Dec. 22 2005

The rise of newspapers in Willimantic

Tom Beardsley

During the *Chronicle's* first two years of publication, 1877-79, it was known as the Willimantic Enterprise. This paper traced its roots back to a broadsheet published in Scotland by the Leavitt family. However, its transference to Willimantic in 1877 provided competition for a long-established news sheet. It also provided a wider source of information on local life in this post-Civil War period than provided by the Journal. It was pointless that each paper should cover entirely the same subject in the borough.

In February 1879, the Enterprise's editor reacted against criticisms aimed at the borough's largest employer, the Willimantic Linen Co., by local farmers who were criticizing the mill owners for flooding their farmland by damming local waterways to increase the waterpower in their mills, and for taking away the farmers' labor force to work in those mills.

Despite Willimantic's rapid 19th century growth, the culture of this section of northeastern Connecticut was still primarily an agrarian one, retaining its colonial and pre-industrial economic base, and the farmers believed that the mills were destroying this long tradition, that dated back to the end of the 17th century. The Enterprise's editor asked the mill owners and farmers to stop squabbling and in doing so provided a snapshot of Willimantic life at that time:

"We appeal to the Farmers and Manufacturers of Willimantic because the interests of both are so blended together. Let us consider for a moment the manufacturing of Willimantic and see how it affects the Farmers as well as other business. We will consider first the Linen Company's business, which employs in its mills and store one thousand hands, and works eleven horses and one yoke of oxen. Their monthly payroll amounts to about $25,000.

"On the fifteenth of each month every one receives their pay. The company's capital is now a million and a quarter dollars. The company owns 169 tenements, and four large factories. Their store, which is a model of perfection, stands alongside other buildings for storage. Their tax is a very important item to the Farmers of Windham, as well as to themselves. They also pay taxes in Coventry and Columbia. The company buys yearly of Farmers from twenty to twenty-five hundred cords of birches, for which the Farmer receives cash.

"The company buys monthly 120,000 pounds of cotton, mostly Sea-Island, all the most durable and expensive, and the Farmer, usually called Planter because he makes a specialty of raising cotton, receives his cash for cotton, which is his main support. Here, let me ask how can the Manufacturer do without the Farmer to raise cotton for thread and birches for spools? And how can the Farmer do without the Manufacturer to purchase his cotton, wool, birches and other products? The Manufacturer should encourage the Farmer to raise better crops of all kinds, not excepting the spool birches.

"The Willimantic Linen Company's barn is richly worth a visit by every Farmer, one of its important features being its warmth. Their Mill No. 2 is a beautiful building, being five storeys in height and 400 feet long. Three turbine wheels, providing 300 horsepower, run it.

"We notice this corporation institutes one reform, and we believe that others would do well to do likewise. After February the 3rd, operatives will be required to work but 60 hours a week and the wages remains the same as before, this giving all the help an hour which may be improved in reading or otherwise which we trust the help will appreciate. But what a good market 1000 operatives create for produce!"

As the 19th century progressed, northeastern Connecticut's network of small farms began to close, unable to compete with the mass-producing farms expanding in the Midwest. Subsequently, Windham County's farms quickly returned to forest and woodland. The only reminder of these individuals who challenged the might of Willimantic's manufacturers are the hundreds of miles of intricate stone walls that border their old farmlands. A walk southwards along the old roads in the woods that separate Route 14 and Indian Hollow Road reveals a dense network of small farms, and numerous remains of sawmills and gristmills powered by small brooks.