

— HISTORY —

# Willimantic Auto Show of 1920 a highlight of the year

The Connecticut National Guard's armory on Pleasant Street was built in 1912 and replaced an older armory on Center Street built in 1880. The new establishment had a sizeable "drill shed," and this space was often utilized for community purposes. For example, many local companies often held their annual dances at the armory, but in 1920 it was the venue for the first major automobile show in Connecticut to be staged outside Hartford.

The Willimantic Automobile Show featured more than 24 popular makes of automobiles, "pleasure cars" and trucks displayed in 20 separate exhibitions.

The show opened on Feb. 26 at 8 p.m. and continued through the weekend with afternoon and evening sessions. The committee in charge consisted of Eugene Lewis, Maurice Leonard, Amos Lewis, Murray Tighe and Edward Morrison and they ensured that visitors were well fed and entertained. The entire drill shed was decorated in pink, white and green, and the Peerless Orchestra

was hired to provide music.

The committee also hired Edward J. Connelly (1859-1928), an Irish tenor, ex-vaudeville entertainer and silent movie actor, to sing a selection of songs and lullabies. Connelly and Peerless Orchestra opened with three songs: "When Irish Eyes are Smiling," "Londonderry Aire" ("Danny Boy"), and "I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen." There was not a dry Irish eye in the transformed drill shed when it ended.

When the tears dried away, auto show visitors had plenty of distractions. Edward J. Cotter, the proprietor of the Motor Car Supplies, located in the Parker-Elliott Building at 1015 Main St., displayed a seven-passenger National touring car. Louis Wilson and William Anthony, who conducted an auto service

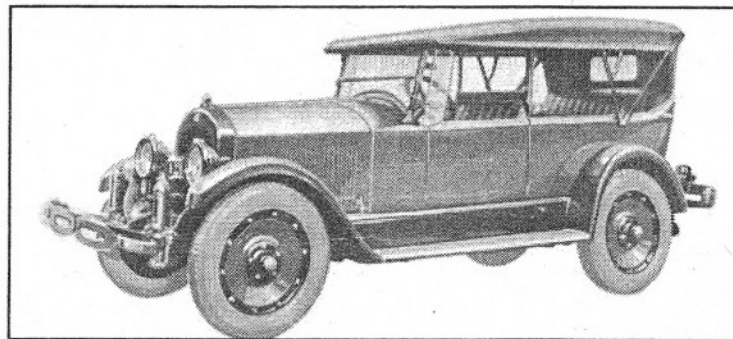


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station and general repairing business on Bridge Street, occupied the adjacent stand and displayed a range of South Bond tires, Zenita carburetor, and a steering wheel lock to prevent auto theft. Wilson and Anthony were the local agents for International Harvester Trucks, but they were unable to display the latest model on opening night, as it became stuck in the mud on its way from Hartford — the majority of major highways had no tarmac at this time.

The Ames Motor Co., which manufactured automobiles at nearby Hebron, displayed an Oakland two-passenger roadster with wire wheels and two Scripps-Booth cars, which were considered to be the most attractive on display. The Scripps-Booth had evolved from a cycle car built at Detroit, and was manufactured there by General Motors.

The Leonard Brothers Garage, located at 893 Main St., occupied the next stand. It featured Essex, Reo, and Hudson cars, and a wide range of Goodyear tires. Smaller



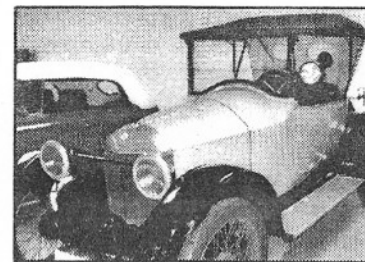
ABOVE: The V8 Cole Aero Eight car; BELOW, RIGHT: The Scripps-Booth roadster.

exhibits were put together by William Konopaska's Windham Battery Co. at 591 Main St., and Adeland Mathieu's Windham cycle shop located at 907 Main St.

It was widely agreed that the most lavish exhibit in the shed was that of the Jordan Auto Co., which displayed several Dodge and Buick models. But the centerpiece of the display was the most expensive car in the show, the luxurious V8 Cole Aero Eight.

It was estimated that 5,000 people visited the Willimantic Automobile Show over three

days, and it was considered to be a remarkable event for the Thread City. The organizers reported that all local dealers had improved sales, and it was hoped to repeat the show in 1921.



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