

— HISTORY —

July 4 military parade predates Boom Box by years

Long before the days of the Willimantic Boom Box Parade, the city held a military parade organized by the local Veterans of Foreign Wars post to celebrate Independence Day.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States traces its roots back to 1899, when the Veterans of the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Philippine Insurrection (1899-1902) founded local organizations to secure rights and benefits for ex-members of the fighting forces. A number of amalgamations followed, and by 1913, the current VFW was in existence.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars in Willimantic, Gold Star Post No. 1724, became active in local civic events, and in 1938 the VFW state parade and convention was held in the city.

The Willimantic VFW's July 4

parades attracted crowds from across the region. The one held in 1940, was particularly poignant, as the country once more seemed to be on the verge of a world war.

Germans forces were overrunning Europe, and the Pacific East was coming under the control of Japanese forces.

The celebrations were based at Wood's Field on Jackson Street, where daylong activities culminated in a bonfire and firework display. The 1940 military parade included VFW members dressed in American army uniforms dating from the Revolution, War of 1812 and the Spanish American



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War. The marchers assembled at Lincoln Square, and were led by the VFW boys bugle and drum corps at Lincoln Square. The Garde St. Mary followed them, and the military assembly marched up Main Street to Bank Street, turned right onto Bank Street and right again onto Valley Street, where they marched to Wood's Field.

When the parade reached Wood's Field, a crowd of more than 6,000 were awaiting them. The various organizations conducted military drills, and then in turn they lowered their colors. The large crowd then assembled around the central stage where Dr. William Keating, recently discharged from the U.S. Veterans Hospital at Newington, took the oath of office as the commander of the Gold Star Post No. 1724.

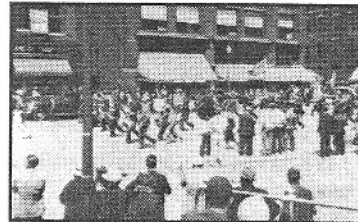
The audience then settled down

to watch an amateur vaudeville contest, which was won by Richard Vie, who performed several popular vocal selections. The Gude twins were awarded the runners-up prize. There then followed a concert by the Thread City Band. The heavens opened as the concert came to an end, and to everyone's disappointment the bonfire and firework display had to be postponed until the following evening.

The bonfire and an "elaborate pyrotechnic exhibition" eventually went ahead, and the police, Windham Hospital and the local fire department reported that there had been no serious injuries or fires in the city, as had been the case in previous years because of the careless setting off of fireworks.

The Willimantic VFW hit the headlines in early 1942, when it

agreed to turn back to the government a 75 mm French cannon, and a heavy mobile trench cannon, which had been obtained from the War Department after World War I. Both guns were constructed of steel and weighed in at over two tons each. They had been in storage since the state VFW parade in 1938, when the heavy guns had been towed along Main Street by tractors.



This scene was shot at the entrance of the footbridge in 1940 as the July 4 parade made its way up Main Street.

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