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— HISTORY —

The Gem Cinema: 'Electronic Picture Palace'

Built in 1912, the Gem Cinema was Willimantic's first purpose built "Electric Picture Palace." Previous to that, movies in the city had been viewed in church halls and department stores.

Like most movie houses across the United States, its decline in popularity was forced by the advent of TV after World War II. Amidst much local sadness, the old Gem Cinema closed late in the summer of 1958 after a performance of the Disney documentary, "The White Wilderness."

Cinema-goers recalled with fondness the first talkies they had heard there, and the Saturday afternoon serials featuring Rin Tin Tin, Tom Mix, Hoot Gibson and Roy Rogers.

But in the five years it had been closed, the old movie house was slowly deteriorating. However, in 1964 the Willimantic YMCA announced it was taking over the vacant picture palace building and intended transforming the interior into a new swimming pool.

This would add almost 60 percent of space to the old YMCA

building, which also like the Gem Theatre, had been built in 1912.

Construction on the project began shortly before Christmas, 1964.

The new swimming pool followed the slope of the old theater floor, and design plans revealed that it would be 60 foot long and 25 foot wide.

This provided much more space than available in the old YMCA pool, which now closed, was forcing patrons to use the Case Gym pool at Windham High School. The base of the YMCA's 52-year-old pool, which had held 50,000 gallons of water, was being deepened and transformed into a locker room for men and boys. From there, stairs would lead to the new pool being constructed in the old Gem cinema.

This locker room was located at



Tom
Beardsley

the south end of the building, one floor below street level. Furthermore, a new locker room was being built for women and girls, thus solving the problem wherein female members could only use the pool on Tuesdays and Thursdays because of the single changing room.

The busy builders were also constructing a corridor to lead from the pool to the sauna baths and a room for the janitor.

When the YMCA's paddleball enthusiasts heard that the wall they used in the gym was to be torn down, they were aghast.

But the paddleballers were relieved to hear that a new court was being built adjacent to the new basketball court.

Construction was also taking place on the second floor of the YMCA where a new youth function room was being built, along with new art, craft and hobby rooms.

These rooms would be connected to the old theater auditorium, where the old ceiling was being raised to accommodate the new

basketball court. Also, a new open area in the old movie house was being transformed into a dance hall.

It was forecast that by July, 1965, the Willimantic YMCA would be one of the finest YMCA facilities in the state.

It probably was, but unfortunately the attractive facades of the adjacent YMCA and Gem build-

ings were enclosed behind stylistically shaped concrete blocks, which gave 1960s Main Street a very "modern" appearance.

Such architectural improvements were apparently very popular in New York and Boston, but as can be seen in the accompanying photograph, the blocks took away and still hide much of Main Street's old world character.



The Gem Theater and YMCA pictured on Main Street in Willimantic in 1914.