



Soldiers march in the Old Home and School Parade in 1916.

PANDEMIC

As fighting erupts in Europe, local residents fight another war — influenza

The century's second decade bought continued prosperity to the city as local industries boomed, but it also brought a world war and an influenza pandemic.

In September 1917, 54 young men, "the flower of Willimantic's manhood," joined the Army and were preparing for basic training at Fort Devens in Massachusetts. They were part of the selective draft from Connecticut's 17th district. Mayor Danny Dunn arranged for a parade and a reception for the departing heroes at the State Armory on Pleasant Street. The canteen service of the local Red Cross provided a banquet for the draftees in the armory on the evening of their departure, and a band was hired thanks to donations from Willimantic's businessmen.

The dinner consisted of tomato soup,

chicken pie, mashed potatoes, mashed turnip, celery, pickles and hot rolls. Pickett's Orchestra provided suitably patriotic music, beginning the proceedings with "Rally Round the Flag." Dunn made a patriotic speech before presenting each draftee with a new fountain pen. With a tear in his eye, Dunn declared that it was doubtful if there was a finer lot of young 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 battle field," Dunn said.

The following day, a massive crowd assembled at the railroad depot to say their farewells. The American Thread Co.

allowed its employees to leave their work to bid goodbye. There was no room to be had on the footbridge, which provided a fine view of the proceedings, and the depot platform was packed. The departing draftees were loaded down with gifts from cigarettes to sweaters, and cheers rang out as the train carrying Willimantic's "flower of manhood" pulled out of the depot.

In 1918, an influenza pandemic began in Asia and spread across war-torn Europe. All told, an estimated 20 million people died, including 500,000 Americans. Many Willimantic victims died of pulmonary edema, a rapid accumulation of liquid in the lungs, and many more were hit by secondary infections such as pneumonia. The local hospitals, St Joseph's and Dr. Mason's, were overwhelmed.