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For ATCO, war meant profits

Part three of five

The outbreak of World War I in April 1917 had a great impact on the Thread City. During the summer, its major employer hired new workers, its young men volunteered in large numbers for the armed forces and its population witnessed a strange military experiment in the city's skies.

The American Thread Co. received unprecedented orders from the United States' military's various arms and increased its workforce. However, this caused a serious housing and accommodation shortage so ATCO temporarily housed its new employees in tents.

The company settled upon a controversial solution, demanding that only families with three or more members employed in the mills were eligible to rent company tenements. ATCO's employment bureau manager notified families in the lower village to leave the company's tenements to make way for those families with three members working at ATCO. Despite widespread criticisms, the evictions went ahead. To deflect the bad publicity, ATCO announced plans to construct 15 more tenement buildings on Ives

Street.

ATCO's ruthless housing program took second billing to the war fever gripping the community.

Every day young Willimantic men signed up for the various services, which shipped them to training camps around the nation.

However, a visit from a French-Canadian war hero tempered this enthusiasm somewhat. The military had employed Napoleon Couture to travel to textile towns across New England to recruit French-Canadian mill workers. Although born in Quebec, Couture had worked in cotton mills in Centerville, R.I., but in 1914 he returned to Quebec and enrolled in the Canadian Army. He subsequently witnessed much action in France and became a highly decorated "hero of the trenches." Locals keenly anticipated Couture's propaganda visit to Willimantic but it failed to have the necessary impact.

When Couture's train stopped at



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Willimantic's railroad depot, a small crowd assembled to greet him. He stepped onto the platform and related the horrors of war to a gang of youths keen to go to France. Couture recounted to his astounded audience how his hair stood on end when the Germans pounded the Canadian-occupied trenches with artillery. He spoke encouragingly of the British tanks, which he thought would win the war. They ran alongside the German trenches, machine-gunning their positions, "killing scores who could not escape." This was in retaliation for the German use of mustard gas and the devastating effect it had upon men and vegetation. He enthralled the crowd with a de-tailed description of the gas mask that had often saved his life. Many young men left the Willimantic railroad depot that day with doubts about joining the slaughter in France.

Shortly after the Canadian's visit to Willimantic, an unidentified flying object caused chaos as hundreds of local people rushed into the streets to view the spectacle. The rumor quickly circulated that this strange airborne object was a secret experiment conducted by the government's Rockville collegiate school.

People standing on Main Street, necks craned, saw flames and puffs of smoke in the balloon's vicinity — prior to its rapid descent. It skimmed over Willimantic's rooftops and local motorists took to their automobiles and chased the descending dirigible. The *Chronicle* revealed the strange vessel's secrets the following day.

This was the balloon's first flight. Just before it took flight, some two hours earlier, military officials smashed a bottle of champagne on the airship's basket and named the craft "Rockville." It was filled with 38,000 cubic feet of "blue gas," 10,000 cubic feet of hydrogen and weighed 800 pounds. The balloon immediately ascended to 3,000 feet and began to drift southwest, causing surprise in Vernon and Andover.

When it reached Willimantic, the balloon had ascended to 6,000 feet but the pilots had to make a forced landing in an undisclosed field on Willimantic's outskirts. Chief pilot Nelson Arnold, who had 14 years experience as a pilot in ascensions, controlled the airship. In 1908, he had piloted an American balloon in the German International Balloon race.

As in any war, the government shrouded its operations in secrecy and officials denied that Arnold had to make a forced landing. They denied the existence of any smoke and claimed that the sun, reflecting off the stars and stripes hanging from the balloon's wicker basket, caused the flash of light. Rumor had it that the balloon crashed into some bushes on a farm in Mansfield but officials remained tight-lipped. They insisted that they had planned the "crash landing." Moreover, the officials denied that the balloon was experimental, claiming that it was airship for officers training to be pilots in the "aero service."

Continued next week