

April 18, 1992

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

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

1892

Baseball had been a passion in the city for as long as anyone could remember. Willimantic's textile mills were a fertile breeding ground for top ballplayers. In the mid 1880s, the city fielded various nines of amateur and semi pro. players. They swept aside all opposition. Thousands flocked to the Willimantic Fairgrounds (Recreation Park) to see the "Willimantics" humble numerous professional ball clubs. In 1886, two local players were paid \$100 a month. By 1892, the passion was somewhat subdued. There was a resurgence of interest in 1901 when the Willimantic Baseball Association (WBA) was formed, and a stadium was erected on the land today known as Memorial Park.

This was April, 1892. Baseball fever was in the Willimantic air. It was noted that a former star of the Willimantics, Peter Gilbert, was an outstanding player with the Baltimore Orioles. Gilbert was born in Willimantic on September 6, 1867. He was spotted by the Norwalk pro. team while playing as a teenager with the Willimantics. They signed him in 1888. In 1889 he was transferred to the Newark NJ pro. team which competed in the Atlantic Association. Gilbert had a brilliant season as a catcher and a third baseman, and was picked up by the Orioles in 1890. He had a fielding average of .867 for the 'O' s in 1891. A bright future was forecast for this 25 year old Willimantic native who stood 5' 10" and weighed in at 165 lbs.

A number of Gilbert's old team-mates still supplemented their mill incomes by playing part-time in the various New England leagues, and for their home town team, which reformed in 1891. A match was arranged with the powerful Colchester team at the Fairgrounds on Good Friday, to "test the waters" for the forthcoming season. A good crowd would provide funds for new uniforms and equipment. Admission was 25 cents for men and 15 cents for boys.

The big day arrived. The Willimantic Band marched down Main Street to the Fairgrounds. "A large crowd" assembled, and watched the Colchesters take a 3 - 2 lead into the 3rd innings. The Willimantics went on a hitting spree and led 9 - 3 at the top of the ninth. Then pandemonium broke loose. A disputed Willimantic catch was allowed to stand. The Colchesters walked off and the match had to be abandoned! Nevertheless, the future looked bright for the city's baseball aficionados - if Willimantic's big-hitters weren't seduced away by big pickings elsewhere. Seven of the nine which led Colchester 9 - 3 that day were Irishmen - Casey, Doyle, Murphy, Lynch, Kelley, Mahoney and Rourke.

Baseball continued to be played throughout the 1890s in Willimantic. It "took off" when properly organized by the WBA in 1901. The newly formed "Willimantic Colts" became one of the "hottest" nines in New England!

1917

Many historic Willimantic buildings were destroyed by urban reconstruction in the early 1970s. One of these was the "new" Jordan block. The old Jordan block was destroyed by fire on November 23, 1916. The structure which replaced it was one of the finest buildings in town, until it was demolished in 1974. The Jordan buildings were located due east of the footbridge.

The building contract for the "new" block was awarded to the Torrington Building Company. Archibald R. Sharpe was architect. They agreed to have the building ready for occupancy by October 1, 1917. The plans called for a 62 foot tall, 4 story building with basement providing 49,000 square feet of business area to house 11 office suites and trading and storage facilities. The west end housed the Willimantic Trust Company, the east end housed the Andrews Music Company. The rest of the building was devoted to the retail and wholesale hardware trade of William P. and Frederick D. Jordan. 100 feet fronted on Main Street, and the depth was 114 feet.

4,000 barrels of concrete were used in construction, in a style employed by American Thread in their new warehouse. The new Jordan Block was decorated with buff tapestry brick trimmed with terra cotta, and 18 large windows fronted Main Street. The first floor was 75% glass show window. The top story was dominated by a 52 foot long relief business sign. Large 14 carat gold covered letters spelt out "Jordan Brothers." The ground floor lobby was covered with "Terrazo", and the offices and corridor floors with "battleship linoleum."

The block was considerably larger than the old building. It extended further to the east on ground previously occupied by the destroyed "Bijou Theater." The Jordan Brothers were congratulated for having the "nerve and energy" to erect "one of the finest buildings in this city."

1942

Willimantic lost two widely known and highly respected residents. William H. Martin, died of natural causes, aged 59, in his Summit Street house. He began work at American Thread in 1901, and had been the overseer of the Company's shoe thread department since 1920. Martin had been in failing health for some time, but continued his duties at the plant. William Martin was born in Willimantic on June 3, 1882 . He was a member of the city's fire department and affiliated to the San Jose council No. 14, Knights of Columbus. David Moxon, ATCO's agent and general manager, said that the Company had lost one of its most trusted and efficient employees and overseers.

A week later, the death of Aime J. Martineau was announced. He was the 62 year old

founder of the Martineau-Bacon Company, and a well known undertaker and funeral director. He was born in Quebec, and came to Willimantic in 1900 to work as a clerk for the H.E. Remington Company, the city's leading clothiers. In 1909 he enrolled at the Barnes School of embalming and science of anatomy in New York city. After graduation, he entered the employ of the New York and Brooklyn Casket company as an embalmer. In 1912, he started in the undertaking business in Willimantic with J.C. Lincoln, the well known local furniture salesman. In 1916, he purchased a four story tenement at 31, Union street, and went into business by himself as an undertaker and furniture salesman. The A.J. Martineau Company continued to grow, and in 1919, he purchased the Shea Block, west of his furniture store. In 1924, he went into partnership, and the business was incorporated as the Martineau-Bacon Company.

Martineau was a devout Democrat and represented the city as alderman-at-large in 1926. He was also a former president of the Franco-American Brigade of New England, and an active member in numerous local organizations, including the St. Mary's Church, the St. Jean Baptiste Society, Conseil Florimond No 74 L'Union Street, the sergeant-of-arms of the Rotary club, the Chamber of Commerce, the San Jose Council and Assembly No 14, Knights of Columbus, Willimantic Lodge No 1440, the B.P.O. Elks, Willimantic Lodge No 1440, the Loyal Order of Moose, the Garde Sacred Heart and the Franco-American Civic and Social Club. He was also a member of the Connecticut State Emergency Squadron of Morticians, and active in naturalization organizations. One wanders when he found the time to embalm and bury corpses!

1967

Willimantic city officials signed two contracts to supply furniture and fittings to the new library being built on Main Street. Over \$25,000 was spent on steel stacks, to accommodate over 40,000 books and periodicals, and for a charging desk, catalog cabinets, reading tables, study carrels, chairs and small book cases for reference materials. The second contract, for almost \$6,000, went to the Goettlich Furniture Company of Willimantic for occasional furniture for the main reading room.

The Central Vermont Extra 6218 steam locomotive, based in Toronto, ran annual excursions between New London and Brattleboro, VT. This Spring's excursion was the last. The Federal Government introduced new restrictions on steam locomotives, making it financially impossible for the Branford Electric Railway Association to continue their highly popular tours. The final excursion picked up Willimantic voyagers on Railroad Street for the round trip journey to the green mountain state. Tickets cost \$15 for adults and \$8 for children. It was forecast that the excursion would mark the last ever appearance of a steam locomotive in Willimantic.

Karen Carlson, the Chronicles' Women's Editor, was one of the 437 passengers. She thought it no different to a journey powered by a regular locomotive. But the reporter was intrigued by wisps of steam settling "in the branches of fir trees like angel's hair on a Christmas tree."

The "angels hair" was recorded for posterity. Every passenger toted a camera! And Ms Carlson was amazed at the amount of sound equipment aboard, recording puffs, clanks, whistles and the bell on the engine, rang by steam power. The passengers "walked along the sides of the train with microphones in hand like they were looking for uranium with a Geiger counter."

The CV Locomotive 6318 was built in the Montreal Locomotive Works in 1942 for the Canadian National Railways. Its water tanks had a 11,000 gallon capacity. It cost \$6,000 to hire for the excursion.