



The stock market crash in 1929 slowed down the gears of production of many companies in the United States, including some in Willimantic.

DEPRESSION

Some Willimantic companies feel the squeeze after stock market crash

The Great Depression did not start precisely on the day known as "Black Thursday," Oct. 24, 1929. Nationally, unemployment began to increase in the late 1920s. There were more than two million unemployed in the country before the Wall Street crash, in industries ranging from textiles and coal mining, to lumbering and railroads.

Willimantic certainly felt the squeeze, losing several small companies in the late 1920s, including Walter Costello's SPS Silk Co. in 1928. There were also a number of job losses at the Rossie Velvet Co., when it abandoned production in the old Center Street Armory in 1926. A New London company, The R&J Waist Co., manufacturers of silk underwear, took their place in the armory's workshops, but it went into liquidation in 1928, with almost 100 jobs lost. The Connecticut Braiding and Cordage Co. closed its Church Street silk mill in 1928, with the loss of almost 50 jobs. So by the end of the 1920s, Willimantic's economy was hardly "roaring."

The city suffered from deprivation during the 1930s, but it did not experience the problems encountered by other textile-based communities in the United States, because of the continued presence in town of the all-dominant American Thread Co. and the arrival of several Jewish silk entrepreneurs from New York City. There were few pay raises, but ATCO did provide continual employment throughout the

1930s, and the Roselin, Corn, Kobe and Alcorn Silk companies offered jobs in the community, despite poor conditions and low wages.

Several longtime Willimantic companies perished during the Depression. The Holland Silk Co. had operated out of its Church Street mills until just after the Civil War. At the time of the crash, the company employed more than 200 workers, but they were hit hard by the financial collapse. After being unable to secure favorable tax concessions from the city, the company announced on Oct. 20, 1932, that it was moving the entire operation to Stroudsburg, Pa. The last piece of machinery was moved from the Church Street mills in December 1934.

In 1899, a group of local businessmen had organized the Willimantic Machine Co. to manufacture silk-spinning machinery. The company prospered and in 1910 they built a large brick factory on Milk Street and continued to prosper until the crash. The company closed its doors in 1931, and the factory remained vacant until Isadore Rosenstein arrived from New York City in 1935 with his Roselin Manufacturing Co., after a favorable inducement from the Willimantic Chamber of Commerce.

In 1901, the Windham Silk Co. began the manufacture of silk linings, ribbons, hat bands and dress materials in the North Street mills of the defunct Natchaug Silk

Co. It gave employment to 150 people for more than a generation. The company built a new brick mill on Valley Street in 1911, and continued to prosper, but it could not survive the hard times of the 1930s, and late in 1937, the company went into receivership.

But it was not all doom and gloom in the city's suffering economy. In 1928, Abraham Corn, Max Goldstein and Max and Nathan Stein closed their Paterson, N.J., mills and relocated to the vacant cotton mills that then straddled Bridge Street. The companies they formed gave almost 1,000 jobs to the struggling community. Albert Garneau, whom I interviewed a decade ago in an oral history program, recalled the conditions there in the 1930s.

"I worked there for a year. It was basically a sweatshop." Garneau noted that they were always reducing wages. Furthermore, "there were no toilets. They had a bathtub to urinate in. There was no toilet paper. You knew you had to work under those conditions because there were four or five people waiting for your job."

The Bridge Street silk companies were gone by 1938, but they eased the unemployment problem. World War II was on the horizon and the Depression was almost at an end. That was signaled by the arrival of the Electro-Motive Co. in 1939. Prosperity would return as Willimantic benefited from the new wartime economy.