

Feb. 12, 2004

From band pavilion to recreation park

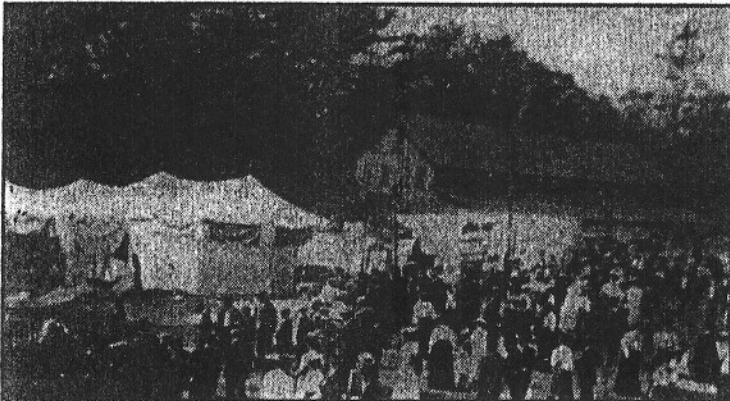
Part four of five

In the summer of 1882, William Eliot Barrows, the Willimantic Linen Co.'s president, built a park and dance pavilion at the Oaks, on the southern side of Quercus Avenue. During the park's opening night concert in August 1882, the Willimantic Band entertained the massed crowds with afternoon and early evening concerts. The dance pavilion was so packed that the orchestra had difficulty per-

invite. *It is hopeful you will find it a source of pleasure and recreation. The Willimantic Band has been engaged to furnish music each Saturday evening. Ten o'clock is the hour when it is expected that all persons will*



Tom Beardsley



The Willimantic Fairgrounds as they appeared in the early 20th century.

forming. The following Saturday evening the Willimantic Band was able to perform on a 16-foot square stage erected inside the pavilion.

The park's opening night attraction was William Barrows' floodlit tableaux, a unique entertainment which was met with gasps of delight. At sunset Barrows projected paintings onto 20-foot-high canvases. The bright beams which illuminated the pictures were provided by one of Barrows' own inventions, an "oxi-hydrogen" light. The performance was repeated the following week. The word quickly spread and over 2000 people packed the grounds and dance pavilion to see the outdoor projection show. However, 'rowdy elements' caused problems, and before the Oaks Park third summer concert of the season, Barrows' posted the following notice around Willimantic:

The Grove at the 'Oaks' is for your exclusive use and for such friends you would be pleased to

leave the grounds. Loud and boisterous talking and laughter should not be indulged in as such conduct is annoying to the large majority of the persons visiting the Grove, and it also leads to the belief that some of you are ill bred. It should be remembered that this Grove is not opened to the public and that it is the private property of the Willimantic Linen Company, and that all persons except yourselves and those whom you invite are trespassers.

The concerts and entertainments continued each Saturday during the summer of 1882, playing to packed crowds. However, on Oct. 14 there was great disappointment when a downpour of rain caused a postponement. The evening dance and concerts at the Oaks Park returned the following

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summer, and a massive crowd came to the July 4, 1883 Independence Day celebrations held at the old "Grove."

The Grove was Willimantic's summer social center for the next decade. It housed every conceivable form of entertainment during the summer months. The company also rented the park to other organizations, particularly to the various societies of St. Joseph's Church. However in 1892 after several rowdy, drunken brawls at the dance pavilion, the park was closed down for "public safety." On July 13, 1892, the *Willimantic Chronicle* reported on the Willimantic Linen Co.'s decision: "The dance pavilion at the Oaks Park will be taken down on account of the fact that it is the resort of many, on Sundays and evenings, who get noisy and disturb the occupants of the tenements of this vicinity."

The Oaks Park met with an ignominious end, but because of its early popularity, Barrows decided to build a trotting circuit and park at the east end of

Willimantic at Sodom. He illuminated the racetrack with electric arc lights, and the first race meeting held in July 1883 attracted an estimated crowd of more than 4,000. Barrows also built a vast exhibition hall, and invited local farmers and civic leaders to hold an annual agricultural fair.

The first Willimantic Agricultural Show was held in October 1883, and the new park at Sodom became better known to two generations of Willimantic residents as the Willimantic Fairgrounds. The following year, the Willimantic Linen Co. laid a baseball diamond in the center of the track and erected a grandstand. A professional baseball team, the Willimantic Colts, was formed to compete in the Connecticut Baseball League, and it played its home games at the new Fairgrounds baseball park. Agricultural fairs were held here annually until 1914, when the Willimantic Linen Co.'s successors, the American Thread Co., rebuilt the grounds into a sporting facility, which it renamed Recreation Park.