

Thursday, December 30, 2004

'Willim-Antics' provided music and fund-raising for the hospital

The Windham Community Memorial Hospital has played a central role in local community life for almost three quarters of a century. In recognition of this role, the local community has often rallied around to provide crucial funding for this institution that evolved out of the old St. Joseph's Hospital on Jackson Street. A prime ex-ample of this close

relationship between community and its hospital were the "Willim-Antics" musical reviews performed at the then Willimantic State Teacher's Col-



Tom Beardsley

lege's Shafer Auditorium to provide funds for the hospital. Francois J. Gamache's extensive local history collection consists of three Willim-Antics programs, dated 1949, 1965 and 1969. The most interesting of the three was the one that recounted the events of the 1949 concert. The "Willim-Antics" represent the old city's long tradition of

music and dramatic reviews, a tradition expressed from the antebellum years right through to this present day by the Windham Theatre Guild and its Burton Leavitt Theatre.

The Windham Community Memorial Auxiliary presented "The Willim-Antics of 1949," a mainly local group of talented performers who presented a musical revue

at Shafer Auditorium, on Nov. 30, Dec. 1-3 of that year.

The review was in two acts and presented a history of musical theater up to that date. Torrey McKenny staged and directed the show and Raymond Beebe and Charles Helmold on the piano, Al Tuttle on bass and Norman

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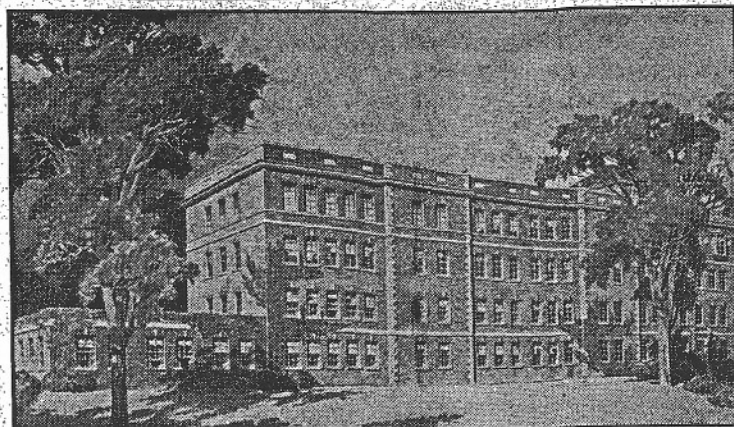
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Frigault on drums, provided the music.

Scene 1 of Act 1 was a recreation of Ethel Merman's performance of "There's No Business Like Show Business" taken from the Broadway production of "Annie Get Your Gun." Shortly afterwards, "Mr. Willimantic" Al Saba performed "The Man on the Flying Trapeze," a vaudeville hit from 1890.

Up next came a rendition of a 1908 Tin Pan Alley hit "Cuddle Up a Little Closer," followed by Dorothy Levinson's interpretation of a song from Fannie Brice performed in the "Ziegfield Follies of 1916."

Scene 7 in Act 2 was "A few minutes with Josephine and Jessie Greer," wherein the former recounted her vaudeville and musical days. The Greets operated the Electro-Motive Co. in town for more than 30 years and a wing of the Windham Community Memorial Hospital is named in memory of the Greers' generous support of the institution over the



The original architectural rendering for the Windham Community Memorial Hospital printed in the 1949 'Willim-Antics' program.

years. The musical evening ended with scene 13 of Act 2, which consisted of the entire company singing "Sleepy Time Gal," a chart hit from 1924.

The "Willim-Antics of 1949" official program presents a history of commercial life in immediate postwar Willimantic.

It includes ads for the Eastern Live Poultry Co. and the Daole Hatchery on Columbia Road and the Sports Center Restaurant at 81

Willowbrook St., where patrons enjoyed dancing every Saturday night with an orchestra. Furthermore, every other Friday night the restaurant hosted semi-professional boxing matches.

Church Street was a thriving retail center and was home to Dean's Electric Shop, the Windham Electrical Co., the City Glass Co., Noheimer's Meat Market and the Church Street Package Store.

The Frontenac Restaurant, off-

ered good food at 11 Railroad St. and the Rock Garden Restaurant, provided dining and dancing to Ray Beller and his orchestra.

Benjamin Hochberg and Gerald Loiselle advertised their new housing estate at Pleasant View Acres on Upper Mansfield Avenue. They asked people to come and see their show house, "the American Life Home, 1950 Model." This "real durable home based on common fundamentals, built by local boys" cost less than \$10,000 to buy.

The program also featured several "Did You Know" sections about Windham Hospital. For example, the hospital had just completed its first year of a preceptorship plan with the Yale University School of Medicine, which involved an assistant surgeon residing at the hospital.

Fifty-five years later after this early fund raising program, the hospital is one of the town's enduring institutions and continues to provide vital services to Windham and the surrounding area.