

September 19, 1992

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

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

1892

Plans were going ahead to make the 10th annual Willimantic Agricultural Fair the most successful to date. Local farmers intended displaying the best of their livestock. As usual, the Fair would be held on the Willimantic Fairgrounds, on October 4, 5, 6. A larger crowd was expected this year, as the organizers had decided to ban "fakirs and gambling schemes" so parents could send their children, especially "young men and boys" without the fear of them being duped by "silver tongued swindlers."

The trustees of the Swedish Lutheran Society purchased a lot at the southwest corner of Oak Street and Summit Street, on the Hewitt estate, to build a church. The Reverend A. F. Wicklund had worked hard to raise funds, and had received enough donations to go ahead with the building of the foundations.

A large force of workmen, under the direction of Willimantic's Superintendent of Building, Mr. Potter, were laboring to complete a massive coal store facility just to the east of the Willimantic Linen Company's Number Four Mill. Coal was becoming increasingly expensive, particularly in the winter, so the Linen Company decided to buy in bulk in the summer, at cheap rates, and store it the year round. The coal store would also solve the inconvenient and expensive problem of picking and chipping frozen coal from railroad cars in the winter months. A large hopper was constructed under the tracks of a branch line so railroad cars could deposit their loads in one attempt, thus cutting down on expensive handling costs.

1917

An unidentified flying object caused hundreds of local people to rush into the streets to view the spectacle. It was rumored that UFO was a secret experiment carried out by the U.S. Government from the collegiate school in Rockville. It was thought to be a battle field observation balloon - and it caused chaos on local streets.

People standing on Main Street, necks craned, saw flames and puffs of smoke in the vicinity of the balloon - and the airship began a rapid descent. It skimmed over Willimantic's rooftops, and locals realized that the balloon was about to land or crash. Numerous local motorists decided to board their automobiles and take chase of the dirigible as it descended. The airship was controlled by Chief Pilot Nelson Arnold, who had 14 years experience as a pilot in balloon ascensions. In 1908, Arnold piloted an American balloon in the German International Balloon race.

The park's famous old race track, built by the Willimantic Linen Company, was the scene of a historic experiment. This was the balloon's first flight. Just before it had took to flight, some 2 hours earlier, a bottle of champagne was smashed on the airship's basket, and the craft was named "Rockville." It was filled with 38,000 cubic feet of "blue gas," 10,000 cubic feet of hydrogen and weighed 800 pounds. It immediately ascended to 3,000 feet and began to drift south westward, causing surprise in Vernon and Andover. When it reached Willimantic, the balloon's instruments revealed that it was more than 6,000 feet above ground, but the pilots had to quickly make a forced landing in a undisclosed field on the outskirts of Willimantic.

As in any war, the operations of the Government were shrouded in secrecy, and officials denied that a forced landing was made. They claimed that the flash of light was caused by the sun reflecting off the stars and stripes which hung from the balloons wicker basket, and denied the existence of any smoke. Rumor had it that the balloon crashed into some bushes on a local farm, but officials were remaining tight lipped. They insisted that the "crash landing" was a planned landing, and denied that it was an experimental balloon, but a training airship for officers training to be pilots in the U.S. "aero service."

1942

Willimantic Police Chief Grant Bombria, a veteran of World War One, celebrated his 25th anniversary as a member of the local police department. He was appointed as a supernumerary officer in 1917 by Mayor Danny Dunn, and became a regular policeman in 1922. He was one of Willimantic's first motorcycle officers before being promoted to sergeant. In 1933 he was promoted to lieutenant, and shortly afterwards Bombria was promoted to captain. When Chief Thomas Grady retired on February 12, 1940, Bombria was appointed in his place.

The Electro-Motive Manufacturing Company, based in the old Rossie Velvet mills in Willimantic since 1939, received praise from L. H. Healy, an official of the War Department. Healy was in negotiations with with Company President Philip Lauter and General Manager Joseph Flanzer, to double the firm's output of mica-capacitors, which were vital components of communication equipment used by all branches of the armed forces.

The experienced workers employed at the plant would receive an immediate raise of 13 cents a hour, which meant a weekly raise of \$6. 25. "Girl" learners were paid at the rate of 48 cents a hour for a 48 hour week, and the new deal meant that the more "efficient" girl learners could now earn up to 55 cents per hour. The company currently employed "200 girl workers" and expected to double that total in the next 2 months. Mr. Healy stressed the importance of this vital war industry, which he considered more important than the production of guns and bullets.

1967

The University of Connecticut came under the spotlight of radio station WTIC's Joan Colbert Colbert Show, September 11 through 15. Admissions Director John Vladis was the first to be interviewed, followed by Dr. David Zeaman and Dr. Sam Witryol, two psychologists, experts of learning in retarded individuals. Next came Dr. Eleanor Lucky, the head of the Department of Child Development and Family Relations. The Thursday show featured Michael Steinberg, "a brilliant young concert pianist" who had just joined the music faculty. He had been the subject of an Emmy winning CBS documentary entitled "The Odyssey of Michael Steinberg" where CBS cameras followed him on a tour of Poland. The radio week ended with a talk by President Homer Babbidge who spoke about the state of the University.