

May 18, 2006

A war brings changes

Part five of
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As 1917 ended in Willimantic, the short months of war had precipitated many changes in the city. A local inventor had designed a new war weapon, flags and symbols reminded the populace of the losses and sacrifices made, theater attendance took a dive and a visitor from far afield came to explore the Thread City.



Tom
Beardsley

During the fall of 1917, John T. Ashton, a local electrical contractor, had submitted a design for an "air bomb" or "balloon mine." The size of a small suitcase, Ashton claimed that it could float over enemy trenches, exploding, killing and injuring Germans troops. Ashton sent the plans to the U.S. War Department and officials there informed the Willimantic inventor that his design looked good on paper. Ashton keenly awaited further developments.

Everyone agreed that Willimantic's 1917 Halloween celebrations had easily surpassed those of previous years. A bright moon helped to illuminate the parade down Main Street, that included a representation of "Kaiser Bill" being beaten by a club wielded by a Chaplinesque figure. A *Chronicle* reporter described Halloween night as a "Thread City Mardi Gras."

Several days later, a visitor wearing strange attire walked along Main Street but he had no connection to Halloween celebrations. He caused "considerable curiosity" as he walked around the city streets carrying a large cane. He wore a brown suit with leather leggings and a colorful Scottish hat. The Scotsman acknowledged that he was a member of Canada's Royal Flying Corps but was reluctant to discuss

any details about the war. He said he had just dropped into Willimantic to see the place.

Three Willimantic men, Russell Chappell, Nate Eccleston and Frank Gelinas, members of the United States' infant "air force," paid a visit to their hometown on a brief furlough and unlike the Scot, were quite willing to discuss the war. Chappell was a member of the 9th Aero Squadron and he thrilled his old high school pals by explaining the rudiments of "aeroplanes" and the sensations that accompany manned flight. He was soon expecting a lieutenant's commission and then a posting in Europe.

A large number of homes, clubs and factories in the city displayed military service flags. Stars on the flags represented how many family members or factory workers were currently serving in the armed forces. American Thread Co.'s main office displayed a 12-foot-by-8-foot flag, which had 41 stars, signifying that 41 ATCO employees were serving in the military. Willimantic Lodge 1440, the Loyal Order of Moose, flew a flag with 23 stars that represented 21 enlisted men and two officers.

Two large stars in the center of the flag represented those officers, Lieutenants Charles Jenkins and William Keating. Blue stars on the Moose flag represented living men, red stars represented wounded men and black stars represented dead men. The Jordan Automobile Co. had a flag with four stars. The honor of being the family to have most members in the armed forces went to the Morrisons of Park Street, who had four sons signed up for Uncle Sam. Mrs. Owen O'Neill erected a 30-foot flagpole in the garden of her home at 133 Prospect St. The Stars and Stripes were visible from almost every point in the city. Her husband was a medical officer serving at Fort Oglethorpe, Ga.

One particular announcement as the year 1917 ended illustrated the changes taking place in local society. The war and a relatively new entertainment technology caused a change in social events in the city. Samuel Johnson, manager of the Loomer Opera House, revealed that there would be no more vaudeville shows at the theater until the war was over. Most entertainers were in the forces and agents for the country's traveling show people admitted that many acts were disbanding because most theaters in the country showed moving pictures instead of live performances.

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