

March 28, 1992

## THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

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

### 1892

The area was once known as the sleepy hamlet of Willimantic Falls, experienced dramatic urban expansion through the 1870s and 1880s. In the 1840s, the thick forest on the south hill, overlooking the the scattered mills and houses in the valley base, looked impregnable. By 1892 , the same hill was populated with by the elite of eastern Connecticut society. They lived in the finest residences in New England. But all was not well with the folks who lived on the hill. The winter's ice and snow was melting.

The inhabitants of the recently laid Prospect and Summit streets, were prisoners in their own homes. Deep mud choked the sidewalks and avenues. The streets were covered with thin layers of crushed stone. It washed away in the winter months. The sidewalks consisted of soil, ashes and pebbles. The thaw turned them into a revolting, clinging mush, causing the extensive use of planks and boards to connect front doors with horses and buggies. More care was taken with Main Street, which was covered with numerous layers of crushed stones and ashes. State- of the- art concrete sidewalks were appearing outside the town's premier businesses. Willimantic grew quickly. Its infrastructure did not keep pace with its urban development. The superintendent of streets became a much maligned figure! The urban problems of the early 1890s were gradually dealt with, and Willimantic's roads improved out of all recognition with the coming of the horseless carriage.

### 1917

Connecticut's Governor, Marcus Holcomb, authorized the formation of a Connecticut Home Guard in each town, to supply "armed troops for constabulary duties." Coventry was the first to respond, and organized the "Nathan Hale Company of Coventry," to guard strategic sites around the town. One of the first to enlist was A.P. Woodward, a 80 year old Civil War veteran. Each Company was supplied with rifles and a machine gun. Someone in Willimantic remarked that they could not, for the life of them, think of any strategic sites in Coventry!

A special meeting of the Willimantic Board of Aldermen was called to consider two building applications. The American Thread Company wanted to erect an overhead bridge between mills no. 1 and no. 5. The Jordan Hardware Company were rebuilding after the November, 1916 fire which destroyed their premises. They wished to construct a coal cellar beneath the sidewalk, 8 feet wide, 12 feet deep and 96 feet long, outside the new Jordan Block. The cellar roof, constructed from glass and cement, would be the

actual sidewalk. Both applications were granted. ATCO were given permission to go ahead if they located electric street lamps beneath the enclosed steel and concrete structure which would straddle South Windham Road.

The Latham & Crane Company was Willimantic's largest and most well known building and carpentry contractors. They had erected many fine residences in the town and district. On December 1, 1916, Willimantic's populace were stunned when they discovered that six of the Company's employees had been tragically killed when the automobile they were traveling in was hit by a Central Vermont steam locomotive as it negotiated the Babcock grade crossing at Ellington. The six men were carpenters and painters, who all lived in Willimantic. They were returning home from a house repair contract in Stafford Springs when the disaster occurred.

After a series of lengthy hearings, the Connecticut State Commissioner, Donahue, awarded their dependents over \$20,000 in compensation. The six men, A. Clauson, A. Swanson, F. Koval, W. Lason, H.B. St Pierre and P. Osterhout, were all married and had nine children between them.

## 1942

Between 1864 and the 1930s, the American Thread Company boarded women workers in the "Elms" house opposite mill no 2. The superintendents of the "Elms" were well known local figures. In the 19th century, they were always women and ruled the house with the strict efficiency of school headmistresses. By the turn of the century, several men were appointed to the position. Wallace G. Hill was one of the first. Willimantic was saddened to hear of his death, aged 81. Hill was born in Farmington, Connecticut in 1860, and moved to Willimantic as a young man. He was a devotee of harness racing, which drew thousands of spectators to the racing track located in the area known today as Recreation Park. Willimantic was a gambling mecca long before Ledyard!

A survey revealed that the average University of Connecticut alumnus was earning between \$2,100 and \$2,400. Sixty per cent were working in occupations relating to their college major. The stats were based on 746 returned questionnaires - 20% of those sent out. They were sent to ex -students who had worked at Storrs between 1896 and 1941. 60% of the alumni were married. 15% were divorced. 75% of the respondents were men.

## 1967

A city meeting was called by Joseph Tubridy, chairman of the Willimantic Parking Authority (WPA), to appropriate \$113,000 for a new parking lot to accommodate 104 vehicles. It was proposed to demolish a building owned by the William Brand Company, and a garage and car washing establishment owned by Mrs. Betty Sherman, located between Valley, Church, North and Meadow Streets.

Tubridy believed that the new lot would generate downtown growth. He reminded the detractors of the plan that the city's Railroad Street parking lot made an annual profit of

\$8,000. The city was short of parking spaces, as the WPA had sold their 170 space Main Street lot, to allow for the construction of the town's new public library.

Tubridy's plan was opposed by the Windham Area Community Action Program, (WACAP), and by a group of merchants situated around the old parking lot, now the building site for the new library. WACAP argued that housing, not parking, should be the city's main concern. WACAP's opposition was voiced by Julio Quinones and the Rev. Charles Pickett. They believed businesses should provide parking spaces at their own expense. More housing would keep present industries in Willimantic, and attract new industries. Brand's old factory should be preserved to house any new industries who wished to locate in town.

The merchants were represented by Eugene LaRiviere, who argued that it was ridiculous to locate the new parking lot in the east end of town, where a large parking lot already existed. The west end of Main Street was now deprived of parking spaces. This was "unfair distribution." The Chamber of Commerce supported Tubridy. Their President, Jackson P. Sumner, complained of the traffic problems on Valley Street, caused by traffic meters, which could be removed if the plan went ahead. Tubridy's plan was controversially defeated by 98 - 92, at the city meeting.