

October 21, 2004

Local Elks lodge has long, storied local history

Part one of two

Earlier this year, Willimantic's local lodge of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks No. 1311 celebrated its 90th birthday. The local Elks held their first meeting in the State Armory on Pleasant Street on March 30, 1914. Subsequent meetings were held twice a month in a variety of locations, which included the old Moose Home on Pleasant Street, the Knights of Pythias Hall in the Jordan Block, the Willimantic Savings Institute building, the Oddfellows Hall on Main Street, and the Valley Street Armory.

This information is included in an Elks pamphlet recently sent to me by John C. Sullivan and published in 1954 by Lodge 1311 in celebration of its 40th birthday. It provides details on the lodge's earliest history, as many of the lodge's founding members were still alive when the Elks compiled this brief history.

The lodge's first officers in 1914 included Danny Dunn, Charles Gates, Joseph Berard and Charlie Hill, who oversaw the lodge's initiation ceremony. Special trains came from around the region, full of members from neighboring Elks lodges, to celebrate the occasion. They marched along Main Street "from the Town

Farm to the Union Street railroad crossing."

After the celebrations were over, the Willimantic lodge members began to plan for a home of their own and subsequently organized a fundraising drive. Exalted Ruler Danny Dunn represented the lodge's spirit when in 1916 he refused an all-expenses-paid trip to the Elks' national convention in Los Angeles, so that the funds could go into the building fund.

The Willimantic Elks organized their first fund-raising program in November, 1916, and held a grand carnival in the Pleasant Street Armory.

The lodge had special guests that evening — the officers of a German U-Boat visiting New London on a goodwill mission, just months before the United States entered World War I.

The carnival was a tremendous



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The Elks home on Pleasant Street shortly after it opened.

success, raising \$5,000. Shortly afterwards, the lodge's building committee began exploring different sites across the town for its proposed new clubhouse.

The first place considered was the Fitch property on West Main Street, on which the Coca-Cola Co. had built its bottling plant in the 1930s — the building now occupied by Blockbuster Video. The members also considered purchasing the Hayden Block, now occupied by the Savings Institute, and the Center Street Armory, which became the home of the Franco-American Club

before being demolished in 1974.

In 1919 the building committee decided to purchase two lots on the south side of Pleasant Street, owned by James Fullerton and Jay Shepard, for \$4,000.

From then onwards, lodge members rolled up their sleeves and began clearing the site, which was covered with "wild growth."

Almost 100 members turned up each Sunday to labor at the task. One member, Tom Foley, was a local trucker and he sent over two horses to pull tree stumps out of the ground.

The Elks had cleared their new grounds by the late summer and the lodge held its first country fair there during the Labor Day weekend of 1919. It was a great success and raised a further \$5,500, which enabled the lodge to pur-

chase two adjacent lots from William A. Dawson in 1920 and to build a wall around the property costing \$10,000.

In 1921, the building committee, led by Patrick Donahue and Albert French, hired the Norwich-based architectural firm of Cudworth and Thompson.

The lodge accepted the plans at the end of 1924 and after putting the building project out to bid the Elks accepted an estimate of \$89,000 from Willimantic's Doyle and Murphy building company. Moriarty and Rafferty carried out the plumbing and heating work and John T. Ashton installed all the electrical wiring and fittings.

Continued next week.

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