

JAN 25, 1992

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

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

1892

The list of births in Willimantic during 1891 was published. It revealed that of the 238 live births, 125 were white females, 1 was a black female, and 112 were white males. The ethnic make up consisted of 84 Americans, 68 French Canadians, 17 Irish, 5 Swedes, 4 Scotch, 3 German, 1 Italian, and 1 not given. The remaining 55 were defined of being of mixed parentage with 26 with American mothers and foreign fathers, and 29 with American fathers and foreign mothers.

Oscar O. Tanner was a colorful and well known figure on the streets of Willimantic. He was an entrepreneur who dabbled in many areas to earn a living. He had been a star athlete in his youth, and his passion now was boxing. He arranged numerous fist fights among the city's "fighting Irish" and pitted the best of them with boxers from other Connecticut towns. He was destined to serve two terms as Willimantic Mayor in 1898 - 99, and in 1904 -05. He had worked in Boston and there befriended future heavyweight world boxing champion John L. Sullivan, who often came to Willimantic to visit his old friend.

Tanner had just returned from an extensive tour of Europe, and returned with a strange looking animal. People stopped and stared as he paraded his full blooded English bulldog up and down Main Street, the first ever seen in Willimantic.

There seemed to be a distinct lack of interest in Windham regarding the forthcoming celebration of the town's bicentennial. It was suggested that the celebration be postponed until 1893, but the *Chronicle* retorted that no one likes firecrackers on July 5 th or Christmas peanuts on December 26. The editor sincerely hoped the celebrations would go ahead in the correct year.

1917

The news was dominated by a bitter 7 week long strike at the Rossie Velvet

Company, instigated by the Velvet Workers local, no 1051, of the Textile Workers Union, who walked out the previous December when the management prevented two new women workers, a quiller and a warper, from joining the union. Eighty workers, 50 men and 30 women, went on strike in protest.

The strike virtually collapsed when the president of local 1051, George Bliss, returned from Taftville, where he had been employed in the J.B. Martin velvet mill, and begged

for his old job back at the Rossie mill. The Rossie management recruited "scab" labor amidst much controversy. Replacement workers were brought from Lowell, Mass., but several of them walked out when they experienced the poor working conditions in the weaving shed. Several others were talked out of entering the plant by pickets. The remaining replacements were lodged on Pleasant Street and South Street, and escorted to work by the police in a jitney.

Gradually the strikers were replaced as over 40 of them, warpers, weavers and quillers, had left Willimantic to seek work elsewhere. The union movement was slowly gaining strength thanks to demand for increased production generated by the First World War, but their first show of power in Willimantic was ruthlessly crushed by the management of the Rossie Velvet mill.

The strike dominated the local news, but local history was made this week in 1917, at the St Joseph's Hospital where a New Jersey surgeon, Dr. Robert Soule, carried out the first bone grafting operation in town on 34 year old Annie Williams, when he cut a portion from her shin bone and grafted it into her spine.

1942

Town officials were negotiating with WPA representatives for the funding of a contract worth \$695,000 to improve Windham airport. It was intended to grade, drain and pave the runways to meet minimum army standards. The War Department considered the expansion of Windham airport as most important because of its strategic location. Taxi strips and service roads would also be built along with a control tower. The plan provided Windham with the longest runways in the state. It was envisaged 700,000 cubic yards of rock and earth would be excavated during construction.

The "Elms" on Main Street was the HQ of the local branch of the British War Relief Society. A lengthy letter arrived there from Ruth Dodds, of Gateshead, England, who heartily thanked the people of Willimantic for their generous contributions of clothes, patchwork quilts, and crocheted shawls and rugs which were being distributed to the victims of German air raids. Mrs. Dodds had consulted a map to see where Willimantic was located, and she saw that it was an important railroad center. She added that people in Gateshead knew a lot about Americans thanks to the movies, and she herself had read "Little Women." Mrs. Dodds' moving letter concluded with a hearty thanks for the tea which the War Relief Society of Willimantic had sent to Gateshead, which was a welcome addition to their rationed tea.

President Roosevelt's 60th birthday was celebrated with a dance at the Shell Chateau. Over 350 people attended an "outstanding social and financial success," with proceeds going to the Mile o'Dimes appeal.

1967

Legislation was introduced to the General Assembly to build a 30 mile long expressway

to link Willimantic and UConn with the Connecticut turnpike and Interstate 84. Expressway costs were estimated to be \$3.5 million a mile. Raymond Bruce, Chairman of the Planning Committee introduced the bill and explained that Willimantic was the only major urban area in Connecticut not linked to an arterial highway. It was necessary for the area's economic expansion.

The UConn Huskies defeated Fordham 67 - 66 before 4,500 at the Field House, to go 10 - 3 for the season. Wes Bialosuknia was leading pointmaker with 23, followed by Ritter (16) and Corley (14). Coach Fred Shabel admitted he gambled in playing Bialosuknia, their star import from Poughkeepsie, N.Y., as he had been suffering from an upset stomach. The Huskies next game was a Yankee Conference tussle with UMass at the Field House.

A capital improvement program was presented in the Legislature by Dr. Searle Charles to provide more than \$11 million to his Willimantic State College, which was soon to become Eastern Connecticut State University.

The funds would be used to extend the student body by 500, to cater for 2,000 students. This would be done by expanding the library, buying new land for extra building, funding a close circuit television system, a new physical education program and repairing and improving the heating system. It was projected to spend more than \$20 million before 1974 to fully complete the improvements.

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