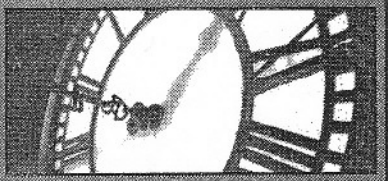


# Local History



## The city and the war

*Part one of four*

The United States entered World War II after the Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor and the events of the next four years greatly influenced local life. Many Windham residents will recall Willimantic's important role in the overall war effort. This is the first part of a series of four articles which looks back to events in Willimantic during 1942, the first full year of war.

A Willimantic resident, Henry Rothblat, serving at Pearl Harbor's Hickam Air Field, survived the attack. He was the son of Mr. and Mrs. H. Rothblat of Whiting Street and received a pile of letters from Willimantic people wishing him well. The young soldier wrote to the *Chronicle*, expressing his delight: "It sure made me feel swell that they were

thinking about me during the attack... it makes things a lot easier when you know your hometown is backing us 100 per cent."

Shirley Cohen, also of Whiting Street, was the local organizer of the "Victory Book Campaign," a nationwide drive to supply free books to members of the American armed forces. Housed in the town's YMCA buildings, it received a boost when the American Thread Co. donated more than 600 volumes from its closed Dunham Hall Library. Cohen appealed for help to transport the books to the regional distribution center in Storrs.

The outbreak of war benefited the recently built Windham Airport. The War Department



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invested a further \$695,000 in the Works Progress Administration project to grade, drain and pave the airport's runways to meet minimum army standards. The construction project excavated 700,000 cubic yards of rock and earth and added taxi strips, service roads and a control tower. The airport runway became one of the longest in the state.

The war was on everyone's mind in Willimantic. To escape it, locals visited the town's three movie houses. The Strand Theater featured Mickey Rooney in "Andy Hardy's Private Secretary." Robert Taylor, fresh from the romantic lead in "Waterloo Bridge," was starring at the Capitol Cinema alongside Lana Turner in "Johnny Eager." Lana Turner also starred at the Gem Theater alongside Clark Gable in "Honky Tonk." Windham's moviegoers got a lot for their money back then. Matinees cost 20 cents and evening performances cost 30 cents. This paid for the movie, a "B" picture, a newsreel program, shorts and cartoons.

The movies were only a temporary diversion from wartime thoughts, because in April, the Pratt and Whitney Co., a subsidiary of the United Aircraft Corp., announced its intention to build a \$5 million assembly plant on Willimantic's West Main Street. Shortly afterwards, the Boston Turner Construction Co. hired 100 local carpenters, who constructed temporary office buildings on Trapella Road.

The city needed skilled workers for wartime production and Otto Nyffeler, the director of the Willimantic Trade School, announced a series of weekend courses to train women and high school seniors to operate lathes, drilling machines, shaping machines and screw turners, with placement guaranteed. The new courses increased the trade school's student body from 65 to 145.

*(Continued next week)*

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