

November 07, 1992

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

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

1892

The Natchaug Silk Company was formed in Willimantic in November, 1887. Several months later, their magnificent new mill on North Street was spinning and weaving silk thread. The owners of the Natchaug, Joseph Chaffee and Charles Fenton, were staunch Republicans who favored the party's policy of slapping high tariffs on foreign textile imports. The Company was now celebrating its fifth birthday. Profits were good, and a new Republican administration would ensure the continuation of those profits. Therefore, the mill's employees were urged to vote the Republican ticket, led by the incumbent president Benjamin Harrison. A vote for Grover Cleveland and the Democrats would, it was believed, lead to a free-trade policy and the collapse of local textile concerns, such as the Natchaug. To strengthen the argument, Chaffee and Fenton mounted two large framed photographs, and hung them in the mill entrance. They featured groups of employees in linen thread mills at Kearney, N.J., and Belfast, Ireland. The Natchaug mill's employees were asked to compare the "comfort and contentment" of the workers at the protectionist New Jersey mills with the "want and discouragement" of the workers across the Atlantic, where free-trade was freely practiced.

George H. Prouty of Boston had recently purchased the Windham Hotel, which stood at the north-west corner of Main Street and Church Street. He cast envious glances up Main Street at the Hooker Hotel where recent refurbishments had turned it into one of the most comfortable hotels east of Hartford. Prouty announced a modernization plan for the Windham. The H.L. Hunt clothing store, which held a prominent position on Main Street on the first floor of the Windham Hotel building, was removed to the rear, to a site facing Church Street. The vacated space was transformed into a reception area and lounge bar. A state-of-the-art water powered elevator was installed. All the rooms were re-papered, painted and completely refurnished in antique oak and cherry, and provided with new hair mattresses. New washrooms were located in the basement, along with a new billiard room containing the latest design of billiard tables. The dining room was also re-decorated, and it was forecast that the new Windham Hotel would be a firm favorite among traveling salesmen stopping in town.

1917

Everyone agreed that the Halloween celebrations in Willimantic had been most entertaining, easily surpassing those of previous years. "A fine moon helped out the festivities." The highlight of the Halloween parade down Main Street, was a representation of "Kaiser Bill" being beaten by a Chaplinesque figure with a large club.

The streets were thronged with "groups of serenaders" dressed as black minstrels, gypsies and witches. And everyone was drinking "pumpkin moonshine." It was remarked that Halloween night in Willimantic was a "Thread City Mardi Gras."

Three Willimantic men, Russell Chapell, Nate Eccleston and Frank Gelinas, were members of the United States infant "air force." Chappell, who was enjoying a brief furlough back in his home town, was a member of the ninth aero squadron. He thrilled his old High School pals by explaining the rudiments of aeroplanes, and the sensations which accompany manned flight. He was soon to be commissioned as a lieutenant, and expected to be posted "somewhere in Europe."

Mayor Danny Dunn and Police Chief Killourey carried out the winter inspection of the Willimantic police department. Dunn was introduced to three new patrolmen, Byron Hicks, Frank McLean and Grant Bombria. He complimented them upon their smart appearance, and asked that they not bring every single case to court because, "under a rugged coat often lies a good heart." Nevertheless, men who persistently violated the law should be punished. Dunn stressed that police courts were not paying institutions financed by heavy fines, but places where justice was fairly administered

1942

Willimantic's new aircraft plant was now in operation. It was officially designated as Plant L, auxiliary unit of the Pratt & Whitney Aircraft Division of the United Aircraft Corporation. It would soon be fully operable on three shifts to produce "airplane parts to check the Axis." Seven brief months before the site of the gigantic plant had been a "mowing field." Tons of machinery were arriving at the plant daily. Some machines weighed more than 7 tons, and "stretched as far as the eye could see." Air conditioning and neon lighting gave the building a contemporary feeling. The basement contained a huge, elaborately equipped cafeteria, under the charge of Frank Sledjeski. The administration building was separate from the main plant. It was noted by visiting newspapermen that there was a large female workforce. The management replied that, "some of the processes are carried out better by women."

The Pratt & Whitney plant attracted workers into Willimantic from many surrounding districts. The Connecticut Bus Company laid on eleven hourly runs, Monday through Friday, to and from the plant originating and ending in Norwich and stopping off at Taftville, Baltic, and South Windham. The first bus set out from Norwich at 4. 45 am. The running time from Norwich was 1 hour 10 minutes, from Taftville 59 minutes, from Baltic 48 minutes, and from South Windham 13 minutes

1967

Willimantic's Democratic incumbent Mayor, Leo Carey, announced that he would not be a candidate for election to a third term. This late withdrawal caused much gnashing of teeth in local party circles, as the election was only a month away. The Democrats quickly nominated former State Representative Albert J. Harvey in his place. Harvey,

who lived at 255 Summit Street, was first elected to the Connecticut House of Representatives in 1955, where he fought for an extension to Route Six, and acquired funding for Eastern Connecticut State College. Harvey was to face Republican Stanley R. Kokoska in the December 4, election.

Twenty eight employees of the American Thread Company had to be evacuated from Mill Number Four, when fire destroyed an adjacent 30 X 30 foot building housing the water circulator unit of a new \$300,000 air conditioning system. Mill Number four was under threat for a while as flames spread to its roof over the spinning department. City firefighters, led by Chief Albert Martin soon brought the blaze under control. The South Windham Fire Department moved into Willimantic to provide a backup service to city residents.