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# The war years

Part one of  
five

In April 1917, the U. S. Congress declared war on Germany. This single act made a long-term impact on American society and culture.



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The changes wrought by war included the introduction of Prohibition, the commercialization of jazz music, a reactionary political climate and changing social mores for men and women — as witnessed in this column over the last two weeks in Mildred Aspinwall's diary from the early 1920s.

World War I affected Willimantic immediately. Paranoia held sway and natives suspected German-Americans or foreign agents would sabotage the nation's war production. Accordingly, the American Thread Co., the community's largest employer, introduced new security measures.

ATCO thus ended a long tradition of allowing non-employees to wander around the plant and yards, either visiting friends or relatives, or seeking employment from the various overseers in the different departments.

It erected a white picket fence around the entire property, banned everyone but employees from company premises and opened a "security and employment bureau" in the building now occupied by the Windham Textile and History Museum.

In May 1917, ATCO reacted to government appeals and leased large tracts of its land in Willimantic to enable locals to grow fruit and vegetables to assist in the war drive.

Company officials allocated plots, 100 feet by 60 feet, of 25 acres of land south of North Windham Road between the Natchaug River and the road leading to the Catholic cemetery. ATCO employees paid \$1 to rent the land and \$4 for fertilizer. In return, ATCO plowed each plot free of charge and supplied seeds and potatoes at cost.

ATCO's home gardening movement was the brainchild of company agent Eugene Boss and General Superintendent Charles Alpaugh. The response was overwhelming. Ninety employees

made applications on the program's opening day. Boss and Alpaugh immediately plowed the land, distributed 200 bushels of seed potatoes and purchased large quantities of sweet corn and beans. The movement's manager, Charles W. Hill, cataloged every allotment, noting the name of each worker and seeds planted.

Each evening, hundreds of men, women and children headed out to their plots on what came to be known as the "American Thread Farm," armed with hoes and rakes.

The main crop was potatoes. The Quidnick-Windham Co., located on Bridge Street, was impressed with ATCO's success with its self-sufficiency program and opened up 20 plots for their workers on Watson Street.

The Connecticut Agricultural College's dairy department followed ATCO's example and announced its intention of increasing milk production.

Officials announced that two cows under the college's supervision, New Canaan's Mary Onyx Brookside and Willington's Lady Agnes Mercedes, had just broken state records by producing 687 pounds and 731 pounds of milk, respectively.

The government's call for increased farm production led to an exodus of students from Storrs, who answered the call to go back to the farm and into the field. Sixty-five left to take charge of state-controlled farms, 20 were recruited to take charge of garden work.

Sixteen went to Litchfield County to superintend the planting of pine tree seedlings and 25 traveled to Plattsburg, N.Y., to train army officers in agricultural pursuits, leaving only 70 students from an enrollment of 230 studying at Storrs.