

Jogging memories

Part one of three

The picture of the week feature that accompanies this weekly column provides visual evidence of local events that lay within the "public memo-



Tom Beardsley

ry." These historic photographs jog *Chronicle* readers' memories, enabling them to identify places, locations, businesses and events within their living memory. Moreover, on occasion readers are able to pass on information provided by a parent or grandparent. Accordingly, the community's public memory is only three of four generations long and limited to about 100 years.

Community events taking place more than a century ago thus fall outside the public memory. Fortunately, because the *Chronicle* has microfilmed collections of all its issues, dating back to 1877, historians and researchers are able to delve beyond the confines of the public memory.

A look at events taking place in the city during the year 1879 reveals how local society, its cultures and mores have so dramatically changed. During that year, Windham's residents and town fathers were involved in walking races, singing classes and persuading their neighbors to abandon alcohol. They were also concerned about mill closures.

In March 1879, locals enthusi-

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Weekend

Jogging memories through photographs

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In March 1879, locals enthusiastically purchased tickets to witness a 150-mile walking race held in Main Street's Franklin Hall Theater. The contest was between Windham's champion walker, "Champagne George," and state walking champion, New Haven's Andy Carroll, for a purse of \$100. The *Chronicle* described Carroll as "a small, muscular fellow" and Champagne George as "long and lean."

The race promoters laid out a track in the theater's auditorium, where 15 laps equaled one mile. The race commenced at 8 p.m. on March 20, 1879, and continued for 52 hours, covering three evenings. The race promoters invited ladies in free on the first night and they packed the gallery. Attendance was smaller Friday night, but to the delight of the promoters, they sold all available tickets for the final night of their "great walking tournament."

The walkers kept on the track the greater part of the time for the first 24 hours but on Friday night and Saturday they took frequent rests. George took the lead and kept it until Saturday afternoon when Carroll took the lead. At the close of the race, the score stood Carroll, 148 miles, in 84 laps, whereas George could manage only 147 miles. The *Chronicle*



The Smithville Manufacturing Co., photographed in 1906

noted that whereas Carroll was fresh at the close of the match, George was "badly used up." Nevertheless, Windham's Champagne George was in action again the following month. He raced Rockville's champion walker, "square heel and toe" in a four-hour long contest for a \$15 purse on an inferior track in Rockville where 37 laps equaled one mile.

Walking was a popular pastime 127 years ago and so was singing. Each church had its own choir and locals formed numerous private choirs. The Willimantic Baptist Church's sizable choir impressed the church's recently installed minister, the Rev. George W. Holman.

However, it could not accommodate all, so in tandem with

Charles Jordan and J.D. Jillson, Holman formed the Willimantic Vocal Society. Its object, explained Holman, was not to learn or teach the basics of music, but to practice and improve singing. Holman invited all singers, even those who could not read music, to join. The price for gentleman was \$1 and for ladies, 50 cents per 10-lesson term.

The local newspaper, while applauding the vocal society's establishment, condemned the increasing drunkenness on the borough's streets. For example, Frank Henry, an Irishman living in Hampton, had come to Willimantic one Saturday, and "became intoxicated." On his return to Hampton, he fell off the wagon and broke his neck. The

Chronicle urged that if a man was to be safe from intemperance, he must touch not or handle anything that could intoxicate. The newspaper hoped that community leaders and their wives could help close saloons. The following week the Willimantic Reform Society met in the Willimantic Savings Institute's building and discussed the resolution, "The Influence of Business Men in Temperance Work."

Soon after this discussion of excessive rum consumption in the borough took place, some devastating news reached the borough. Mill closures are still fresh in the public memory with the closure of the American Thread Co. plant in 1985, but such events had been commonplace in Willimantic history.

In early April 1879, the Smithville Manufacturing Co., which employed 225 hands in its Bridge Street cotton mills, collapsed with liabilities amounting to \$600,000. The *Chronicle* noted, "...The failure of this company not only distresses those employed there, but it damages our merchants and farmers. We can bear testimony that the operatives of this company made a good market for the products of the farm."

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