

JAN 11, 1992

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

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

1892

Organized dog fights on Jackson Street attracted large crowds of spectators who bet heavily on each canine contest. The growls and cheering disturbed the entire neighborhood, but complaints went unheeded. The *Chronicle* thought the fights were a good thing because the boys and young men were kept out of mischief, and they reduced the city's dog population which was far too high!

People walking past the junction of Main and Railroad Streets were alarmed to hear blood curdling screams emanating from the railroad depot. It sounded like murder most foul. Upon closer investigation it was discovered that a large rat was scurrying around the ladies' waiting room in the depot. The panicked inhabitants stood on seats, screaming, with skirts raised high as young boys ran around the room attempting to club the oversized rodent.

Local grocers, the S.E. Amidon Company, opened a new branch in the Hall Block, situated on the west corner of Main and Walnut Streets. It was "handsomely finished in natural wood" and had a floor space of 70' X 30'. The Company were famous in throughout eastern Connecticut for their "imported groceries" and delicacies from around the world. To celebrate the opening they gave a free jar of Mocha & Java coffee to every customer.

1917

Samuel Porcaro was found guilty of criminal carelessness at Windham County Court, for causing the death of Giles Alford. Porcaro was employed by the city to dynamite the rear brick wall of the Jordan Block on Main Street. This imposing building contained numerous stores and offices and stood just east of where the Fleet Bank building is located today. It burnt to the ground in a disastrous fire in November, 1916.

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**The ruins of the Jordan Block, pictured in these two photographs shortly after the fire.**



Several days later, a small crowd assembled to witness the demolition of the fire scarred walls of the Jordan Block. The police made them stand well back as Porcaro packed some 50 lbs of dynamite into 15 drilled holes in the unsafe structure. The ensuing explosion shook almost every building in Willimantic, blowing out numerous windows. More disastrously, the flying debris injured several people, and killed Giles Alford, a local millworker, who was stood on the railroad tracks, some 300 feet south of the rear wall.

The Laramee Market Company provided Willimantic's populace with meat and vegetables from their store on North Street. Passers-by and customers were intrigued by the giant glass cabinets and pipes being installed in the shop. The company announced they had just purchased two ten feet long "sanitary silent salesmen," with sliding doors, to store and display their food. These refrigerated cabinets were the first to be installed in a Willimantic store.

Automobiles were gradually replacing horse drawn vehicles in town. There had been several accidents in the previous few years, but the city's first fatal accident occurred this week 75 years ago. Michael Scholaski was born in Poland in 1861, and emigrated to the United States in 1896. He arrived in Willimantic in 1910, and worked in the American Thread Company's mill number 4. This father of 13 children was killed instantly while trying to cross Main Street to reach his home at 44 Ives Street after a shift at the mill. He was struck by a car driven by Robert Johnson, the proprietor of the Windham Garage on Valley Street.

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## 1942

City Mayor Russell Hinman gave his Annual Message to the Republican dominated board of alderman. He announced the appointment of city department heads and went on to stress for economy because of the extra expenses expected for home defense in current war conditions. All city purchases over \$50 would be vetted by a purchasing committee. In the midst of the cuts was one extra expenditure - a \$5 a week rise for George Larkin of the fire department for extra work entailed in the upgrading of the town's fire alarms. His wages rose to \$38. 50. a week. On a more mundane level, the committee listened to appeals for an extra electric light on Bolivia Street, and claims for damages from two women. Mary Connell fell and was injured on the footbridge, and Elizabeth Sutton fell on the "defective" sidewalk outside the town hall.

Windham High School students could buy subsidized school lunches for 15 cents. The menu changed each day. On Mondays the fare was frankfurters and beans with Harvard beets, cole slaw and whole wheat bread. Thursdays looked good. The students could feast on beef stew and biscuits, mashed potatoes, carrots and and peas, cole slaw and pickled beets, and for 3 extra cents they could purchase a coconut custard pie with fruit jello and whipped cream!

Up at Storrs, the UConn Huskies were well placed in the New England Conference with 4 wins and 2 losses after a 57 - 36 win at the Hawley Armory over the University of New Hampshire. A 14 - 0 run late in the first half gave them a 31 - 15 lead. Coach Don White played the second team for the entire second half, to give his varsity quintet a well earned rest. Bob Moss , a former Windham High School star was outstanding in the offense and defense, scoring seven points. "Wink" Wizzler and Nick Verbillo were leading scorers with nine apiece.

## 1967

The major news in town this week, a quarter of a century ago, concerned the publication of the results of a 4 month long survey to recognize potential social and economic problems facing Willimantic in upcoming years. It was conducted by Dr. Bruce Bradford and Dr. James Tipton of the Willimantic State College. They headed a team which interviewed 60 political, governmental, social, business and professional leaders in the community. They identified major problems in five major categories; urban deterioration, the local economy, education, non English speaking residents and transportation. The survey was financed by by a federal grant of \$2,850 under Title 1 of the Education Act of 1965. The U.S. Commissioner of Education received copies of the nine page report.

It began with numerous recommendations for improved social services for the elderly and Puerto Rican community and extra recreational facilities for youth, including advice about alcoholism, drug addiction and sex. Government reorganization was mentioned most often. Almost everyone recommended the consolidation of town and city government, to provide a reinvigorated political leadership to reverse urban decay. A comprehensive urban renewal plan was seen as vital to further Willimantic's economic progress. This would be achieved by the construction of low and middle income housing within walking distance of major industries. A program should be introduced to attract new industries to the area. Also, the city's deteriorating infrastructure needed to be rebuilt. This could be achieved by the provision of an efficient system public transport and the construction of a modern system of water and sewer services.

The next most mentioned subject concerned the development of effective programs to help Puerto Rican and English speaking residents understand each other better so that diverse cultural patterns did not continue to be misunderstood. A lengthy list of specific educational and facilities improvements were outlined to improve the lot of the city's Puerto Rican community.

The report concluded with the strong recommendation of a public forum for "rational discussions" of vital issues facing the Willimantic and the Windhams as the 1970s approached.