

March 18, 2004

A lifelong love for the city

Part two of three

Willimantic's Gladys Bowman, who died recently at the age of 87, had an enduring affection for the city in which she was born in



Tom Beardsley

1916. Conversations with her were a delight, particularly when Gladys recalled some of the city's proud, and not-so-proud history. Her father and grandfather had run a tailor's shop in Willimantic for more than 50 years, and the Bowman family had played an integral role in the Thread City's civic history. They had always lived "over the river" and Gladys recalled this city suburb from her youth:

"This part of Willimantic was known as the fourth ward, or as we used to say, the 'forgotten fourth!' It is a very quiet part of town. We had a blacksmith, a carriage painter and the canoe club. There was also a sausage maker, a Mr. Parent, who worked for a butcher. It was a terrible smell! I remember that when we moved into this house, (95 Hayden St.) there was no electricity. My uncle would not have it. The house was lit by kerosene lamps! Several of the houses around here did not have electricity when I was young, so there was a demand for kerosene. We had one neighbor, Mr. Melony, who was an overseer at American Thread, and another neighbor worked in a dress shop in town. Down on the corner lived the Southlands. Mr. Southland had owned Dawson's Florists. Mr. Dawson had worked for Mr. Southland, and bought the business from him. Mr. Southland's father was a lawyer, and Willard Hayden lived up at the other end of Lebanon Avenue. He was the son of Whiting Hayden, who was a well known businessman here. In fact, two streets around here are named after him, Whiting Street and Hayden Street. My father bought some property from Will Hayden."

The house in which Gladys lived on Hayden Street was built by her grandfather John Bowman in 1872 and it had always been occupied by the Bowman family. When Gladys was a teen-ager, it was owned by her uncle. However, tragically he died during a National Recovery Administration (New Deal) march up Main Street in 1933, so Gladys' father William inherited the Hayden Street house.

Prior to moving to Hayden Street, Gladys' family lived around the corner at 40 Lebanon Ave., and it was here that as a 9-year-old that Gladys experienced the bitter 1925 strike at the American Thread Co., which lasted for more than a year. She recalled that many members of her family were affected, and

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also that the strikers had lived in a "tent city" after American Thread had ejected them from their housing. Gladys' uncle, a striker, swore that he would never again work for the American Thread Co. and he never did.

She also remembered her aunt referring to the replacement workers brought in from Maine, New Hampshire and Quebec as scabs. Nevertheless, Gladys recalled how important American Thread was to the Willimantic economy, despite the strike's terrible effects. It hit the Bowman tailoring business badly, and Gladys recalled how difficult it was for her father to send her brother to college. He was very good in chemistry, and after high school worked for four years in American Thread's chemical laboratory in order to pay his tuition at Storrs.

Gladys Bowman never worked at American Thread, but she did enjoy a lifelong career as a teacher. She was educated entirely in Willimantic schools, and first attended the Oaks School — now the McSweeney Regional Senior Center — for kindergarten and the first three grades. After that, she went to the Model School and Windham High on Prospect Street, and then onto the Willimantic State Teacher's College. She started at the college in 1934, and Gladys' class was the first to receive bachelor degrees from what had previously been the old Willimantic Normal School.

Gladys Bowman graduated in 1938 with a bachelor of education degree. She had always wanted to teach, right from being 6 years old. Gladys was inspired by her teacher at the Oaks School, Helen Holmes. As a child, she had never wanted to do anything else — until after she had completed a very difficult and demanding first year done at the Teacher's College. Gladys did not want to return the following year, but her father told her she was going back — and that was that!

Concluded next week

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