

April 04, 1992

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

A WEEKLY REVIEW OF LOCAL NEWS
ITEMS FOR 1892, 1917, 1942 AND 1967

1892

Norwich police officers apprehended two suspicious looking characters on their city streets in the early hours of March 24. One detainee put up a struggle and escaped the clutches of the law. The remaining suspect was searched. A set of burglary tools were revealed, along with thousands of postage stamps and a large number of pennies. The escapee was seen hotfooting down the road towards Willimantic. The Norwich police chief boarded the boat train from New London, to warn his Willimantic colleagues of a potential post office heist. Unbeknown to the Norwich police chief, the dirty deed had already taken place. When he arrived at the Willimantic depot, an awaiting telegraph wire informed him that the Yantic post office had just been robbed! The Willimantic police chief thanked his Norwich colleague for his troubles, but a 24 hour guard had already been enforced around the Willimantic post office. The Norwich policeman forgot that the telegraph wire was a faster messenger than the boat train!

Public Health was a contentious theme in late 19th century urban politics. Outbreaks of cholera and smallpox had ravaged the unsanitary, overcrowded tenements in the east end of Willimantic. During the mid 1880's, Willimantic embarked upon a massive sewer building program, which was still underway in 1892. The project decreased serious life threatening contagious diseases, which had decimated the families of Irish and French Canadian millworkers during the summer months.

The inhabitants of the chronically overcrowded tenements warned their neighbors of serious infections by hanging a red rag or flag from an upstairs window. The recent outbreaks were fresh in everyone's minds, so a mild panic ensued in town when a family draped a red flag from a second story window of a Jackson Place tenement house. The Doctor was called, but fortunately the disease was diagnosed as a mild case of scarlet fever. The sewers were doing their jobs!

1917

Panic reigned in town with the spreading of a "red hot" rumor. The international situation was serious, and in a few short weeks, American troops would land in Europe. As far as locals were concerned, the war had already started. Men and youths ran around the streets of Willimantic spreading the news that the U.S. and German navies were locked in mortal combat in New York Harbor! And a U.S. battleship had been sank!

These rumors reflected the tension in Willimantic. Company "L" was drilling, training and recruiting daily at the Armory on Pleasant Street. They were commanded by Captain Tiesling, who requested 50 more recruits before the end of the week. Tiesling appealed for potential recruits to come to the recruitment center sober. A large number of intoxicated young men had recently attempted to sign up , causing havoc with the Pleasant Street Armory's military efficiency.

Willimantic's motorists were a new breed. They complained to all who had the patience to listen, that their jaunts to Manchester and back were ruined by the terrible state of the road at Bolton Notch and North Coventry. The Spring thaw created six inches of mud on these roads, and several unfortunate motorists sank into it with their automobiles. Teams of oxen and horses were employed to recover cars "anchored in the mire."

A crowd of over 5000 people assembled in the Drill Hall at the Pleasant Street Armory to witness Company "L" being put through its military paces. March and skirmish drills were performed, followed by target shooting and flag signaling. Seventy men had just signed up for Company "L." The Connecticut First Infantry boasted a manpower of 1,107 men and officers. It was obvious to onlookers who were "vets" and who were "green." The Company "L" vets were rather contemptuous of the new recruits, and asked to be distinguished from them in the regular military parades around Willimantic. Company "L" men who served in Arizona nine months previously, to defend against an attack from Pancho Villa, were allowed to march at the front of all future parades, and display the regiment and company colors.

1942

It was announced that the United Aircraft Corporation intended to build a \$5m. assembly plant in Willimantic on West Main Street. Soil tests and title searches were conducted. The call for an increase in war aircraft production created 15,000 jobs nationally. The offices of the local U.S. Employment Service was located in the Jordan block. From there, Willimantic heard the call, from the Turner Construction Company of Boston, for 100 union card carrying carpenters, to begin construction of the new plant. Temporary office buildings were under construction, adjacent to Trapella Road.

Willimantic experienced its first surprise, unpracticed black out. It generated tension between the local populace and auxiliary policeman and air raid wardens, who were accused of being over zealous in their desire to enforce blackout regulations. Locals reported an auxiliary policeman who drove around the city without headlights, causing several near accidents. The authorities ignored the complaint. Several Main Street businesses mistook the siren of an ambulance as the all - clear signal, and re-lit their premises. The wardens quickly reminded them of their error!

There were numerous complaints that the works' "steam gongs" and church bells could not be heard, so the city and town of Windham ordered four electrically operated sirens, and placed them in the fire headquarters in Bank Street, the fire stations in North and South Windham, and at the school in Windham Center. Each siren had a range of

two miles.

1967

Joseph S. Nasin, a local contractor, was building the new \$269,000 public library on Main Street, designed by architects Jeter & Cooks. Nasin was served with an injunction, instigated by Marion Taft, to halt further construction. Miss Taft owned the adjoining property, 901 - 907, Main Street, which housed the Despathy Furniture Company. She believed that the digging of the foundation for the new library was weakening the store's foundation, and the removal of the east wall of an old structure on the site, weakened the west wall of her building. No further work could be continued in an area 20 feet west of Miss Taft's property. This would hamper plans to complete the library by July 1, 1967. The injunction was lifted several days later when Miss Taft and the city agreed upon an out of court settlement.

The Catholic Diocesan School Superintendent, Richard Archambeault, blamed the cancellation on the fact that eastern Connecticut was a textile area and not as "education conscious as other sections of the state." He announced that a new Catholic school would be built in Vernon, instead.

Federal authorities were planning to establish area Social Security administration offices in Willimantic. The site of the old Post Office building, at Main and High Streets, was considered to be a suitable location. This required that the venerable greystone structure be torn down. Local authorities asked the Social Security to consider two other sites, and offered to trade sites on Valley Street extension, or at the corner of Valley and Bank Street. The local grapevine bore much fruit regarding the utilization of this grand edifice, built in 1912. It would be converted into a new court house, or house new district planning offices.