



W.T. Grant Co. department store in Willimantic.

WORLD AT WAR

Willimantic answers nation's call; war effort pulls economy from Depression

Any discussion of the Windham in the 1940s must feature World War II. The war certainly impacted Willimantic's economy in a positive fashion. In 1942, the War Production Board announced that the nation's textile plants would be given the same priority rating for employment of labor as munition plants, due to the critical shortage of textiles for the war effort. The American Thread Co. received massive government orders to manufacture necessary items for the war effort. Also in 1942, the government's Defense Plant Corp. built the plant today occupied by BICC General, and leased it to Pratt & Whitney. In 1946, the American Screw Co. purchased the plant.

Throughout the war, the local ATCO plant worked on large contracts for fungus-proof thread for duck and canvas cloth for the South Pacific theater. Forces fighting in Europe usually had housing shelter, but this was not the case in island and jungle warfare. U.S. forces fighting in the Philippines and the Far East needed such material for tents. Furthermore, the life of uniforms, shoes and other equipment in the tropics was much shorter and replacements were more frequent. After the surrender of Germany in May 1945, the demand for such products increased by 20 percent, and ATCO increased its workforce by 200 to meet the production levels for the all-out war effort against Japan. There

was little in the way of war equipment that did not depend upon thread to hold together the component parts.

In May 1942, a crowd of 500 assembled at the Willimantic railroad depot and bid farewell to a contingent of 97 local draftees. Members of the American Legion Post, Salvation Army and Lions Club gave them cigarettes, coffee and candy. Mayor Russell Hinman and Postmaster James Lee gave patriotic speeches. Local police officers John Lutton and Phillip Chasen had qualified to enter officers' school, and they organized the departure of the contingent to an unnamed destination.

As in World War I, the large numbers of volunteers and draftees leaving their jobs to enter the armed forces meant that women moved into the vacant positions. Women workers at the Electro-Motive Co. made a tremendous impact on the local wartime economy. Electro-Motive was founded by a Rumanian immigrant, Phillip Lauter (1885-1945) in New York City. He transferred the company to Willimantic in 1939 and began manufacturing radio parts in the vacant Rossie Velvet mill on South Park Street. Electro-Motive received massive orders from the government and in October 1944 the company expanded into the old Bridge Street cotton mill previously occupied by the Corn Silk Spinning Co. At the end of the war, Electro-Motive

employed more than 1,200 workers in its two mills, and more than 90 percent of them were women.

On May 8, 1945, the city of Willimantic heard the news that Germany had surrendered, and the sounding of the fire department and air raid warning sirens was accompanied by the pealing of church bells. All the churches in the town held special services of thanksgiving, and the post office closed at noon. Throughout the war, *the Chronicle* had carried "News of Our Men in Uniform." On May 7, 1945, it was announced that Lawrence Peloquin, a coxswain in the U.S. Navy, was home on leave at the family home at 185 Jackson St. Sgt. Frank Trainor of Pleasant Street was serving with the Sixth Army in Germany and Lt. Robert Currier of Crescent Street was awarded the Bronze Star for bravery in the Philippines.

The late 1940s marked the return to prosperity, and the Electro-Motive Co. expanded because of the demand for vacuum tubes for TV sets and radios.

Probably one of the most noteworthy events of the 1940s occurred on June 19, 1946, when the PanAm Constellation passenger aircraft carrying Sir Lawrence Olivier and his wife, Vivien Leigh, crash-landed at Windham Airport.

A most eventful decade indeed.