

May 25, 2006

Tour will feature new homes

Part one of two parts

This year's Willimantic Victorian Home Tour weekend gets under way June 3 and 4. The weekend includes tours that I will lead of the old Willimantic



Tom Beardsley

Cemetery June 3 at 2 p.m. plus a tour of the old American Thread Co. complex — now called Windham Mills — at 2 p.m. June 4. Meet at the cemetery gate opposite the Super Stop and Shop gas station on Saturday and at the stone office building in the Windham Mills yard on Sunday.

This week we will explore the grand Elks Club building on Pleasant Street, which is included on the tour for the first time this year, and next week we will look at the two new houses on the tour, 208 Summit St. and 71 Chestnut St.

On May 10, 1927, after a year of construction, Willimantic's Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks No. 1311 opened its "imposing monument to Elkdom" for public inspection. Everyone considered it ideally situated on the summit of the knoll in Elk's Park, 26 feet above the level of Pleasant Street. It was easily accessible from the center of the city yet removed just far enough from the business section. The Elks were also proud of the "sturdy oaks" and "towering hemlocks" in the 4.5-acre park, enclosed, and by the ground's attractive rubble stonewall and its ashlar pillars that were mounted by large electric globes.

Willimantic's lodge held its inaugural meeting in the State Armory on Pleasant Street on March 30, 1914. In November 1916, it held a grand carnival in the armory and raised \$5,000 towards the building of its own clubhouse. The Elks explored several sites in the city and initially considered the site now occupied by Blockbuster Video on Main

Street. However, in 1919, the building committee purchased a parcel of land on the south side of Pleasant Street for \$4,000. Members cleared the site and organized a grand country fair there on Labor Day weekend to raise more building funds.

It was a great success and they raised \$5,500. Subsequently, the

lodge purchased more land and built a wall around the property. In 1921, it commissioned an architectural firm to design an Elizabethan style building, a style much in vogue at the time. In 1924, the lodge's building committee accepted a \$89,000 estimate from Willimantic's Doyle and Murphy Building Co. to commence construction.

The builders built a steel frame. They laid red tapestry bricks, hollow tiles, applied stucco and panel work around the frame and built verandas and sun porches that offered a fine view of the city.

The building's cellar and basement contained bowling alleys, pool and billiard tables, showers and kitchens.

The main floor housed a parlor, music room, reading room, ladies room, secretary's office and a coat and cloakroom. The second floor contained the lodge room, which was finished in mahogany, and boasted a beamed ceiling. The third floor housed three sleeping rooms all finished with oak and brown ash.

The builders finished the roof with shaded, brown fire-flash tiles and landscapers provided an English country garden appearance by laying out curving walkway approaches to the new Elks home.

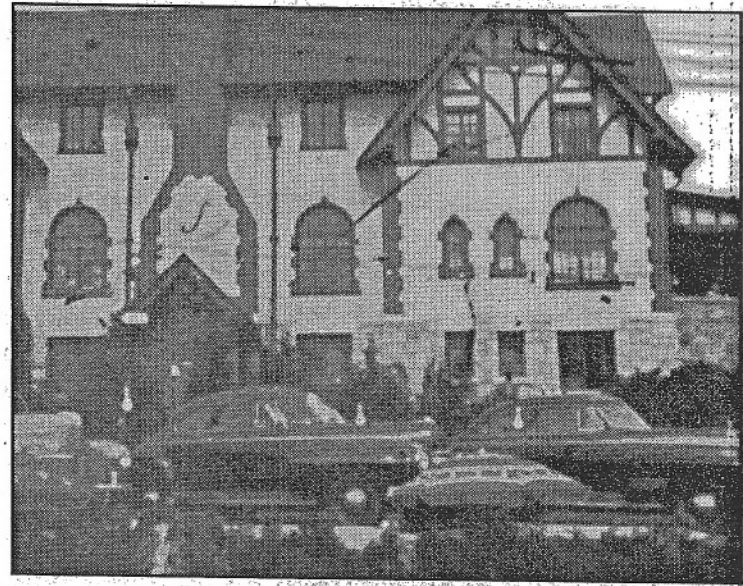
The official opening and dedication took place on June 9, 1927, and the Elks Grand Exalted Ruler Charles H. Grakelow of Philadelphia conducted opening ceremonies. More than 1,000 members and special guests witnessed the concerts and dedication.

The leader of the Willimantic Lodge, P. D. Donahue, gave over his seat to the rule of the Elks and past Exalted Willimantic Rulers Charles W. Hill, Valentine L. Murphy and R. Ernest Melody occupied seats the head table.

Local orchestras performed concerts and the Elks dance pavilion, located on the park grounds at the rear of the new home, housed a five-act vaudeville performance. The Elks treated their guests to a "cafeteria luncheon" during the dedication ceremony in

Elks Park that was lit by floodlights.

Between 1914 until 1952, the Willimantic Elks held an annual fair every Labor Day weekend that locals still fondly remember. One of the most popular events was the grand raffle for automobiles, which raised much-needed funds for the club. Make sure you take the tour of the home and explore one of the city's finest architectural gems — and then make your way to the cemetery or mills tour.



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