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History



Reports provide snapshot of the city

First of two parts

The Willimantic city reports, published annually from 1894 until the early 1980s, provide a vivid snapshot of the Thread City in



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past years. Lebanon's Ed and Ann Leete came across a copy of the 1931 report and passed it on.

This interesting little volume allows us to look back in detail at Willimantic as the nation headed into the Great Depression. We discover anxieties about milk-borne diseases, the purity and future availability of local drinking water and concerns over the free time in the community caused by mass unemployment.

The city mayor, Walter R. King, briefly reviewed the state of the city's varied departments and then pointed the reader towards each department head's report. King was pleased that Willimantic had experienced no epidemics or dangerous diseases as in previous years.

Dr. Nathan Spector, the city's health officer, had reported 85 cases of measles, 50 cases of venereal disease, 31 cases of chicken pox and 27 cases of scarlet fever. Fortunately, there were only three cases of polio and Spector acknowledged how little current medical science knew about infantile paralysis. There were seven cases of typhoid fever, traced to a case of infected milk imported from Canada. There were also two cases of undulant fever caused by milk and Spector recommended that in the future, city residents should drink only pasteurized milk.

Spector noted that in neighboring communities diseases caused by milk were virtually unknown, because they treated their milk before allowing it to be sold. However, since Spector's 1930 report, two Willimantic milk dealers had purchased pasteurizing units. Furthermore, he had met with the mayor and the Chamber of Commerce and had put plans in place to introduce a system where local milk dealers required a certified license that indicated they pasteurized all their milk and dairy products before distributing it for sale.

There may have been problems with the city's milk supply, but Spector's inspection of Willimantic's food markets and restaurants had successfully followed guidelines set forth in 1930 regarding the storage of food and the rapid disposal of garbage from such premises. Furthermore, Spector's regular testing of the YMCA's swimming pool water ensured it remained

free from water-borne diseases.

Spector also required regular and stringent testing of the city's drinking water, a task undertaken by the water department's superintendent, Harrison Moulton. In his report, Moulton noted that in the very near future the city would have to supply a greater volume of water to its customers, a situation caused by the building boom in the city during the 1920s.

Moulton reported the laying of more than 5,000 feet of new water pipes in the previous year, which included 2,200 feet on the city's newest thoroughfares, Greenwood and Friendship streets. The water department head had also replaced 633 feet of 2-inch pipe with 6-inch pipe along Willowbrook Street.

Moulton's pumping station inventory reveals the technology of the time. Along with the department's cottage, barn, hen house and steam pumps, was a water wheel, two high-pressure boilers, 52 tons of coal and 40 gallons of kerosene. Moulton left nothing out of his detailed report and even included his office's desk, five chairs, coat hanger and radiator.

Ruth Terry, the city librarian, had concerns and interests that transcended health and purity issues. She reported that the library had 65,231 books in circulation and that she was open for business 300 days a year. On average, patrons withdrew 217 books per day. During the year, she had acquired 533 new books and obtained 106 beyond the budget.

A small state grant and personal gifts had paid for these volumes. Terry announced that this was the largest circulation figure ever recorded in the city's history, a situation caused, she believed, because large numbers of locals out of work were reading much more than usual. "New novels and the latest magazines," she explained, "alleviated many hours of enforced idleness when the time might be used to much less advantage."

Continued next week.



Walter R. King, Willimantic's mayor in 1931.

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