

September 05, 1992

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

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

1892

Labor Day was celebrated in some style at Mansfield's Echo Lake. The Baptist Sunday School of Willimantic and the Congregational Sunday School held a picnic on Echo Lake's Pleasure Island. "The day, the grounds and the company were everything that could be desired." Five bus loads and numerous single teams arrived at the Lake at 10 a.m., and unloaded some 400 revelers. They were described as "a happy and joyous thong of Sunday School pupils and their teachers."

Pleasure Island was owned by a Mr. Weeks, who had fitted it out with swings, benches, and a croquet ground. The Island was connected it to the mainland with a "long rustic bridge," which was constantly packed with "lovely damsels" and "eager youth" displaying "beauty and intelligence." The afternoon's fishing contest was won by the Reverend J. B. Lemon, who bagged a "quart" of perch. (Being a man of the cloth, it was widely believed that he had had some unfair assistance.)

The Mansfield scribe who eloquently described the occasion was late for the picnic, but he concluded that, "...judging from the fragments remaining, and the general rotundity of those present, we should infer that there was ample refreshment for the inner man." The throng departed at 5 p. m., after the difficult task of recalling all the boating parties back to the shore of Pleasure Island. A "general good time" was had by all.

1917

The American Thread Company Baseball Association organized a four day carnival on Recreation Park to raise funds. The organizing committee fitted the entire park out with electric floodlighting and decorative lights, and designed the carnival in the style of a county fair. There were numerous entertainment booths, and stands from where refreshments could be purchased. A merry go round was provided for the children, and the Thread Company's carpenters erected a large dance pavilion, "on the basketball court rear of the baseball grandstand." The dance music was provided by Pickett's Orchestra. One highlight was the appearance of the daredevil "Cadieux" a well known high wire artist, whose speciality was performing somersaults on the tightrope some 50 feet in the air.

The opening ceremony took place in Lincoln Square, where the Willimantic American Band assembled, to march down lower Main Street towards the park. They were greeted by Mayor Danny Dunn, a great lover of baseball who had managed the city's

professional baseball team in the early years of the century. The American Band performed nightly concerts at the carnival. On the Saturday before Labour Day, the thread mill's accomplished baseball nine were to do battle with the New London team, members of the Connecticut Independent league. The game started at 3. 30 pm. Men were charged 15 cents for admission. Ladies were admitted free. A match was also arranged for Labour Day between the crack nine of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company of New Haven, and Willimantic's thread mill nine. Admission for this game was somewhat more expensive, being 25 cents for men and 10 cents for women. Both teams had invited accomplished professional players to perform them, and a large crowd was expected.

The park's famous old race track, built by the Willimantic Linen Company, was the scene of a historic experiment. Trotting contests held there, were floodlit by electric arc lights as early as 1883. The track had been resurfaced and renovated by the American Thread Company, and the surrounds were pleasantly landscaped. The carnival ran for three nights. It was estimated that over 4,000 people attended, thus filling the coffers of the baseball association. The director of the carnival, John McQuillan, admitted that he had planned the carnival in the style of the old agricultural fairs which were held annually on Recreation Park, when it was known as the Willimantic Fairgrounds.

## 1942

The 24th annual Elks Country Fair was keenly awaited. Thousands of people flocked to the grounds on Pleasant Street. It's 4 nights and 2 matinees offered a brief escape from the worries of wartime. The Willimantic Elks held their highly popular annual fair every year between 1919 and 1952. The 1942 fair opened with a speeches by Alderman George Millard and Exalted Ruler Louis Moran, but many of those present were keenly looking forward to the quadrille contest and the performance of the " beautiful high wire acrobat," Marion. Children were fascinated with the animals who were part of Hills Society Circus. Adults were keenly looking forward to the dances where music was provided by Matty Mattison and his orchestra. Adults were charged 30 cents admission, and children had to pay 15 cents - a small fee to see Rex, the pony with a human brain, Wilbur's dog and pony act, and Hill's tight rope walking elephants.

The opening night promised to be a roaring success, but a transformer blew up, plunging the fair into darkness. The gloom had to be endured for 90 minutes while emergency crews from C. L. & P. repaired the transformer. By that time, many had gone home, and others were deterred from attending. However, those who remained were treated to a display from Rex, the educated pony, and tricks performed by elephants Tulan and Judy. The highlight of the evening was the daring performance of Marion, who performed acrobatics on a wire some 120 feet above the ground without a safety net.

When the lights came back on, those present were further inconvenienced by several rain showers. The crowds found shelter in the bingo booths, which did a roaring trade. Between the showers, a quadrille competition between local towns took place, with

music provided by Delude's orchestra. Those dancers not interested in winning prizes, waltzed to Matty Mattison's music on the large stage.

The four day event was, as usual, a great success, despite the inconveniences. The crowds flocked to Pleasant Street to see Harry and Jean Wilzer, "twin trumpeteers" who had performed on Fred Allen's radio show. Dippy Diers, "a pantomimist and clown" entertained the kids. He had just completed a 4 year run in the musical "Hellzapoppin" at the Winter Gardens in New York. The Fair patrons were also treated to performances by an illusionist, "the Great Dexter, and the Richados who featured a "boy wonder juggler." The Fair's midway was packed each day and evening, and the organizers were delighted with the high sales of War Bonds.

## 1967

Columbia's most well known and oldest resident, the composer of "The Columbia Sesquicentennial March in 1954, died at his home aged 90. Albert E. Lyman, "musician, student of American Indian history and baseball," was born on Edgerton Road, Columbia in 1876, a son of Chester and Jennie (Foote) Lyman. He died in the house his father built on route 87 in Columbia, in 1898. He began his musical career with the Columbia Band in 1891, eventually becoming its bandmaster. Lyman had been actively involved with America's oldest band, the Babcock Cornet Band from Ashford, since 1918. The Babcock Band could trace its origins back to the American revolution. Albert Lyman was also an accomplished music teacher. He taught numerous people how to master the intricacies of brass instruments. Lyman himself was an expert with virtually every brass instrument, and had recently mastered the French horn.

Baseball had also been a passion in Lyman's life. In 1893 he played in the Milk Can League and was a close friend of John Richards, an accomplished black baseball star at the turn-of-the-century. Lyman had published a history of baseball in Columbia, dating back to 1870. His third passion in life was the history and folklore of Connecticut native Americans, a subject on which he often spoke at local schools. Albert Lyman was a member of the Columbia Grange 131 Patrons of Husbandry, and the Columbia Congregational Church.