

August 08, 1992

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

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

1892

The West End of Willimantic was often referred to as the "Dead End" - but things were changing in the summer of 1892. The Air Line Railroad Company had just completed a large new freight depot next to the Windham Cotton Company's property. Just to the north, contractors were extending Windham Street to connect with Prospect Street. This called for a great deal of blasting, and much dynamite was used to clear the large granite ledge which blocked the way to Prospect Street. This opened up some desirable new building lots, most of which had already been purchased. "The view is superb and the air as fine as can be had in the city." Preliminary construction was already under way on the site of Willimantic's new Normal School. "This will bring more seekers after fine resident locations to the West End. It is to be a very beautiful part of the city of Willimantic."

A vociferous movement calling for the improvement and appearance of Willimantic's streets was constantly ignored by Willimantic's city fathers. However, enterprising local businessmen were gradually replacing the city's ancient wooden structures with new brick "blocks," following the example of the Willimantic Savings Institute, who began the construction of Willimantic's first modern business block in 1869.

Each day, small crowds assembled to watch workmen build the new "Murray Block" on the corner of Main and Church street - Willimantic's "Boston Store" was located in the Loomer Opera House block, but rapid expansion lead to Hugh Murray's large new investment. The city's "conservative elements," who feared change of any variety, complained bitterly when Willimantic's historic "Brainard House" hotel was torn down to make way for the Murray building. However, they were reminded that Hugh Murray had "removed from the most conspicuous corner in the city a rambling wooden structure that has been an unmetropolitan eyesore and dangerous firetrap for years."

A great deal of gravel was dug out when workers excavated the building's vast cellar. Willimantic's Street Superintendent, Mr. Comins, aware of the carping of the so called progressives who wished to improve the city's streets, decided to use the gravel to resurface Main Street. The gravel was spread on the streets, "...and a ordinary field roller, loaded down with stones and a good size negro, propelled by two mule power, packed down this top dressing." It was considered "a rather pitiful experiment" as the gravel would soon be crushed into mud and dust by the constant traffic on the busy street. Why did the city fathers not consider purchasing a steam roller? Then the streets could be macadamized at an "economical cost," providing "a road that would be a

pleasure to drive over for years without repair."

1917

A controversial ruling by the American Thread Company (ATCO) caused much anguish in town. ATCO, and their predecessors the Linen Company had built a large number of single and multi - family tenements across Willimantic. They were always in great demand because of their low rents. The new ruling demanded that only families with three or more members employed in the mills, were eligible to rent the company's tenements. The manager of ATCO's employment bureau notified a large number of families in the lower village to quit their tenements, to make way for families with three members working at ATCO. The company received a great deal of criticism for this decision, but the evictions went ahead. To deflect the bad press, they announced plans to construct 15 more tenement buildings on Ives Street.

Samuel Cooper and Bernard Sternith sued the city of Willimantic for \$3,500. They operated several ice houses in the district, trading under the name of Cooper and Sternlib. During May 1917, they signed an agreement with the city council to purchase the contents of their ice house at the Willimantic water works, at the rate of 85 cents per ton. City officials claimed that there were 1019 tons in the ice house, so Cooper and Sternith were charged \$867. After they had removed 175 tons, the city padlocked the ice house door. This was a particularly hot summer, and ice was at a premium. It transpired that there was less than 500 tons of ice in the house when Cooper and Sternith purchased it. The city decided to hold back the remaining 325 tons because of shortages. Cooper and Sternith were understandably furious, and sued the city for loss of earnings and misrepresentation. An undisclosed out of court agreement was worked out.

1942

The United Aircraft Corporation and the State Development Commission issued a statement to relieve local anxieties concerning the erection of a large factory on West Main Street. It was feared that the drilling of artesian wells for the new development would effect local water supplies, including those earmarked for new housing under construction in that vicinity. The statement further added that more than 2,000 people would be transferred to the new plant from East Hartford. Pratt & Whitney and the Navy Department stressed that their new development would not disrupt municipal facilities, or the infrastructure of the local economy. Careful arrangements were being made to ensure that there would be sufficient housing. Transport would also be provided for those living beyond a 20 mile radius of the plant. Local officials organized a survey, and drew up a list of available rental space, apartments, houses or rooms, in the area, as some 312 workers still needed accommodation in Willimantic, including 107 single men.

1967

500 young people from disadvantaged areas in Hartford, New Haven, Waterbury, New London and New York's Harlem and Lower East Side were given a brief taste of college life at the University of Connecticut in a "cultural exposure program." The program was designed for children who had little contact with life outside their communities. It hoped to convince them that they were welcome on college campuses. The group consisted of elementary, junior high and high school students who displayed academic potential. They were given a tour of the Storrs campus in the morning, provided with a picnic lunch, and treated to a movie in the afternoon about UConn called "Measure of a University."