

July 18, 1992

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

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

1892

Willimantic's streets were dangerous enough. They were crossed with many busy railroad lines. There had also been a recent spate of serious accidents involving pedestrians and horse teams. It seemed that the only safe place for pedestrians was upon the city's sidewalks - until young boys decided to use them for bicycle races. Adult cyclists also felt save on the sidewalks - but several pedestrians had recently met with nasty accidents, so the borough introduced new laws banning the "riding, driving or running of bicycles, tricycles and velipocedes upon the (named) sidewalks of the said borough." Bicycling was allowed on sidewalks in the less crowded areas of town, but Willimantic's cyclists were ordered to warn pedestrians with a bell or whistle, when they were due to pass them on the town's outlying sidewalks. If pedestrians did not heed the warning, the cyclist had to dismount and walk past the said pedestrian. Cycling was banned from all sidewalks after dark. Culprits were fined \$10 when they violated any of the above laws.

Cycling was a highly popular means of transport and recreation in Willimantic for its wealthier families and leading citizens. One hundred years ago, bicycles, new and second hand, were often beyond the means of a typical mill worker. Nevertheless, mill workers often paid ten cents, ladies were admitted free, to join several hundred keen spectators on Willimantic's Fairgrounds - later known as Recreation Park, to watch the bicycle races which followed the trotting and harness racing. One mile and one half mile bicycles races had the crowds cheering - and laying bets. There was great competition, and some nasty tumbles involving the leading citizens involved in the racing - greatly appreciated by the audience. One such group of racers lined up to compete for trophies, pins and adoring glances from young ladies. They included, Fred Bugbee, William P. Jordan, Isaac Bissell, George Hinman, Fred Herenden and John Edgerton. These gatherings were called "Horse and Bicycle matinees." They were organized by the "Willimantic Driving Club" and the "Thread City Cyclers."

The building today occupied by the Windham Textile & History Museum, located on the junction of Main and Union streets, was being completely overhauled. For several years, the Company had leased out its old store, but the latest occupants, the S.E. Amidon grocery company, abandoned the property. The Linen Company then converted its old store on the second floor into an agent's, superintendent's and clerks' offices, and totally remodeled the first floor to accomodate the Company's engineering draftsmen, who had been working in the granite building located at the entrance to Mill Number Two. The Company library remained intact on the third floor.

1917

The American "Kolb's Corner," located near the "Center School Hill" in South Coventry, was the scene of an horrific accident. South Coventry's Main Street was often turned into a dust cloud thanks to motorists speeding through the town. To avoid the dust and automobiles, Coventry's residents often walked between the trolley car lines at the side of the road. Two local residents, George Grossman and Charles Littlefield were walking between the tracks when they were struck by the 7. 45 trolley car heading into Willimantic from the Lake Terminal. Grossman was killed instantly, and Littlefield was badly injured. Traffic was held up for more than three hours. The trolley car had to be jacked up, so as to recover Grossman's body. There was also a delay in the arrival of a medical examiner to the scene. Dr. W. L. Higgins was out of town, so Dr. Louis Mason was called from Willimantic. Dr. Higgins eventually arrived, and the case was handed over to him.

Grossman and Littlefield were walking to Kingsbury's store, and were greatly shocked when they turned around and saw the trolley car almost on top of them. Littlefield jumped out of the way, and was hit by the trolley car's running board. Grossman was not so lucky, and he fell under the wheels. The passengers on the car told the police that they heard the trolley car motor men shouting and blowing the whistle, but to no avail. They slammed on the brakes, but the car was on a downhill grade and ran on for some twenty feet after it had hit the men. Grossman, recently arrived from Wisconsin, was in the poultry business in Coventry, and he gave work to Littlefield, who usually worked in a Coventry silk mill. Littlefield soon made a full recovery from the several cuts and bruises he received.

1942

The city of Willimantic had taken over the responsibility for the upkeep of Over fifty members of Local 460, Textile Workers Union of America, mostly employed by American Thread in Willimantic, gathered at the Polish National Home to listen to an address by national representative Edward Cluney, who assured those present that a wage increase was forthcoming in the textile industry. The steel industry had just received a substantial rise, and Cluney expected an announcement at any time. He stressed that the differentials in wages in manufacturing industry, ensured that textile workers were the lowest paid. He dismissed the arguments of reactionary forces in Congress who believed that a raise in textile wages would cause inflation in America's wartime economy.

Cluney also stressed that the fault did not lay entirely at the feet of the government and employers. He noted that the Willimantic mills were very poorly organized, and textile mills across the country needed better trade union representation, which would greatly improve the economic strength of the workers. Cluney also stressed that mass organization must be supplemented by "intelligent labor leadership." The meeting was chaired by Romeo Benoit, the President of the Willimantic local.

1967

The go ahead was given for a new one million dollar shopping center to be developed in Willimantic opposite the Brand Rex plant on West Main Street. The project was to be built on a 14 acre tract of land by a West Hartford developer, Simon Konover, who had built 30 such developments stretching from Maine to Florida. It was planned to include a supermarket, a department store and seven smaller stores, with parking provided for a minimum of 700 cars. space had already been leased to Mott's Shoprite and the W.T. Grant Company, who intended to relocate from their Main Street department store.

Konover purchased the land from from Sol Levitt, a Vernon developer who had constructed the Oak Ridge apartments on Roanoke Avenue. This was a 36 apartment complex consisting of three 12 dwelling buildings. Commercial zoning for the shopping center had been granted to Levitt in August, 1964, but Konover wanted a revision so that the stores could be built further back from the road. Construction was planned to begin within thirty days time, and Konover expected it to be completed by the spring of 1968. He also added that there would be provision for the expansion of the site.