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10 ALBUM, Chronicle, Saturday, November 2, 2002

— HISTORY —

Popularity of the car ended a successful trolley car run

Part two of two

The Willimantic Traction Co. launched a trolley car system in Willimantic in 1903, connecting the city of Willimantic to Norwich and New London. A line was built to Coventry in 1908, but further plans to connect from there to Hartford were halted by the emergence of the automobile.

The Willimantic trolley car line was originally 11 miles long, and consisted of a one-mile length that stretched down Main Street from the Willimantic Cemetery to the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad grade crossing near the junction of Jackson Street. A 10-mile line went from there through to Baltic, where a connection was made to Norwich and points south. It was a profitable and popular line. In 1904 the trolley company operated four closed passenger cars, three open cars for summertime use, and its conductors and motormen earned \$1.75 a day. The company planned to build a line from Willimantic to Stafford Springs, but it was taken over by a larger concern with an eye on connect-

ing Willimantic and Hartford by trolley.

On Dec. 6, 1905, the Willimantic Traction Co. was purchased by the Consolidated Railroad Co., which in 1907 was absorbed by the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad Co. In 1908 the "Consolidated" petitioned the Connecticut railroad commissioners to extend its Willimantic trolley line by seven miles from the Willimantic cemetery, through Mansfield, to the southeastern section of Lake Wangumba at Coventry.

The Willimantic South Coventry trolley car line and Coventry's Lakeside Park opened for simultaneously for business on Aug. 18, 1909. The Lakeside Park, built by the Consolidated Railroad Co. to generate fares, consisted of a grove of chestnut trees, a merry-go-round, a bandstand, refreshment stands, lunch counters, a boat landing, "rustic seats," and a two-story pavilion containing ice cream parlors, a bowling alley, and a dance hall. The opening night celebrations at the park were marred however,

when a section of the dancing pavilion floor collapsed and 16 people were injured.

Commencing at 6:15 a.m. the Coventry cars ran every hour until 12:15 a.m. commencing from the railroad crossing in Willimantic. The fare was 10 cents for a one-way trip. The line was tremendously popular, particularly during the summertime. Rose Dunham, interviewed in 1990 fondly recalled her regular trolley car trips from Willimantic to Coventry in the early 1920s.

"Everybody hopped onto the trolley on Saturday night to go to the dances at Coventry, and the boys used to jump on the sides of the car and sway it about. The driver cursed them, and the girls screamed. We also had good times at Coventry Lake on a Sunday, where everybody used to go swimming."

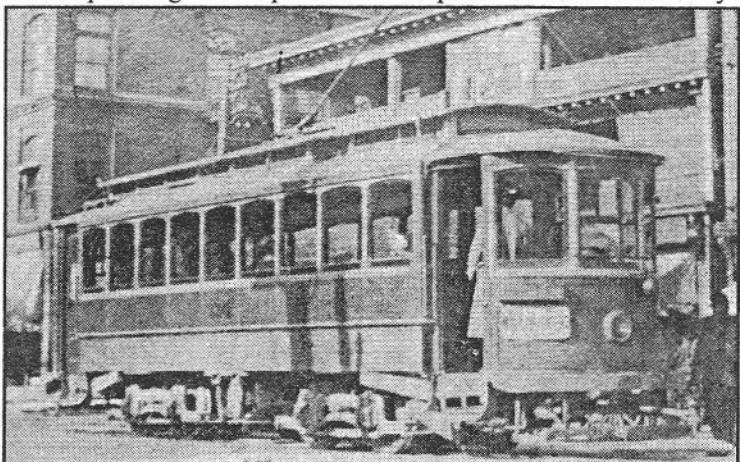
The trolley-generated good times at Lakeside Park did not last long. The Coventry trolley car could not compete with automobiles, and had to raise fares during World War I. The last trolley car from Coventry to Willimantic ran

on Nov. 22, 1926, and was replaced by a motorbus service. However, despite the trolley line's brief 15-year existence, it generated a great deal of house building along its seven-mile route.

Willimantic's Main Street trolley line and its link to Baltic remained popular, but it too could not resist the popularity of the automobile, and then lost much ridership during the Depression

years. The last trolley car ran to Baltic from Willimantic on Dec. 1, 1936, and the lines were removed by a WPA project shortly afterwards. However, the Willimantic Traction Co. car barns built in 1903 next to the cemetery remained in use as a city garage until demolished in the late 1980s.

Caption: The Coventry-



The Coventry-Willimantic trolley car passes the Loomer Opera House.