

March 26, 2004

The death of Gladys Bowman was true loss

Part three of three

Earlier this month Willimantic lost one of its treasures with the death of 87-year-old Gladys Bowman. She had a wonderful sense of history, which was captured in an oral history I undertook with her several years ago. In tandem with her love of history, was her fondness for Willimantic, and the combination of the two has left us with a valuable historical document.

One statement she made says it all: 'I've lived here all my life, so I guess Willimantic is a little special to me. I never went away to school, so Willimantic has been

the center of my universe.'

From the 1870s until the 1930s, Gladys Bowman's father and grandfather were well-known tailors in the town. This family and business perspective provided her with important insights into Willimantic's history and culture. She recalled, for example, that the American Thread Co. ruled Willimantic. It was her family's belief that ATCO kept out other businesses out of town, which might have paid more wages. However, there were other firms who operated in the Thread City.

Gladys lived on Hayden Street, and remembered that the Rossie Velvet Co. was located on nearby South Street. She walked past there on the way to school: "At noon they blew the whistle for lunch, and the janitor sometimes let us pull the whistle and that was one of our biggest thrills. Years



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later it became the Electro-Motive factory, owned by Mrs. Lauter-Greer."

However, Gladys Bowman never worked in the local industries. She trained to be a teacher at the Willimantic State College, and her first job was teaching at Stonington. She also taught in Andover and Coventry, but spent the majority of her career teaching first-graders at Columbia.

In Gladys' youth Willimantic was a busy railroad town and she often traveled to work at Andover and Coventry on the train.

She also enjoyed taking passengers train to Hartford and Boston and was sorry when they stopped running. Her uncle, who refused to return to the American Thread Co. after the 1925 strike, worked at the Willimantic railroad depot as a janitor.

Also, Gladys' cousin, Harry Blanchette, was the freight agent at the depot for many years. Gladys enjoyed standing on the Willimantic footbridge, to see the trains pass underneath.

She also recalled the steam engines filling up with water from a

big tank near the tracks, just up from the railroad depot. However, there were many other things to do in Willimantic back then other than watch the trains.

Gladys went to American Thread's Dunham Hall library, belonged to sewing and bridge clubs, and went dancing to the Tabern dance hall on Valley Street, nicknamed the "Tab." Famous Connecticut dance bands played there, such as Gaylord Madison and singer Lester Foster. She was also involved in Baptist church activities, and went bowling at the Lucky Strike alley.

Gladys Bowman lived her entire life in the south side of Willimantic and enjoyed walking over the footbridge to shop and do business on Main Street, or as she called it, the "overtown" section of the Thread City.

I will miss my regular chats with Gladys and her insights into life in the city. She was very distressed by Willimantic's decline since the closure of American Thread, but nevertheless she retained an enduring affection for her hometown.

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