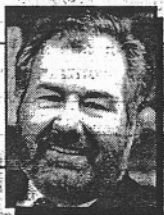


Fires, angst and marital mysteries in June 1896



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Locally, the big event of June 1896 was the fire of Willimantic's new town hall. Nevertheless, the first week of June provided plenty of diversions, particularly in Chaplin, where one of the two paper mills located in the town, and owned by Manchester's Case Brothers Co., was totally destroyed by fire in the early hours of June 1. It was a wooden frame structure situated in South Chaplin, about two miles east of North Windham. The company also operated another mill in the town, about half a mile up the Natchaug River from the burned one.

The total loss was eventually

estimated to be \$65,000, but the company had insurance worth only \$10,000, so it was doubtful that the mill would be rebuilt. Insurance examiners discovered that the fire was an accident, caused by friction on a pulley in the wheel house. The Case brothers lost 30 tons of paper and some valuable machinery which manufacturers of paper. Many Chaplin men had lost their jobs. Andover residents had lost their trains.

The population of Andover was furious about the decision of the New England Railroad to cut its service through the town. The residents appealed to the General Assembly to persuade the railroad to resume its old service. Up until that summer, every train, some seven per day, traveling between Boston and Hartford stopped at the Andover depot.

But because of economies the

railroad company suspended the 7 a.m. express from Hartford to Boston, the noon Boston-to-Hartford train, and the 6 a.m. Willimantic-to-Hartford service. A state representative told the residents that they should be grateful that they still had four trains per day, and that all remaining trains stopped off at Andover.

Mrs. Arthur Jones of Mansfield couldn't care less about missing trains — she was more concerned about her missing husband. Mrs. Jones was a 54-year-old who lived in Mansfield. Unfortunately, because of severe arthritis in her knee, she was confined to the house. She had been widowed several years previously and was living off a small pension, but had been recently swept off her feet by a handsome 33-year-old named Arthur Jones. The widowed lady became acquainted with Jones the previous win-

ter, while he was employed setting telephone poles in Mansfield. It was love at first sight, and the two were joined in matrimony.

Mrs. Jones signed the pension over to her new husband. About a month later, Arthur informed his wife that he was going into Willimantic. That was the last anyone saw of him. Investigations revealed that Arthur had subsequently purchased a bicycle on credit from a Willimantic dealer, telling him that it was a present for his wife's son at Spring Hill. The dealer had lost his bicycle, but Mrs. Jones said she wasn't worried too much about losing Arthur. She wanted her pension back.

Tom Beardsley, a free-lance public historian, was the scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum from 1990 to 1995.

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