



St. Valentine's fire of Feb. 14-15, 1968 destroyed several Main Street business blocks between Church Street and the First Baptist Church.

FIRESTORM

A civil war 10,000 miles away touches lives of soldiers, students alike

The decade is remembered nationally as a period of liberalism, sexual freedom, drugs, hippies, the British Invasion, Woodstock, student radicalism, but above all, for the Vietnam War. This war impacted every community in America, including Willimantic.

One of Windham's best-known businessmen, Bill Potvin, witnessed student riots at the University of Connecticut in spring 1968 and shortly afterwards he witnessed the war in Vietnam at close hand. I interviewed Potvin last year. This is part of his story, and reveals some aspects of life in the community, and in Vietnam, during the 1960s.

"Willimantic was different when I was a kid in the 1950s and 1960s. There were more businesses in town, and many people walked on the sidewalks with baby carriages, because there was so much going on. There were shoe stores, hardware stores, pharmacies right down Main Street. There were no malls then. So there's been a big change. But you can't get anything downtown nowadays, like groceries or a watch. In the old days, you could get anything you wanted. A change that bothers me is that people tend to follow what companies say today. People should always think things out and ask themselves, 'Is that what I really want to do?' People tend to be more easily manipulated by the big companies. Money is not everything.

"Although Willimantic was still a mill town when I was growing up here, I never

worked at American Thread. I worked in a mill called Sutures in Coventry when I was going to UConn. They made stitching for wounds there. I was there for about two years. I also went to Vietnam, so I'm a vet. When guys graduated from college, they could get drafted. Someone told me that I was too smart to be drafted, so I decided to enlist and tried to become an officer and went to officer candidate school. But I didn't make it, so I ended up in Vietnam as an enlisted man. I spent one year there. Eleven months is what you were supposed to do. It was called a tour of duty. But some people would stay! That I could never understand. The war was winding down a little and I was allowed to leave the Army before my three years of enlistment had ended. That was good. I didn't particularly like the service.

"I was a combat engineer in the Army over there. Basically, we were part of the crews which would build roads and bridges and culverts. We would clear landing zones. We were a construction outfit, but you also had to have a weapon with you. You carried a rifle with you at all times. I was also a demolition specialist. For six months I carried the explosives right on me. They were not anti-personnel explosives. They were used to blow up trees, and the bunkers used by the Viet Cong. They were the places where the enemy was living. If we found an enemy complex, we blew it up to make sure the enemy could not use it again. But that didn't often work though.

"I was based north of Saigon, and we would try to blow up the enemy's intricate tunnel complexes. There's a book about the tunnels, called the 'Tunnels of Cuchi.' These were like underground cities. They went on for miles underground. The tunnels were unbelievable. The Vietnamese were able to operate underground, and even the American bombing did not destroy them. We had one volunteer force that tried to destroy those tunnels. It was strictly volunteers because it was so dangerous. This force was called 'tunnel rats.' You had to be small — it was no good being as tall as me, 6 feet 2 inches, and try to become a tunnel rat. You had to be less than 130 pounds and less than 5 feet 6 inches tall. These guys would go into the tunnels — and a lot of them did not come out. War should never be glorified.

"One of the things that impressed me about Vietnam was the beauty of the country. When you come into the country by helicopter, it was impressive to see rice paddies with oxen out there, and the people standing in the water, with the rice sticking out. All colors of green. It's beautiful. There are all kinds of land, upland, valleys, and forests."

The 1960s also saw the beginning of a process that is still a highly controversial issue today. On June 13, 1966, the Willimantic Redevelopment Agency was formed. Willimantic would never be the same again.