

— HISTORY —

# The everyday people make up a community

An important part of local history, beyond buildings, mayors, parades, floods and hurricanes, are the everyday people who make up a community.

Contributors to the Threadcity.com chat forum have been recalling the Willimantic of the 1950s and 1960s, and the local characters who gave the city its own unique character in those postwar years, such as "Nick the Stick" at the Lucky Strike Lanes.

Nick was employed by the bowling alley's owner, Mr. Barbour, to reset the pins. He lived in the same building with his wife Eloise and also worked as a cleaner at the Gem Theater movie house.

Nick enjoyed an occasional beer at Peter's Tavern, and never missed the Gillette-sponsored "Friday Night Fights" on the TV at the Italian Garden bar.

Nick and Eloise are fondly remembered because they were one of the few black families living in the city in those days.

Many people fondly recall Alex Caisse, who headed the city public works department, and also the camaraderie of the city employees.

One worker in the water department complained to Caisse that he was always being chased by dogs when he went out to read meters in the city.

He solved the problem by arming himself with a water pistol. This was a city where everyone knew everyone else and Caisse contacted his friends in the police department.

The local constabulary went round in a squad car and pretended to arrest the worker for carrying a weapon as he was reading the meters. He was taken to the police station in the town hall and ordered to fire the water pistol.

The contributor who related the



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water pistol story explained that if you did not grow up in the city prior to the 1960s, it is difficult to explain what a great town Willimantic was — particularly on Thursday nights when Grants and Woolworth's were open until 9 p.m.

People could shop downtown at the First National, the A & P and the old Stop & Shop, in the years before the East Brook Mall.

Bill Brainard recalled what a thrill it was shopping downtown, especially at Christmas. When he was a kid, Main Street, Willimantic gave him the feeling that he was in a big city, with all the shops, stores, soda fountains, clothing stores.

However retailers had begun to move away from downtown before redevelopment, with the building of the Willimantic Plaza in 1967, which housed the Shop Rite and the Bonanza Steakhouse.

A contributor, now living in Japan, was born in Willimantic in 1952 and left in 1971. He loved

growing up in the Jackson Street neighborhood, which was filled with a "wonderful conglomeration" of Irish, French Canadian, German, Ukrainian and Polish people.

Mr. Duffy ran a little market at 195 Jackson St. When he closed it down, he invited the local kids over to divide up the leftover cakes and chocolate milk.

There was also "old Charlie" from the Ukraine who ran Charlie's Grinder Shop and who had trouble with the Milk Street kids who were always raiding his candy display.

The Jackson Street area was a thriving neighborhood in those days. There was Mr. Goudreaux, the shoe repairer, and Mr. Carey the milkman, who delivered the delicious Mountain Dairy chocolate milk.

Phil Angelo's green truck provided a mobile market service for people without automobiles. George Boudreau had a market "down Sodom."

There was also a family on Jackson Street who got up early on Saturdays and washed the sidewalk in front of their house.

Another contributor fondly recalled his youth with the Oak Street neighborhood kids, and riding bikes down to Flynn's to go swimming in the river behind Butler's Dairy.

After swimming, they bought ice cream at Butler's window, and then played baseball in the vacant lot now occupied by the Lutheran minister's house. Right field was the intersection of Oak and Summit streets.

Going back to the late 1940s, someone recalled that the city of Willimantic ran baseball excursions by bus for kids to watch the Boston Braves. The following year the city organized a train to Fenway Park, but nothing could ever beat that Braves trip on the bus.

Everybody agreed. It was the people who made old Willimantic great.

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