

July 04, 1992

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

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

1892

Plans were revealed for a new Catholic convent for sisters, to be built on Jackson Street across from St. Joseph's Church. The plans called for a 'T' shaped building with a 95 foot long frontage, and a depth of 55 feet. The north wing would be 80 x 32 feet, the south wing 80 x 27 feet. The structure would be three stories high, built of brick, trimmed with brownstone and granite trimmings, with a 85 feet tall tower. It would be topped with a mansard roof covered with slate. The interior was designed to be finished entirely in hard wood. The first floor would contain reception rooms, parlors, study, refectory, recreation and music rooms. The remaining two stories would house a chapel. The south wing contained sleeping apartments, and the whole building was to be heated by the "hot water system." J. O'Sullivan of Willimantic won the contract to build the convent. The cornerstone was laid on Sunday, 9th September, 1892.

Willimantic's united Catholic organizations observed the 4th of July by a picnic in the "Oaks" grove for the benefit of St. Joseph's new \$30,000 convent, which was due for completion the following December. The societies participating were the Knights of Columbus, Ancient Order of Hibernians, St. Jean Baptiste Society, the Knights of the Sacred Heart and the Children of Mary. Each society provided a table, laden with goodies. The affair was ably managed by St. Joseph's Father Florimond DeBruyker. In the evening, the crowd was entertained by Keegan's orchestra, who performed in the dance pavilion built by the Linen Company in 1882. This was the last organized concert, as the Linen Company were forced to tear down the pavilion because of many complaints from locals who were continually disturbed by rowdy and noisy behavior from young people who regularly collected there during the summer evenings, disturbing the peace of the occupants of the nearby Oaks tenement cottages. Father DeBruyker made sure there was no rowdy behavior that night. The dancers were forced to disperse at 8. pm. For more information about the Oaks dance pavilion, refer to "A Tour of the Oaks," on sale at the Windham Textile & History Museum for \$3. 95.

1917

The American Thread Company announced their summer program of recreational events, which would be held on their rapidly developing park. Two years earlier, in 1915, ATCO had built and opened Recreation Park on the site of the old Willimantic Fairgrounds. The summer band concerts held there in 1915 and 1916 had proved to be very popular with the local public. ATCO hired the Willimantic American Band to perform six consecutive Tuesday night concerts on "Rec" Park throughout the summer,

commencing at 8 pm.

ATCO also announced that they had purchased and installed 12 park benches, 12 "iron lawn swings," baseball bats and balls, a set of rope quoits. Six sand boxes with pails and shovels for children, were installed at the east end of the men's bath house in the rear of the croquet courts. ATCO's recreation director, John F. "Buck" Donahue also arranged a number of classes in calisthenics and swimming. The swimming lessons were given in "the old swimming hole" in the Natchaug River, known as "The Island." ATCO erected two well equipped bath houses at the site, one for men, one for women, 25 feet by 12 feet in dimension. They were designed to accommodate between 80 and 100 people each. A spring board was installed, and the river bank was dug away to accommodate sand, providing a "beach" for the bathers. When ATCO opened their "Willimantic's seashore," over 300 people packed onto the small "beach." "Buck" Donahue acted as lifeguard, and saved four people from drowning on the opening day - a 15 year old "Polish boy," who had been attempting to log roll like a Canadian lumberjack, two fully dressed young ladies, visiting from Providence R.I. who waded out of their depth, and a "married woman from the 'Oaks,' " who also was out of her depth. Mr. Donahue suffered deep scratches in one arm, where one of the panicking ladies had clutched him during the "heroic" rescue.

The beach opening coincided with the school holidays. ATCO invited local children to join their "summer camp" programs. They would be able to bathe, and have access to baseball diamonds, tennis, quoits, basketball and croquet courts, along with free instruction in any sport they wished to engage in. It was hoped that "Rec" Park would keep the children off the city streets, which were becoming increasingly dangerous because of speeding automobiles. Finally, ATCO laid out a new baseball diamond for their employees engaged in "home gardening" for the war effort.

1942

The city of Willimantic had taken over the responsibility for the upkeep of ATCO's Recreation Park in 1938. Charles Hill, an ATCO official, deeded the property to the city for one dollar. Shortly afterwards the city was forced to close the park to the public because of the extensive damage caused by the 1938 hurricane. Street Superintendent Alex Caisse announced that the Park would be officially reopened in the near future. However, the baseball diamond and bleachers still needed extensive work. Nevertheless, locals would be able to enjoy the park seats, the swings and tennis courts. The city announced that they had budgeted \$3,200 to finance an extensive refurbishment project at the Park in the coming months. Mayor Russell Hinman declared that the Park would provide an ideal playground for the many children living in the city's crowded third ward.

Sumner Dole, Dean of men and former football coach at UConn was commissioned a lieutenant in the U.S. Coast Guard, based at Boston. He was put in charge of the Coast Guard's general fitness program, also having the responsibility for developing sports programs for the enlisted personnel. Dole had been UConn's Dean of men since the

creation of that post on September 12, 1929.

1967

Work had began on a new \$1. 2 million engineering building at UConn's Storrs campus. The brick, glass and concrete structure, being built across from the Jorgensen Auditorium, was designed as a three story building. It was jointly financed by federal and State funds, including a \$409,000 grant from the National Science Foundation. Engineering Dean, Arthur Bromwell, announced that the building would be a vital component in the Department's masters and doctor degree programs. When completed, the new structure would house a new biological engineering program, a lab for developing advanced computers, a lab for developing microwave tube research, a lab for solid state electronics - transistors and semi conductors, a lab for control systems studies. Civil engineers would be provided with an area to conduct experiments dealing with the behavior of materials under extreme stress. Chemical engineers were not forgotten. They were provided with a lab to conduct experiments at very high temperatures. The building also contained a fluid dynamics lab and a wind tunnel for aerodynamics research.

July the 4th was celebrated in Willimantic by a giant fireworks display, staged by Willimantic Young Adults at Windham Airport on the evening of July 3, commencing at 9 pm. Airport gates were opened at 6 pm. The display, which was usually staged at Recreation Park, had been moved to provide superior parking facilities. Refreshment booths were also made available. There was no admission charge, but it was hoped that the audience would provide voluntary donations to meet the \$1,500 expended on the fireworks. The Young Adults had held a teenage block dance at the Railroad Street municipal parking lot on the previous Saturday evening. Over 250 attended, and the proceeds were used to advertise the display. Publicity was organized by Anne Service, and Kathleen Valone was in charge of donations. Before the fireworks display, the crowd was treated to a drum and bugle call exhibition by the Golden Antlers sponsored by the Willimantic Elks. An estimated crowd of some 15,000 assembled on the airport to watch the display. They were transported there by more than 7,500 vehicles.