

FEB 08, 1992

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WASA WEEKLY REVIEW OF LOCAL NEWS
ITEMS FOR 1892, 1917, 1942 AND 19671892

A spiritualist/medium, Professor Starr, was "packin' 'em in." Seats for his forthcoming Loomer Opera House performance had been sold out for weeks in advance. Starr professed to work with unseen spirits. The performance attracted Windham's elite. The Chronicle announced that, "...the whole of the downstairs and every seat in the balcony was filled with the cream of society. There was none of the gallery element which so commonly predominates in so large an audience." Gasps of amazement greeted Starr's every "trick." The 700 strong audience were astounded when the Professor persuaded a departed Willimantic resident to write a letter on a blank piece of paper placed inside a sealed envelope. Whiting Hayden's "ghost" wrote to his son, James, asking him to erect a monument to his memory - Whiting Hayden was a textile entrepreneur who built a cotton mill on Bridge Street during the 1840s. He has two Willimantic streets named for him in the fourth ward.

When Willimantic's wrong doers were convicted of crimes, they were deposited in the Windham county jail in Brooklyn. It was noted that of the 79 prisoners at Brooklyn, only 8 were from Willimantic - but 63 were from Putnam. There were only 40 cells in the Brooklyn jail, so prisoners had to double up - some even slept in the corridors. The state was hoping to build a new jail, and Willimantic was being considered as a site. However, Willimantic's residents argued that it should be built in the city which spawned most criminals in Windham - Putnam!

Windham was world famous for its cotton and silk production, but a firm in South Windham had been manufacturing paper making machinery in the area long before the textile industry became established. The Smith and Winchester Company were renown for the quality of their machinery and exported it around the world. They had just built a "S.B. Eddy" machine, the largest manufactured in South Windham, and shipped it to Hull, Canada. It weighed over 250 tons. Two of the firms engineers, D.S. Clark and E.S. Bristol, traveled with it to superintend installation.

1917

Mellnot Worster was born and bred in Willimantic. His late father had been a local railroad engineer when Willimantic was a busy New England railroad hub. Mellnot now lived in Chuna Vista, California. He had traveled west with his parents in 1911, and regularly wrote detailed letters to his old friends in Connecticut, informing them about his new life in the sunshine. He was the manager of a large lemon packing house

which employed only Japanese workers - because they were willing to labor for extremely low wages. Mellnot's letter caused envy among his shivering friends back east. He wrote in detail of the California sunshine and the beautiful lemon trees which were now full of yellow and green fruit.

Patrolman Thomas Grady was walking his beat up Main Street, during the early hours of a bitterly cold February morning, when he noticed a glow in the sky above Pleasant Street. He investigated and discovered that the William E. Clark Hosmer Mountain Spring Bottling Company factory was ablaze. Grady hit the lever at the Bank Street Engine House and alerted two local fire companies, the Excelsior Hook and Ladder and the Alert Hose. They were too late to save the two story structure where Clark stored his water, soda bottles and his new Ford delivery truck. The "nozzlemen" took on the appearance of "knights in full armor" as the water froze over them as they sprayed the flames. The fire was ignited by an overheating stove which Clarke kept lit to stop his bottles of water from freezing.

Clark salvaged little from the debris, but he was well insured. He received \$816 for the building, \$800 for the contents and \$445 for his Ford delivery truck. Motorized transport was praised by local fire chief Thomas Foley. Their new Buick fire truck had them at the scene faster than their recently discarded horse drawn equipment would have, thus saving Clarke's business from being fully gutted.

1942

The U.S. Department of Justice asked Windham's Postmaster, James J. Lee, to organize the registration of the town's enemy aliens. Windham's German, Italian and Japanese born residents were ordered to report to Lee before the end of February. Failure to do so would result in the offenders being arrested and committed to concentration camps. The "aliens" were ordered to supply three unmounted 2 x 2 inch photographs taken in the last thirty days, full face without a hat. Those who could not speak English when they arrived at the Windham Court House to be processed, had to bring their own interpreters. They had to produce their registration forms, filled out in duplicate. They were also fingerprinted. If cleared by the Government, Windham's aliens received, by registered mail, a small black booklet with six pages for records and stamps which had to be carried by them at all times.

T. Frank Cunningham, executive chairman of the Windham Defense Council, thanked the American Thread Company and the Willimantic Lumber & Coal Company for their co-operation in the work of equipping the local air raid warning center, located on the second floor of the central fire headquarters on Bank Street. David Moxon, the Thread Company's agent, had provided free office furniture. The other concern had donated a substantial amount of lumber. It had been agreed that the signal for an air raid would be several short blasts, and a sustained three minute blast for the all clear. The alarm would be sounded by the gong at American Thread, the Smith & Winchester siren, and the Windham Center Congregational Church bell.

1967

Benefit claims at the Willimantic Employment Office rose by 18.2% over the previous week due to 80 lay offs at the Electro Motive Company. Plant Manager Irving Bein said the lay offs were only temporary as more work was expected soon. 454 claims were processed at the Willimantic office of which 40.5% (184) were from women.

The Common Council were studying a layout produced by a New Haven consulting firm which outlined a \$8 million redevelopment plan for Willimantic's business district. The project area was defined as a 36 acre site bounded by Main, Bank, Valley and Milk Streets, which currently housed 291 families and 171 businesses. It was hoped to persuade Federal authorities to come up with \$6.2 million of the \$8 million needed to fund the redevelopment.

The Willimantic Chamber of Commerce celebrated its 80th anniversary. The annual meeting was held in the Elks Home on Pleasant Street and was attended by 230 people. Retiring President, John Crotty recalled that the first ever meeting of the Willimantic Board of Trade, as it was then known, was held in the Loomer Opera house in 1887. The Board became the Chamber of Commerce in 1915.

Jackson Sumner, the President elect, believed that 1967 would be a year of challenge, with many issues to resolve. They included consolidation of the city and town, redevelopment, highways and the retention of Willimantic State College - rumors were circulating that the college was to be relocated in the New London/Norwich area.

The Chamber had met with much success in the past, and hoped to repeat it. In 1907 they were influential in retaining UConn's forerunner at Storrs, the Connecticut Agricultural College. In 1912 they successfully lobbied for permanent trunk line roads through the city, and in 1919 they pressed for the completion of the highway between Middletown and Willimantic. Consolidation had first appeared on their agenda in 1919, not long after after Willimantic had originally separated from Windham. The subject had remained on their agenda ever since!