

— HISTORY —

During the days when 'good' bananas sold for 20 for a quarter

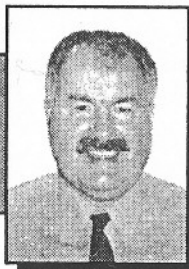
Part one of three

Earlier this year, during a slide show presentation at the Willimantic Library featuring historic Windham, one particular picture caused a great deal of comment. It was a photograph of a fruit and vegetable store on Main Street Willimantic, but no one in the audience, which is usually highly knowledgeable, could recognize the location or the particular store.

It was a photograph of an old brick structure with a fancy veranda, and the store sign read, F. P. Lombardo.

The name "Lombardo" was familiar to some people, but the location was puzzling. One clue was that the display was on a hill, and sloped upwards to the left. The photograph will be on view next week. So this week and for the next two weeks, we'll relive the history of one of Willimantic's leading fruit and vegetable stores during the first half of the 20th century.

The fruit and vegetables on display were far above the quality usually seen in a modern super-



Tom Beardsley

market. "Good bananas" sold for 20 for 25 cents, and "fancy bananas" sold for 16 for 25 cents. There was a wide variety of berries, pineapples, oranges and plums on display, along with a hot peanut vendor. The store also sold tobacco, cigars, cigarettes and pipes.

Willimantic boasts a rich ethnic heritage thanks to the local cotton and silk industries that attracted immigrants from around the world during the late 19th century. The largest groups came from County Kerry, Ireland and Quebec. They were followed by a sizable influx of Polish immigrants in the early years of the 20th century. However, commencing in the 1890s, Willimantic developed a thriving Italian com-

munity. By the middle of the 20th century, such families as the Mazzolas, Ferrignos, Insalcos, Melos and Giordanos were firmly established in the city.

Many of the local Italian-American families became significantly involved in the city's service industries. The Sicilian Lombardos were such a family.

Onofrio (Louis) Lombardo emigrated to the United States from Palermo, Sicily, sometime in the 1890s, and settled in St. Louis, Mo. In 1903 Onofrio and two of his four sons, Frank and Charles, arrived in Willimantic and opened a "confectionery" store at 763 Main St. in one of the city's oldest Main Street buildings located west of North Street in a position occupied today by the Sumner and Sumner Insurance Co.

Onofrio Lombardo and his sons Frank and Charles operated the Lombardo and Sons fruit and vegetable business for nine years, until 1912 when Onofrio returned to Sicily on family business, where he was later to die. Frank P. Lombardo took over the business,



Onofrio Lombardo, left, and son Frank, right, at the Lombardo & Sons store circa 1907.

and operated it at the same location for more than a quarter of a century.

Frank was born in Sicily on Sept. 11, 1883. In 1908 he married a Sicilian girl, Mary Longo, whose family had settled in Danielson. Frank and Mary had 10 children: Josephine, Clara, Louis, Jennie, Lorena (Bunny), Margaret, Ignatius, Frank P. Jr., Michael and Joseph T. (Tom). Michael Lombardo recalls that on Friday and Saturday mornings,

around 1 a.m., two or three of the children would accompany their father in a truck to drive to the farmers' market at Front Street, Hartford. Lorena Lombardo also recalls that on these occasions her father would only consider the best quality produce, and carefully checked all potential purchases for degrees of ripeness. Only then would he begin to bargain with the farmers.

Continued next week

Buffalo Bill: A spinner of myths and collectibles

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