

The original drafts of history

Historians assert that daily news is the first draft of history. A variety of local newspapers thus recorded Willimantic's history during the 19th century. However, only



Tom Beardsley

two endured for long periods. The Willimantic Journal first appeared in 1847 and under several ownerships, culminating with the Hall and Bill Co., it appeared weekly until 1911. The other paper, the *Willimantic Chronicle*, first appeared as a weekly in 1877 and is still with us today. A glance at the *Chronicle* a decade later in 1887 reveals new buildings, the implementation of new labor laws, the arrival of P.T. Barnum's circus in town, a proposed horse railroad and the death of a Thread City textile pioneer.

In June 1877, the Willimantic Baptist Church was grading and turfing its grounds and building granite steps to its front entrance. Just around the corner on Church Street's west side, workers were preparing for the construction of a new headquarters for the *Chronicle* publishing company. They were dynamiting a massive hole to accommodate the new building's cellar and foundations.

The newspaper's proprietor donated the surplus stone blasted

from the ground to the borough authorities so the street superintendent could resurface Willimantic's downtown streets. The *Chronicle* had hired two accomplished local stonemasons, S.A. Cromins and Hiram Boswell, to build the foundations for the new printing works and newspaper offices. The pair was currently constructing stone mills for a dyeing company in Sterling.

Changes were also taking place for workers in the borough's cotton and silk mills. The Connecticut legislature had introduced a 60-hour work week law for women and children in factories, which went into effect on July 1, 1887. After that date

women and children could work no longer than 11 hours a day from Monday to Friday and only from 7 a.m. to noon on Saturdays. On June 14, 1887, every mill, factory, office and school in Willimantic declared a full day's holiday to celebrate the visit of the circus, "The Greatest Show on Earth." The parade along Main Street drew an immense crowd of 15,000 that came to see a menagerie, a museum and a mobile playhouse.

Barnum organized such parades to persuade locals to attend the day's performance. After the show William Warner, Barnum's press agent, stated that the circus tent had a seating capacity of 18,000 and that 16,000 were present at the performance. Willimantic had never seen so many people on any one occasion before.

The only way most of the vast crowd could witness the parade and circus performance was by walking to it or riding in private cabs or wagons, but Joseph Stall, a New York City-based entrepreneur, planned to change this. He and his partners had just built a horse railroad at Birmingham, Ala., and he proposed to the borough authorities to build a line from the Willimantic Fairgrounds (Recreation Park), where Barnum had pitched his tent, to the cemetery. After Stall left Willimantic, he went down to New London with the same proposal. The Willimantic burgesses turned him down and another 16 years elapsed before Willimantic's Main Street had rails but electricity and not horses were powering the carriages.

The year 1887 closed with news of the death of 67-year-old Ames Burr Palmer. Born in Stonington, he came to Windham County in the early 1840s and established a cotton factory at Howard's Valley in Hampton. A fire destroyed this mill shortly afterwards but Austin Dunham hired him as superintendent of his cotton mill.

In 1877, when Dunham sold this mill to the conglomerate that became the American Thread Co., Palmer entered into partnership with a local clothing company. However, during his 30-year tenure in Dunham's Willimantic mills, Palmer had entered into partnership with William C. Jillson and the pair developed a machine that revolutionized the cotton industry: the "Jillson & Palmer Cotton Opener." Cotton mills across the United States employed this machine to remove the seeds and impurities from raw cotton.



The Church Street Chronicle building pictured in 1932.

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.