

— HISTORY —

Combing the Hartford farmers' market in pre-dawn hours

Part two of three

The days are long gone when America's small town Main Streets were thriving commercial centers. The flight to the suburbs, enabled by improved transportation technologies, has led to the suburbanization of the country. The development of massive shopping malls has signaled the death knell of small grocery and provisions stores. Willimantic boasted many such stores in the pre-World War Two period.

Probably one of the most well known was the F. P. Lombardo store. Such family-run operations were conducted with extreme pride and attention to detail. For example, the Lombardos were very selective about the produce they purchased from the farmers and wholesalers in Hartford.

The selection process at the Front Street market at Hartford usually took about three hours. The Lombardo family arrived from Willimantic around 2 a.m. and left Hartford around 5 a.m. They were back in Willimantic at 6 a.m. The produce was then



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cleaned and placed on the stands ready for the earliest customers who arrived when the store opened at 7 a.m. Michael Lombardo remembers that during the summer the stands would often be empty by 2 p.m., and the family could take a welcome break.

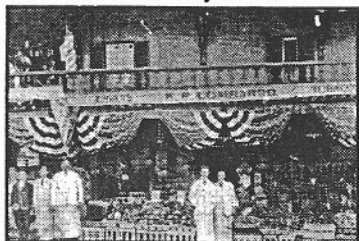
The Lombardos became well known for the quality of their berries, the majority of which were purchased locally. It was Lorena Lombardo's job on Saturday mornings to stand on soda boxes to reach the outdoor displays, and check each individual berry for ripeness.

The four younger Lombardo boys and the youngest sister also helped out. The business was a

real family affair.

The Lombardos catered for the city's upper middle-class customers. The store provided high quality fruit and vegetables in the days before supermarkets, and drew customers not only from the fine houses on the hill, but from miles around.

Michael Lombardo remembers that the strawberry season was



The Lombardo family and assistants pose in front of their store, circa 1920.

particularly hectic.

"We would have two, three, and sometimes four truckloads of berries delivered. The containers could never be put out for sale until each basket was dumped on white waxed paper, and the berries picked over.

The bad ones were discarded, the small ones placed on the bottom and the bigger berries stood up in the basket nice and shiny red, to provide a mouth-watering delicious-looking appearance. No one ever purchased just one basket.

It was always two, four, six, or eight and even 10 and 12 I would always hide four baskets to take home for Sunday dinner and I'm not even certain my father ever caught on."

In 1925 Frank P. Lombardo's

store was demolished for the building of the W. T. Grant Department Store. Frank Lombardo and Alex Menlitto, who operated a barbershop above the store, had to find new premises. Alex moved across Main Street to the Sadd block, and Frank obtained premises in the new W. T. Grant building.

The Lombardos conducted their fruit and vegetable business in a small store at the west-end of the new structure, which was known as "The Old Reliable Fruit Store."

During construction, Frank Lombardo operated his store in the North Street building across from the municipal parking lot where there have been a series of restaurants over the last few years.

Continued next week

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