

March 11, 2004

# With death of Gladys Bowman, city lost a true link with its past

Part one of three

Another piece of Willimantic's rich history, and a link with the old city's past was lost recently with the death of 87-year-old Gladys Bowman.

I first met Gladys in 1991 when interviewing her as part of an oral history program. It became immediately obvious that she had an endearing love for the city in which she was born and had spent her entire life. Her recollection of life in the Thread City reminds us of its rich ethnic, religious, and industrial heritage.

Gladys Bowman was born in Willimantic in 1916, the daughter of William Bowman and Rose Blanchette Bowman. Her grandfather John Bowman (1841-1905) was born in County Durham, England, and trained as a tailor in the city of Newcastle. He worked in London for a tailor who made clothes for the royal family, but in 1866, Bowman left England for America, and worked for a tailor in New York City. He arrived in Willimantic in 1869 and opened a tailor's shop in the borough in 1871. The Bowman tailor shop at 794 Main St. subsequently served Willimantic for more than two generations.

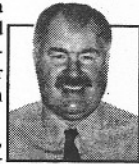
Gladys' grandfather never forgot his British heritage and named all his children after kings and queens: William, John, Arthur, George, Mary and Elizabeth. Moreover, Gladys' father William named her brother Edward. Gladys' paternal grandmother Mary White Bowman was born in Edinburgh, and Gladys

recalled that as a child she had difficulty understanding her thick Scottish accent.

In contrast, Gladys' mother Rose, although born in West Willington, was of French Canadian descent. She was the daughter of a French Canadian immigrant from Trois Rivieres, Quebec. He owned a large tract of land in Willington and supplied the Hall mill there with lumber to cut their spools. Rose Blanchette Bowman arrived in Willimantic as a child, when her father purchased property at Jackson Place.

Gladys recalled that Willimantic's multi-ethnic makeup resulted in a large number of competing and contrasting religions. For example, her father was an Episcopalian and his mother, Scottish-born Mary White Bowman was a "very strong" Protestant, and anti-Catholic. Consequently, Gladys' mother realized that her children would not be brought up as Catholics, so she decided to send them with the neighbor's children, to the First Baptist Church of Willimantic. Despite the Protestant influences from her father's family, Gladys' mother remained a Roman Catholic all her life. The religious differences never caused problems.

Gladys' mother was raised at Jackson Place, Willimantic,



Tom Beardsley

which she recalled was then known as Cork Alley. All her neighbors were Irish or of Irish descent and consisted of such families as the Killouneys and the Picketts. Rose told her daughter Gladys about the Irish funerals and wakes at Cork Alley, where relatives and friends celebrated the lives of the recently deceased. They put pipes into their mouths

so they could have their last pipeful of tobacco, and sang, wailed and moaned over the coffins. Because Gladys' mother had been raised among the Willimantic Irish, she could easily speak with a strong Irish accent and when she related stories of Cork Alley, she always did it in an Irish accent. Gladys' mother, Rose Blanchette Bowman, who

had once worked in American Thread's packing room, died in Willimantic in 1968 at 88.

Gladys recalled that when she was growing up, the city was losing its 19th century Irish identity as more Italian, French and Polish families than Irish lived in Cork Alley during the 1930s. Also, many French and Polish families

were living down in "the lower village," which was known as Sodom. In contrast, the Anglos lived predominantly in the Fourth Ward, south of the River. Next week we'll take a journey around the "forgotten fourth" as it was in the 1920s, when Gladys was growing up there.

Continued next week

**Weather Report**

**FORECAST**  
 Tonight: Cloudy, Low 32.  
 Friday: Rain, snow, High 40.  
 Saturday: Sunny, High 45.  
 Sunday: Partly cloudy, High 49.

**TOMORROW'S TIDES**

	HIGH	LOW
New London:	12:54 a.m./1:24 p.m.	7:58 a.m./7:59 p.m.
Noank:	12:32 a.m./1:02 p.m.	7:50 a.m./7:51 p.m.
Stonington:	12:22 a.m./12:52 p.m.	7:17 a.m./7:18 p.m.

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