

September 26, 1992

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

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

1892

Willimantic's Alert Hose Company had annually raised funds since 1886 with a small fair under three large tents, on the Brayman lot on the corner of Bank Street and Valley Street. This year's offering was considered to be their best ever. It consisted of a massive central tent, 84 x 45 feet, with two wings, each 45 x 25 feet, "handsomely decorated with flags and bunting." Inside was a cornucopia of entertainment. Numerous booths displayed a variety of commodities for sale, including Japanese ware, confectionery and dolls. To attract the crowds, the Fire Company restaged the Civil War battle between replicas of the "Monitor" and the "Merrimac." There was also an exhibition of glass blowing, by Madame Howard's troupe of Bohemian Glass Blowers, and a demonstration of a phonograph. The star attraction was a raffle for a first class, all expenses paid trip to the World's Fair in Chicago.

Ground was broken on Thursday, September 29, at "the old Air Line junction" in Willimantic for a locomotive roundhouse, financed by the N.Y. N. H. & H.R.R. The plans called for a building to accommodate 20 locomotives. It was to be constructed in quarter sections. Over 100 workmen were employed at the task. E. F. Lathrop of Westfield Mass. had the contract for the foundations, and Mr. Thomas, of Rye, NY., had the contract to build the superstructure.

1917

54 young men, "the flower of Willimantic's manhood" had signed up for the U.S. army, and would soon depart for basic training at Fort Devens at Ayer, Mass. They were part of the selective draft from Connecticut's 17th district. Mayor Danny Dunn called for a public meeting to arrange a reception for the departing heroes at the state armory on Pleasant Street, consisting of speeches, music and a luncheon. Dunn also believed that a parade ought to be organized to escort the draftees to the railroad depot.

Arrangements were made by a committee of 12 who met in the Bank Street firehouse. The canteen service of the local Red Cross association volunteered to provide a banquet for the draftees in the armory on the evening of their departure. A band was hired thanks to donations from Willimantic's businessmen.

The draftees heard of the plans, and asked the city not to arrange a parade or banquet. They preferred a private function where they could say goodbye to their families on the eve of departure. This was subsequently arranged and took place in the Chamber of

Commerce rooms. The Red Cross provided the food - tomato soup, chicken pie, mashed potatoes, mashed turnip, celery, pickles and hot rolls, and Pickett's orchestra provided some suitably patriotic music. They began the proceedings with "Rally Round the Flag." Other than families and close friends, the ministers of the city's numerous churches and denominations were also invited to the Chamber's rooms.

Mayor Dunn made a patriotic speech before presenting each draftees with a new fountain pen. With a tear in his eye, Dunn declared that it was doubtful if there was a finer lot of young men on their way to Camp Devens. "You are a credit one and all of you, to our fair city and town. You are about to face ordeals, but be brave of heart and faithful in your duties. Be a credit to Old Windham while away whether in camp or on the battle field."

The following day a massive crowd assembled at the railroad depot to say their farewells. The American Thread Company allowed its employees to leave their work to bid goodbye. There was no room to be had on the footbridge, which provided a fine view of the proceedings, and the depot platform was packed. All the draftees were there bar three. Ovila Chalifoux was injured in an automobile accident and Guiseppe Nardi and Felix Zajacskowski had disappeared without trace. Alternatives were drafted in their place, as each district had to supply a specific number of men for service. Nardi, however, turned just before the train departed. It was rumored that Zajacskowski had fled to Hartford. The departing draftees were loaded down with gifts, from cigarettes to sweaters, and cheers rang out as the train carrying Willimantic's "flower of manhood" pulled out of the depot on the beginning of a long journey to a trench in a French field.

1942

Freshman week at UConn opened for the largest class of entering students in the institution's history. 528 men and 268 women began their orientation at Storrs. The Freshman Week program was planned by a committee consisting of faculty members Dr. J. Gerberich, Dr. R. L. Gilman, Mr. E G. Van Bibber, and Mr. W.B. Young. It was a busy week, consisting of class registrations, reading comprehension tests, meetings of students with the deans of their respective schools and colleges, men and women "get-togethers," informal entertainments, men's physicals, mathematics tests, Protestant, Catholic and Jewish church services, and X - ray examinations. The traditional Pied Piper parade and frolic would bring Freshman Week to a close. President A. N. Jorgensen officially opened the University year with a speech to faculty on September 24, 1942. He revealed that 34 members of the faculty had left for military service or work in war industries and government bureaus..

Managers of Willimantic's 3 cinemas organized a "Salute for Heroes Month" The Capital, Gem and Strand were designated as official war savings stamps and war bond agencies. Patrons of the 3 movie houses were able to exchange their stamp books for bonds, and purchase either stamps and bonds to support the war effort. It was announced that packed houses at the cinemas meant that the drive would be an enormous success.

1967

At 8 pm on September 20, 1967, Thomas Kelly and George Samuels of Goose Lane Coventry, reported that a large round object was hovering over their homes. Kelly described it as being the size of a basketball with a white glow around it. It made no sound and traveled at a great rate of speed. Samuels described it as being round with a pulsation to it. Samuels was an ex-Air Force man who had worked in electronics, and he further described the object as being about 6 times the size of a satellite. He did not believe it was any kind of aircraft. Soon after, Richard Ingraham of Cassidy Hill Road, Coventry reported a large round object hovering near his home. The sightings came to the attention of Lawrence Fawcett, head of the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization. He said that similar sightings had been reported in New Hampshire. Fawcett passed on the information to researchers at the University of Colorado. Several days earlier, people in Willimantic, and all over eastern Connecticut, reported strange reddish-yellow lights in the night sky which seemed to hover some 35 feet from the ground. A witness in Hampton said the lights were as far from the ground as the top of a telegraph pole. The mystery was seemingly solved when officials from the Quonset Point Naval Air Force Station said that the lights were caused by high flying stratosphere B52s dropping flares in night maneuvers.

Willimantic's Downtown Beautification Committee appealed for funds from House and Urban Development to pay for a program to improve the appearance of Main Street. The chief consultant for the scheme was Professor Alvin Eisenman of Yale, who claimed that Willimantic had great potential for improvement, unlike fellow Connecticut cities, Derby and Shelton who needed to "tear buildings down and start again." Eisenman hoped to employ 50 of his students to prepare a detailed plan. He believed that Willimantic's greatest obstacle to improvement would be obstinate store keepers who did not desire change. In his eyes, the biggest villains were service stations who should be forced to lower their signs. If that could be done, Willimantic would look "Less Coney Islandish."

Trans. East Airlines of New York City announced plans to start a three round trips a day air taxi service between La Guardia airport and Windham airport on January 1, 1968. The airline had just ordered 12 Twin Otter planes which carried 19 passengers each. The planes would operate a scheduled air taxi service between New York and cities across New England.