

Rails Start Modern Windham's Story; In Heyday of Era, 50 Trains Per Day

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Modern Windham dates its birth from the first whistle of the steam engine. That clarion cry awoke the sleeping valleys. Energy, enterprise, progress followed its course. At every stopping place new life sprung up. Factory villages received immediate impetus and plentiful supply of cotton. Larger manufacturing enterprises were speedily planned and executed, foreign help brought in; capital and labor, business and invention rushed to the railroad centers. Innumerable interests and industries developed, and in less than a score of years the county was revolutionized.

In 1849 the railroad came to Windham, and it was the biggest event of all. The railroad had long been heralded, yet it was to most people an incomprehen-

sible thing that the engine should go right along without anybody pushing or anything pulling, and no signs of motive power but little puffs of smoke and steam.

First Railroad In 1849

The New London, Willimantic and Palmer, later called the New London Northern was the first railroad built through Willimantic. The first train arrived in Willimantic from Norwich in the fall of 1849, with an engine and two passenger cars. It stopped "down back of John Moulton's house and passengers were transferred by teams up to the place opposite Hardin Fitch's" where the tracks from Palmer had reached. Large crowds were gathered at both points to see the sight.

It was several weeks later be-

fore the tracks were connected but then a grand free excursion was given from New London to Palmer and a large number of people went along.

The Hartford, Providence and Fishkill road came through in 1853. One John F. Lester, the first station agent, met the first train from Hartford up near what was then the Smithville Company near Bridge Street. It is said he sold the first tickets while standing by the track in this location.

Boston and Erie

The Boston, Hartford and Erie railroad, later the New York and New England main line (New York, New Haven and Hartford) was completed between Willimantic and Putnam in 1872 and open for traffic in August of that year.

And also in 1872 the New Haven, Middletown and Willimantic (later the Air Line) entered the town.

This quartet of railway outlets to all the important points made Willimantic one of the most convenient and accessible railway centers in the country. The first depot was built in 1850 a little east of the second one which was built in 1880 at the foot of Railroad street.

The depot was a busy place and the stores, restaurants, newsstands and saloons on Railroad Street hummed with activity. At one time over 50 trains a day passed through town and The Chronicle printed the arrival and departure time of all of them.

The coming of the railroads broke up not only the stage coach business but also the great teaming industry which preceded the modern freight line. The teaming thoroughfares from Willimantic led to Providence and Norwich, then Windham's chief sources of supply. The Windham Company had a six horse team; Henry Brainard and Grant Swift were for many years the principal teamsters to Providence. Charles Huntington, Ephraim Herrick and Martin Harris were among the teamsters to Norwich. The Chronicle in its first years in the late seventies printed the departure time and arrival time of stages.

Railroad Waned

But as the trains supplanted the stages in time the railroads waned when faced with the increasing competition from private autos, bus lines and long distance trucking and planes. The resultant dwindling of passenger business and freight receipts caused one after another of the railroads to be abandoned.

By the early 1950's the only passenger line left was The New York, New Haven and Hartford which along with the Central Vermont supplied freight service. The Air Line tracks which were taken up only last year were used occasionally for excursions or in the case of accidents or storms blocking other lines. When the shoreline tracks were damaged in the great 1938 hurricane all the New Haven crack trains were operated through Willimantic as the main alternate route.