

FEB 15, 1992

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

Every Saturday night, Willimantic's lock-up was packed with drunks. Excessive whisky drinking was a serious social problem and the town fathers introduced a strict licensing program to dissuade the rowdy "Irish element" from brewing and selling "gutrot" out of their homes. Jeremiah O' Grady, a shoemaker, had long been under suspicion for selling liquor from his house, 13 Jackson Place. Several police raids had discovered nothing. The latest raid produced no contraband, until an observant constable, James Newell, decided that O'Grady's cellar looked strange. On further investigation he discovered a virtual honeycomb of hidden rooms replete with hidden compartments and cleverly built partitions. He also discovered an escape hatch into the back yard.

A careful search produced half a dozen barrels of beer and a dozen quart bottles of whisky. They were hidden in roof beams, and in a 6 foot square cellar whose trapdoor was concealed beneath ten bushels of potatoes. O'Grady was brought before Judge Lynch. Imprisonment seemed inevitable. Officer Newell told the judge that the cellar at 13 Jackson Place contained "whisky in every knothole." O'Grady pleaded for lenience as his wife was insane and he had three children and a mother-in-law to support. The whisky trade kept them out of the workhouse. The shoemaker's plea for mercy tugged the Judge's heartstrings, and he received a compassionate punishment - a fine with costs amounting to \$45. 94. O'Grady paid it on the spot and was freed. \$10 a week was a good wage in 1892, so shoemaking was obviously profitable business!

1917

The Governor of Connecticut, Marcus H. Holcomb, instructed the mayors from each town and city to prepare a military census of able bodied men in their communities in case of War. Willimantic's mayor, Danny Dunn, organized a committee to prepare and distribute a suitable questionnaire. The census was conducted in the town's factories, shops, mercantile houses and schools. Enumerators were chosen and supplied with large silver badges, similar to those worn by policemen.

The enumerators were met with a myriad of problems. A large majority of textile workers in town couldn't speak English. Many interviewees disappeared, developed strange illnesses and disabilities or refused to answer the questions. The majority of foreign born millworkers in the Windhams were Polish, from the section of Poland partitioned by Austria, Their birthplace was therefore entered as "Austria." This

terrified Willimantic's Polish population, as war with Germany and Austria was imminent. They feared repatriotization or internment.

One English born loomfixer at American Thread refused outright to fill in the form. The town's judge ordered him to comply, and it was discovered he had been a gunner in the British army who had fought in the Boer War and served in Ireland during the "troubles." He feared that the property he held in England would be confiscated by the British Government if he signed up as a "doughboy." The judge and mayor assured him that this was only a manpower census and not an enlistment form.

One man (5' 10" and 210 lbs) stated that he was too short to handle fire - arms, and in any case his wife would not let him join up! The completed list revealed that Windham's tallest man was 6 foot 5 inches, and the smallest was 4 foot 3 inches.

Question no 10 was considered to be a get-out by many. "Have You Any Serious Physical Disability ," was cunningly answered. Willimantic's potential fighting men had developed attacks of itching, ingrowing toenails, lameness, insanity, blindness, hair lips, epilepsy, cross eyes, pigeon toes, knock knees, deafness, St Vitus dance, asthma and paralysis. One overworked enumerator remarked that, "actual war could hardly have produced some of the distressing disabilities." By early March, the Connecticut census produced almost 400,000 names from sixty townships. The Windham count was almost 4,000.

## 1942

A poll was conducted at the University of Connecticut to ascertain why so many students left the campus at weekends. It revealed that 20% of the males and 13% of the females left to work. 30% of the student body admitted they went home to see boy and girl friends, and 46% said they left Storrs at weekends because of its "lack of diversion."

Mayor Hinman announced that he had arranged the purchase of 315 parking meters, at the cost of \$65 each, for a six month trial period to ascertain if they would help relieve Willimantic's traffic congestion while raising funds for the city. The meters were provided by the Karpark Company of Washington DC, who received 75% of the fees during the trial period. It was agreed that the meters could be returned free of charge if the experiment failed. The fee was 5 cents for a one hour stay in the business district. The same experiment had been conducted in Norwich with great success.

A test blackout, 15 minutes long, was conducted in the Storrs community - and fowls suffered more than humans! University statisticians estimated it took 4 minutes after the warning signal to have the community in darkness, and two minutes after the all clear to have the place completely relit. It was the first carried out in Connecticut to test how built up areas would be protected during an air raid. There was some consternation on campus regarding how the blackout would effect the college's pure bred hens who had been entered into an international egg laying contest. The lights in the hen roost were not relit as the occupants had retired. It would have been a mean

trick to rouse them at 9. 15 pm and put them back to sleep at 10 pm!

## 1967

The Jorgenson Auditorium at UConn was filled to capacity by an audience who came to hear South Dakota's Senator George McGovern's plans to end the Vietnam War. He believed the bombing of North Vietnam was "a grave hindrance to peace," and regretted that the United Nations had not been involved at the outset to prevent American intervention. McGovern was invited to speak by UConn's Honors Program Coordinating Council.

Eugene Healy of Chaplin was driving along Route 14 at 10. 30 pm on Saturday, February 11, 1967, and noticed that Windham Center's Elementary school was ablaze. The flames were visible for five miles when the fire reached its height. It took fire fighters almost 37 hours to put out the flames and clear the debris. The school was built in 1922. A 1953 wing survived, but the original structure was destroyed. Firefighters arrived on the scene and were knocked to the ground by an explosion which blew out the front doors of the school building, Two of them had to receive treatment at Windham Hospital for minor cuts and burns. Others were trapped when the roof fell in, but they luckily escaped injury.

Almost 300 firemen responded to the alarm. They came from near and far, from Willimantic, Windham Center, South Windham, North Windham, Chaplin. Columbia , Hampton, Lebanon, Eagleville, Colchester, Dayville and Mansfield.