

Fighting 'demon drink'

Part one of two

In October 1886, a new newspaper hit the Willimantic streets. Allen Bennet Lincoln, a prominent state prohibitionist and temperance movement activist, published and distributed the Connecticut Home from offices located at 38 Church St. Lincoln would go on to edit the two-volume "A Modern History of Windham County" (1920). However, his focus in 1886 was to fight the influence of the "demon drink."

The weekly newspaper included polemic tracts about banning the sale of alcohol, but it also had a very detailed local news section, which gave an alternative view of Willimantic life, apart from that published by the borough's two established newspapers, the Willimantic Journal and Willimantic Chronicle.

The newspaper's second edition published a league table that compared the population of industrial towns across the state and divided them by the number of licensed saloons in each town. Winsted came at the top of the prohibition table, as its population of 4,200 could visit only six saloons.

However Ansonia came way down the table because its 4,000 population had the choice of 46 saloons. With 491, New Haven had the most saloons,

but they served a population of 72,000. Willimantic was in the top half of the table, as its 29 licensed saloons served a population of 8,700. Nevertheless, this concentration of saloons in the Thread City, according to Lincoln, had dissuaded Augustus Storrs from locating his proposed agricultural college in Willimantic.

The college did not come to Willi-mantic, but electric street lights did, thanks to the Willimantic Electric Light Co., which began erecting light poles on Main, Church, North and Railroad streets in November 1886. The company placed 20 private lights in shop windows along Main Street, and supplied free street lights on the corner of

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Tom Beardsley

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Main and Church and Main and Bank in an attempt to impress the borough council.

The light company's board of directors consisted of president, Edwin Buck, a local grain merchant, vice president Eugene S. Boss, the Willimantic thread company's agent, Secretary Albert Morrison, a silk machine manufacturer, and Treasurer Henry Royce, a thread manufacturer at Mansfield Hollow.

The company illuminated Willimantic with electricity for the first time on Dec. 17, 1886.

Everyone was mightily impressed, and a petition was sent to the borough authorities urging the board of burgesses to award the company with a contract to illuminate the city's streets with its Waterhouse arc lights.

In addition to detailing the city's day-to-day life, Lincoln continued to attack the saloons in his editorials, especially those that lined

Jackson Street near to the Natchaug School, where hundreds of children had to pass them daily. He added that the situation was a disgrace to the borough and to decent government.

Lincoln had no friends at the Willimantic Chronicle, which responded to his demands to make Willimantic a dry city by publishing editorials which defended the saloons in town. In early 1887, the Chronicle began erecting new offices and printing works on Church Street, but the builders walked off the site one May morning.

Lincoln responded with glee in the Connecticut Home, when he discovered the reasons why the builders had gone on strike.

The boss builder had gone off for a drink, and upon returning he was not in an agreeable mood. Five of his men, who had been cooling themselves with a pail of beer from a neighboring saloon, took offense at their boss' ill temper and quit work: "There are still

vacancies on the Chronicle brick laying staff, and the Chronicle should not put this experience on record if it expects to print any more editorials against prohibition."

Continued next week



Allen B. Lincoln pictured in 1920.

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