

— HISTORY —

Polish Americans have long, rich history in Willimantic

The recent closure of the Polish Club in Willimantic brings to mind the community's rich Polish-American history. Before his death several years ago, I talked in depth to Frank Koslowski, who had documented the city's rich Polish history. Frank was born in Galicia, in the Austrian section of Poland in 1904, and had arrived in Willimantic with his parents in 1913. Frank is probably best remembered for his tailor shop at 57 Jackson St., but he was also a significant and active member of the Willimantic Polish Club.

In 1922, nine years after Frank Koslowski's arrival in the city, Willimantic's White Eagle Polish-American band, organized on Sept. 13, 1919, built a band hall and Polish Club on Brook Street. The building was taken over by the Moose Club after the Polish Club built the premises on Ives Street in the early 1930s.

The Brook Street premises were opened with great ceremony on Saturday evening, Jan. 27, 1923.

The hall's interior was decorated with Polish and American flags, and the walls were adorned with pictures of famous Polish generals. The vast majority of band members worked at American Thread, and the plant's officials and overseers were the evening's special, invited guests.

John Lathusek Jr. was the master of ceremonies for the evening, and the club's president Frank Nysek gave the welcoming address. The band then played the National Anthem and the overture, "Polaska Powestaje," and building fund secretary Frank Kokooska read out a list of major contributors.

The next guest was Father O. S. Benumister from St. Joseph's Church, who spoke to the assembly in English and Polish. He congratulated Willimantic's Polish



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population for their keenness in becoming integrated into American society, and stressed that they should all become 100 percent Americans, and continued with a fine tribute to the local, well-known bandleader, Charles Wheeler, who had trained the band members to play their instruments. He then paid great tribute to William C. Smith, the "father of the band," who had organized and inspired the city's young Polish men to study and take up music.

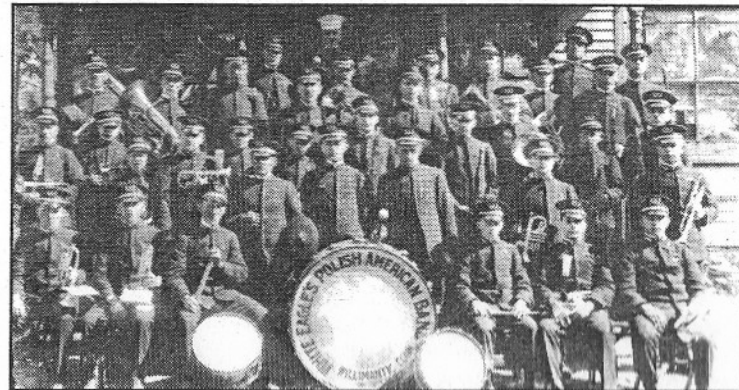
The band played the overture "Flower Girl," before William C. Smith went up to the podium to give an address. Smith, a manager at American Thread Co., had been given the task of integrating the company's Polish immigrants into American life, and to ensure that as many employees as possible took out American citizenship.

The band had been ATCO's idea, as a way of introducing the Polish workers to the American way of life. Smith gave a brief history of the founding of the band,

and raised laughs around the hall when he explained how difficult it had been in getting some of the current, accomplished players interested in playing trumpets and trombones. Smith went on to say how well the Polish children were doing in the city's schools, and that this bade well for Willimantic.

After Smith's speech, Benumister gave the benediction, and apologized for the absence of

the city mayor, Charles Gates, who had been called away on urgent business. The hall was then cleared of chairs, and dancing was enjoyed until midnight. Unfortunately, the pleasant relationships between the Polish workers and ATCO management would only last for two more years, because the Polish employees were highly visible in the controversial 1925 strike.



Willimantic's White Eagle Polish American Band in 1927.

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