

May 11, 2006

Willimantic's men head to war

Part four of
five

By September 1917, 54 young men, "the flower of Willimantic's manhood," had signed up for the U.S. Army and were due to depart for basic training at Fort Devens in Ayer, Mass. The Thread City boys were part of a selective draft from Connecticut's 17th District.

Willimantic Mayor Danny Dunn suggested that the city organize a reception for its departing heroes.

Dunn chaired a committee of 12 local businessmen and dignitaries in the Bank Street firehouse's meeting room, that arranged a grand parade and a brass band to escort the draftees to the railroad



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depot. Also, the local American Red Cross' canteen service offered to provide a banquet in the Pleasant Street Armory on the evening prior to the draftees' departure.

Hearing of these plans, the draftees asked the city not to arrange a parade and banquet. They preferred a private function to say goodbye to their families. Dunn arranged for it to take place in the Chamber of Commerce rooms in the Hayden Block.

The Red Cross provided tomato soup, chicken pie, mashed potatoes, mashed turnips, celery, pickles and hot rolls. Pickett's Orchestra furnished some patriotic music, beginning the proceedings with "Rally Round the Flag." Other than families and close friends, city church ministers also attended the farewell banquet.

Dunn made a patriotic speech to

those assembled before presenting each draftee with a new fountain pen.

With a tear in his eye, Dunn declared that it was doubtful if there were a finer lot of men on their way to Fort Devens.

"You are a credit one and all of you, to our fair city and town. You are about to face ordeals, but be brave of heart and faithful in your duties. Be a credit to Old Windham while away whether in camp or on the battlefield," he told them.

On the day of departure, a massive crowd assembled at the railroad depot to say their farewells. The American Thread Co. allowed employees to leave work and bid goodbye to friends and family. The depot platform was packed and there was no room on the

footbridge. All the draftees were there except for Ovila Chalifoux, who was injured in an automobile accident. Giuseppe Nardi and Felix Zajacskowski had disappeared though Nardi turned up just before the train departed.

The draftees were loaded down with gifts and cheers rang out as the train carrying them pulled out and they began their long journey to a trench in a French field.

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