilltops. The anniversary celebrations ended in the early hours of the following day, and were considered to be a

great success.

Fire coverage on the Hill continued until the early 1940s, and for a while, the building at 209 Summit served as an auxiliary police station for the



*Tom Beardsley*

second precinct. Wilton Little's fine building then became home to the Musicians Union 403/285, who used it as a practice hall for many years. They often gave concerts on special occasions. In the late 1970s the building was utilized by the Comprehensive Educational Training Act (CETA), a federal project designed to help people find employment.

In 1978-79, CETA organized a play of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's famed book, "The Little Prince," and performed it in the Hilltop's old headquarters. The play was made possible by the work of 40 seamstresses, artist painters and sculptors, set-design-

ers, musicians and administrators, including the building's current owner, Tom Hebert.

"The Little Prince" was performed for elementary and high school students from across northeast Connecticut, and was a great success. At the program's end, the head of the puppeteers went to work for Jim Henson. One of the project's bandleaders was a former member of Paul Winter's Consort, who are well known for combining elements from various African, Asian and South American cultures with jazz, and for integrating music and nature.

In November 1979, the Hilltop's old firehouse was purchased by local artist Tom Hebert and his wife Margaret. Tom installed a kitchen and a bathroom, and began to insulate the building to create living space. No one had actually lived in the building before, and one of the first prob-



*The entire Hilltop Hose Co. poses in May 1917, in celebration of its 20th anniversary.*

lems to be overcome was the flooding of the cellar after heavy rains or thawing snow. Tom has been renovating and producing artwork in the building for more than 21 years. He has recreated the Hilltop's old sign from a historic photograph, and recently mounted a plaque on the building indicating the building's construc-

tion date, thanks to research undertaken by Tony Clarke. Wilton Little's 1897 building is one of the most unique structures in northeastern Connecticut, and Tom Hebert hopes that his studio will become part of the Victorian House tour each year. Like many things in Willimantic, it is a "best kept secret."

## An online change of heart

By ROSEMARY MCKITTRICK  
Special to the Chronicle

an item that I never inspected firsthand and if victorious would leading online marketplace for the sale of goods ranging from your

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