

— HISTORY —

# Irene Monroe: She was Willimantic through and through

An integral part of Willimantic's history died on Nov. 23 when Irene Monroe passed away at St. Joseph's Living Center at age 84. Irene had worked for many years at the American Thread Co. and in her retirement played an essential role in the Windham Textile and History Museum's establishment and staffing. I interviewed Irene in March 1991, and her oral history was published as Chapter 11 of "Willimantic Industry and Community."

At the textile museum Irene demonstrated the workings of a winding machine she had operated at American Thread. In 1998 she took part in the "Songs of the Heritage Corridor" program, and was interviewed by Mrs. Andrychowski's class at Sweeney School. This project provided the material for a song written by state troubadour Sally Rogers which recounted Irene's experiences with the strict nuns who taught at St. Mary's School in the 1920s.

Irene was Willimantic through and through. She was born at 228 High St. on Sept. 19, 1919, one of

Exerias and Elsie Ducharme's five children. Her father and Joseph Plante worked as blacksmiths, shoeing horses at 43 Bank Street, on the corner of Meadow Street. Irene's mother Elsie Cardin was born in Norwichtown, and grew up in Baltic where she worked in the mills. Exerias Ducharme arrived in Baltic from Quebec, and Irene recalled stories from her father regarding its rural nature. Her grandmother had to look out for bears when she went to the well to draw water.

Irene attended St Mary's School on Valley Street, and in the 1998 interview at Sweeney School she recalled the discipline imposed there by the nuns. Sally Rogers compiled a song from these experiences entitled "Just a Little Whack." Here's a verse:

*"Uniforms, uniforms that was what we wore*



Tom Beardsley

*I would have been happy if my uniform tore!*

*Discipline, discipline, oh, what a bore!*

*But what I remember is*

*Smack, smack, smack,*

*Just a little whack on the back of the hand ..."*

The full song can be heard on the CD "Songs from the Heritage Corridor" or at <http://www.threadcity.com> where you can hear the Connecticut Nu=tmeggers' 1961 recording of Jesse Greer's song "Willimantic, USA."

Irene fondly recalled Willimantic's trolley car days. She rode on them to Baltic to visit her grandparents, and all the way to Ocean Beach at New London. However, during Irene's early childhood the family briefly left Willimantic. The demand for horseshoeing fell in the 1920s, and the Ducharmes moved to Mansfield. Her father shoed horses at the Agricultural College at Storrs and for local farmers who still operated their farm machinery with horsepower.

Irene's mother worked at American Thread during the Depression, and she had a word

with manager David Moxon to see if he could hire his daughter. Irene began work at American Thread in 1938, and was employed in Mill No. 6's Finishing Department until it closed in 1985.

Nevertheless, during that 47-year period Irene found time to join the Army and have children. She worked as a translator in New Jersey, for members of the French-speaking population of Martinique and Guadalupe who were joining the fighting forces.

During Irene's long spells at American Thread, she met a great variety of immigrant workers. She recalled the Polish-speaking workers, those from eastern and central Europe in the late 1940s and 1950s, and Puerto Rican employees who came to Willimantic from the 1960s onwards.

She also recalled a young man from Mansfield named Peter Torkelson who came to work in Mill No. 6 during his summer break from college. He left ATCO for New York and Los Angeles and in 1965 became Peter Tork of the Monkees.



Irene Monroe, 1991

Irene particularly enjoyed working with children at the museum and on the Heritage Corridor project and took pleasure in talking about Willimantic. However, she was greatly saddened by the old city's decline, and preferred to remember the bustling, energetic community of her youth.

I'll miss you Irene. Thanks for everything.

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