

# An old-fashioned clambake

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Part two of  
three



Tom  
Beardsley

Along with city records, letters, postcards, maps and documents, local newspapers are a great source to explore local community events that lay beyond the public memory. The *Chronicle's* microfilmed copies provide an ideal window to view life in Willimantic in the late 19th century. Last week we looked at walking contests, vocal societies, the local temperance movement and mill closures in early 1879, as recorded in the *Chronicle's* first editions.

The year 1879 continued to be an eventful year in the Thread City. Windham's selectmen decided to rebuild the town almshouse, there were changes in street lighting, the historic Frog Pond property was put up for sale, a new theater and telegraph lines were built, an annual clambake took place and there was news of a young student at a Willimantic school, destined to become Connecticut's governor.

In the spring, Windham's almshouse, located on the west of the road between Windham and North Windham, burned to the ground. The almshouse, also known as the town farm or the poor house, was home to the unemployed and paupers who received charitable aid from the town and local charities. The selectman identified a new site in the west end of Willimantic, opposite the cemetery, and allocated \$5,000 to rebuild it at that location.

Willimantic's central business district was now brighter at night, as the town fathers placed a number of kerosene lamps on Main Street to accompany the existing gas lamps. Maybe this was the reason why Fred Taylor, the town lamplighter, had left to take a similar post in Massachusetts. The town hired George Parks in his place, giving him the duty of lighting Willimantic's 400 street lamps as darkness fell.

It had been very dark in 1758 during the famous Battle of the Frogs in Windham Center. Now, some 120 years later, this historic spot was up for sale. The Follett family decided to sell the property, along with a dwelling house, for \$2,700, but there were no takers. However, property did change hands in Willimantic when Silas

Loomer purchased a plot on the corner of North and Main streets.

He demolished the existing buildings there and began the construction of a grand new opera house. At the same time, a new telegraph system was improving Willimantic's connections to the outside world. However, the company had built many of the telegraph poles on private land and faced threats from Windham's farmers who promised to cut down these eyesores at nighttime. In addition, residents on Willimantic's Main Street com-

plained that the new telegraph poles disfigured their property.

As the telegraph pole controversy raged, Willimantic held its annual clambake at Horseshoe Park, which was located on the Bricktop Road. Joel Webb, caterer opened the clambake to the public at 3 p.m. on Saturday, June 21, 1879. Visitors crammed into the park by the hundreds and consumed five barrels of clams.

An Irish mill worker, John Ryan, won the "grand cake walk" race and received an old time Johnny Cake as his prize. Next followed a hurdle race, in which John Hickey the local drug store owner, was victorious. The organizers rewarded him with a new \$40 suit. The day ended with a barbershop quartet.

There was musical entertainment provided in town the following week, but this occurred at the graduation ceremonies of the Natchaug School on Milk Street. In 1879, this was a private school, attended by the sons and daughters of the local elite, preparing them for entry into Yale University.

Prize giving followed the concert, and then the leading students

took part in a competition to see who could best recite poems entirely from memory. Mary Hayden won first prize, Carrie Buck won the second prize, and Hattie Merrow came in third. For the boys, no one could match 17-year-old Wilbur L. Cross's ability to recite long passages from memory. Cross, from Mansfield, served as Connecticut's governor between 1931 and 1939.

Conclusion next week

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