

— HISTORY —

Charles Barrows and his many 'ingenious contrivances'

Charles H. Barrows was born in comfortable circumstances in Willimantic in 1841. He was educated privately in New Jersey. Like many New Englanders he headed for the South after the Civil War, to East Tennessee, hoping to expand his fortune. When his carpetbagger days were over, he headed back home.

Mechanical implements fascinated Barrows, and he began tinkering in his home workshop. Willimantic gained city status in 1893, and began to have big city ideas. The city fathers were particularly interested in bringing an electric streetcar service to the Willimantic, particularly after the successful operation of Frank Sprague's electric trolley car sys-

tem, Richmond, Va. in 1887-88.

In April 1894, Willimantic's Charles H. Barrows patented an elevated trolley car rail system that was designed to cut down on friction and drag, thus enabling electric streetcars to carry more passengers by utilizing the previously lost energy. He also designed a large double truck trolley car for 60.

Several city transit systems were considering adopting Barrows' rail and cars, and it was actually installed by the



Tom Beardsley

Harrisonville Rapid Transit Co. of Baltimore County, Md. The Willimantic City Council had examined Barrows' plans, but because of endless political wrangling it wasn't until 1903 that the first trolley car left Willimantic en route to South Windham, and by that time Barrows had departed for Springfield, Mass.

Charles Barrows was connected with "numerous ingenious and useful contrivances," which included the "steam revolving swing" then commonly used at summer resorts across the United States. The Willimantic Journal believed that Barrows' swing might have provided the idea for the Ferris wheel that was operating at the 1893 World's Fair.

In 1896, Barrows patented a horseless carriage. A *Chronicle* reporter reported that it reminded him of a pony cart with "an energized mechanical motor instead of the old familiar four-footed hay motor." The unique feature was its lightness of weight compared with other horseless carriages of the time. Barrows preferred an electric motor, but he claimed a gasoline or compressed air engine could also power his car, because like similar vehicles it did not consist of half a ton of wood and iron. The "Barrowsmobile" motor drove two 40-inch diameter wheels, and a pulley/gear system allowed the carriage to drive up Willimantic's steep hills.

Barrows' carriage had a wheel-

base of 4-feet 8-inches; wheels were wire spoked with heavy pneumatic tires, ball bearings, tubular frame, a comfortable seat to hold the driver and the passenger. It weighed between 200 and 400 pounds and was priced between \$300 and \$500.

Barrows anticipated a massive demand for his carriage, so he was providing licenses to manufacturers in cities across the United States, Canada, England, France and Germany, rather than manufacture it himself in Willimantic. Who knows? Willimantic could have become more famous for producing automobiles than cotton thread.

Looking back: 125 years of the Chronicle

125 Years Ago:

In the news: "The price of gas has been reduced from \$4.50 per 1,000 feet to \$4.00, but the average gas bag still supplies the genuine article free."

"The footbridge and street widening idea is still exercising the minds of many. Improvements of any kind which will advance public interests are desirable, and we advocate them."

Advertisement: S. Barrett, Carriage Trimmer, repairing promptly attended to. Harness making and repairing done all in the same shop. Church Street.

100 Years Ago:

In the news: "The state dairy commissioners' report says that we have 26,948 farms in this state valued at \$97,425,069. The increase in the production of milk has been very large. Lebanon Creamery does the largest business of any in the state. Last year it received from 1,300 cows 1,237,080 pounds of cream and paid their patrons \$67,528.61."

Advertisement: Horse brushes, floor brushes, counter brushes, scrub brushes, paint brushes, feather dusters. Jordan Bros., 664 Main St.

75 Years Ago:

In the news: "At the session of the Windham County Superior Court at Putnam, four cases assigned to be tried by the court were disposed of, the accused changing their pleas to guilty."

"Business transacted at the local post office exceeded that of the year previous, according to Postmaster Frank M. Smith. Willimantic ranks among the list of first class offices. To be in that circle, the receipts of any one-year must be in excess of \$40,000. It is stated that the receipts here last year, were several thousand dollars over that amount."

Advertisement: Our Nathan Hale Ginger Ale is delicious. Try it. Thread City Bottling Co., 67 Main St., Willimantic, Tel. 1169.

50 Years Ago:

In the news: "More than 100 annual town and city reports from state communities are now in the hands of a trio of judges, in the seventh annual town report contest sponsored by the University of Connecticut Institute of Public Service."

"The local Housing Authority met with a committee from the John Cates Terrace Protective Association and heard a series of protests over operation of the housing project on West Main Street."

Advertisement: When you take a mid-morning break, make it a real break with delicious ice-cold Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola Bottling Co. of Willimantic, Inc.

25 Years Ago:

In the news: "The season's largest storm moved into Connecticut and before it leaves in the evening, it could drop as much as a foot of fresh snow on the state's already covered ground."

"Willimantic has been chosen as the site for one of four public hearings designed to get public reaction on Gov. Ella Grasso's financial policies."

"Dropping its support for a plan to take over operation of E.O. Smith High School, the Board of Education has changed its negotiating for the first time since last summer."

Advertisement: We won't sell you someone else's headache. Gem Chevrolet, Route 195, Storrs Road, Mansfield.

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Watches, Hummels,



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