

— HISTORY —

Selling yeast: The rising career of a Foster

Part one of two

Oral history is one of the most effective ways to record the lives of individuals, and the history of the communities in which they lived. I recently talked to Kirk Foster, who was born in Willimantic in 1912, and an interesting picture of life in 20th century Willimantic was formed as we conversed.

Kirk didn't know too much about his father's family, other than that his grandfather, J.B. Foster, was a shoe and boot manufacturer in Coventry in the 1870s.

Kirk's father, Clarence Foster, was born in Coventry in 1875. He came to work in Willimantic in 1909 as a salesman for the Fleischmann's Yeast Co.

Fleischmann's Yeast dates back to 1868, and was developed by Austro-Hungarian immigrants Charles and Maximillian Fleischmann who were disap-

pointed by American breads at that time. They built a yeast plant in Cincinnati and developed a compressed yeast cake, which standardized the baking of commercial and domestic bread.

Clarence Foster was based in Willimantic, and as the regional agent for Fleischmann's Yeast he traveled across eastern Connecticut by horse and wagon, then by Model T Ford, and often by train from the Willimantic depot to places such as Colchester.

Kirk knew more about his mother's side of the family, the Kirkpatricks. His grandfather, James Kirkpatrick, was Scots-Irish Orangeman from Northern Ireland. He arrived in Coventry



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after the Civil War, and worked in a local woolen mill. James later worked a 20-acre farm, and ran a livery rental business. The Kirkpatrick family homestead, which still stands at 950 Main St. in Coventry, was built in 1870. Kirk's mother, Mary Kirkpatrick, was born in Coventry in 1878.

When the Fosters first came to Willimantic, they lived at the Park Central Hotel on Valley Street. Many locals will remember the restaurant for its famed, and generous spaghetti dinners. The Fosters then moved to Tingley Street, and eventually purchased a large house at 147 Spring Street at the junction of High Street, which was built in 1856. Clarence's son, Kirk was born at a historic Willimantic location. Dr. Mason's Hospital was located in the Oaks at Fairview Avenue in a converted mansion, built by a mill executive, William Barrows, in 1880.

Some of Kirk's earliest memo-

ries of Willimantic are from when his family lived on Tingley Street. He recalls the circuses, and the traveling Chautauqua Arts Festivals that were held on the adjacent Windham Field, later known as Soldiers and Sailors Field and today known as Memorial Park.

Kirk remembers Willimantic's trolley cars which ran to Coventry and Norwich. He used the cars regularly to visit family in Coventry, and recalls that on hilly sections the cars ran slow enough to enable young boys to hang on to the back and hitch a ride. Also, in the summertime, the Willimantic cars had no sides and open tops. Willimantic's streets were bustling with activity. The city's railroad depot was also operative, providing regular services to Hartford. Kirk and his wife Hazel left the family home on Spring Street in 1974, and now live in Windham.



Kirk's mother and father, Clarence and Mary Foster, are pictured with the Fleischmann's Yeast delivery truck in Willimantic during the mid-1920s.

Continued next week

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