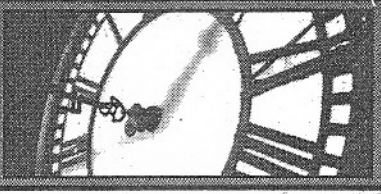


Local History



A wartime economy

Part three of four

In 1942, Pratt & Whitney built a massive aircraft plant on Willimantic's West Main Street. Prior to its completion, the state Development Commission and the Navy Department issued a statement to relieve anxieties. Local residents feared that the drilling of artesian wells would affect water supplies, including those earmarked for new housing in that vicinity.

More than 2,000 workers moved to the new Pratt & Whitney plant from East Hartford, and local officials became concerned that there would be a housing shortage in the city. They organized a housing survey, and drew up a list of available rental space, apartments, houses or rooms, in the area, as some 312 workers still needed accommodation, including 107 single men. However, Pratt & Whitney ensured the city fathers that there would be sufficient housing. Other industries in the Thread City benefited from increased war time orders. Isaac Cooperman, president of the New England Pants Co., and Jack Yelowitz, business agent of Local 280 Amalgamated Clothing Workers

announced that for the duration of the war, employees were to receive bonuses every three months equal to 5 percent of their wages.



Tom
Beardsley

Workers at the New England Pants factory had already seen their wages raise by some 35 percent since the war began. They gave much of it to the U.S. government by purchasing large numbers of war bonds and saving stamps, and Cooperman's employees were involved in various forms of civilian defense.

Away from all the wartime anxieties, locals had keenly awaited the 24th annual Elks Country Fair and on opening night thousands of people flocked to the grounds on Pleasant Street.

The Willimantic Elks held its highly popular annual fair every year between 1919 and 1952. The 1942 fair opened with long speeches from Alderman George Millard and Exalted Elks Ruler Louis Moran. The crowd patiently listened while awaiting an opening night quadrille contest, a performance from Marion, the "beautiful high wire acrobat," and music performed by Matty Mattison and his orchestra.

The opening night was a great success, until a transformer failed plunging the fair into darkness. The gloom lasted for 90 minutes while emergency crews from CL & P repaired the transformer.

When the lights came back on, several rain showers further inconvenienced those present. The crowds found shelter in the bingo booths, which did a roaring trade. The four-day event was a great success, despite opening night inconveniences. The crowds had flocked to Pleasant Street to see a circus and stars of radio and Broadway, Harry and Jean Wilzer, the "twin trumpeters" who had recently performed on Fred Allen's radio show. Clown Dippy Diers entertained the kids. Visitors packed the fair's midway each day and evening, and the organizers were delighted with the high sales of war bonds.

Elsewhere in town, the Capitol Theatre organized a scrap metal drive for children, offering free tickets to each child bringing up to five pounds of scrap metal, which they deposited in trucks stationed outside the cinema.

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