



*Cars are parked along Main Street on a night in 1951.*

# HAPPY DAYS

## New residents, new housing, new opportunities for post-war America

The 1950s in this region can be best remembered by examining several themes: economic expansion, immigration, suburbanization and the Cold War.

Throughout the decade, the American Screw Co. provided employment for several hundred locals in its facility in the former Pratt and Whitney aircraft engine plant on West Main Street (now occupied by BICC General). Rose Dunham worked there in the late 1950s. She was in charge of employment. "I did all the hiring for the plant. I loved it. I was there for two or three years."

Willimantic's burgeoning 1950s economy needed more workers, and as in the past when Irish and French Canadians flooded into the city, immigrants once again filled the vacancies during the 1950s. Abraham Cooperman's New England Pants factory on Ash Street became, according to one longtime resident, "the port of embarkation" for displaced persons — Lithuanians, Estonians and Ukrainians. Martin and Victoria Uskurs from Latvia were two of Europe's post World War II refugees who answered Willimantic's call for labor. They arrived here on Dec. 20, 1950 and found employment at ATCO.

A snapshot of 1950s Willimantic was featured in the magazine Connecticut Industry that, between 1955 and 1958, included

a regular column entitled "The People Behind the Products at American Thread." Included were biographies of many ATCO workers such as 21-year-old boxmaker James Gerald Hooper, 49-year-old carpenter Dulward Oldershaw and 34-year-old supervisor Rogers Johnson. The importance of ATCO to the region's economy in the 1950s was revealed in a Connecticut Industry promotional piece: "American Thread employees put more than \$5,677,000 in circulation last year at Willimantic and neighboring communities. The payroll at the company's Willimantic plant is 25 percent of all wages paid in the community during 1955, exclusive of government and non-profit organizations."

New housing developments appeared around Windham during the 1950s, as the post World War II baby boom took hold. New streets appeared, like Serwan Avenue, Roanoak Ave. and Impala Drive. This followed on new housing built in the immediate post-war period and this called for an improvement in the town's water distribution. A new 1.1-million gallon auxiliary reservoir, in the shape of a huge prestressed concrete water tank, was constructed on Quarry Street in fall 1950. It was 60 feet in diameter and 50 feet high. The walls were 10 inches thick to withstand the enormous water pressure.

The Cold War came to Willimantic in 1957. Connecticut's Civilian Defense Organization planned "Operation Alert" on July 11, 1957, when traffic was stopped for 15 minutes, and the streets were cleared. Many shoppers gained shelter under the Woolworth's awning on the hottest day of the year. It didn't really work. Shoppers insulted the police and air raid wardens, and hundreds of people came on to Main Street to see what was happening.

The early 1950s were dominated by the Red Scare and Wisconsin Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy. Charles Barrett, the son of the Capitol Theatre's longtime manager, Russell Barrett, recalled in 1952 that the Hollywood studios, "sent stars on trains across America to let the nation know that not all of Hollywood was infested with Communists. Handpicked 'Good-America' stars like Esther Williams, Debbie Reynolds, Rhonda Fleming and others came to Willimantic's Union Station. My dad held a reception for the Hollywood stars in the Capitol's lobby, which was attended by then Mayor Florimond Bergeron and other local dignitaries. I remember the chocolate cake they served and all that ice cream from Hallocks in Willimantic. I have Mr. Gable's autograph somewhere."

Happy days in 1950s Windham!