

June 27, 1998

The Alexis Caisse Park Springs (Part Two of Three)

Willimantic's Park Springs, or Whittemore Park, has been renamed in honor Alexis Caisse Jr., who maintained and improved the appearance of Willimantic for almost four decades. He was born on Jackson Street in February 1905, and attended St. Mary's Parochial School and Windham High School. As a young man he worked with his father, a building contractor, and helped him to design and construct many homes on the hill district. Caisse became Willimantic's public works' assistant superintendent in 1933, on his 29th birthday, and five years later was promoted to superintendent.

In 1938, the city of Willimantic was awarded funds by the Works Progress Administration to beautify and modernize Whittemore Park, and Caisse oversaw the building of stone pump houses, drainage systems, and an attractive stone bridge. Shortly afterwards the 1938 hurricane devastated the city, and Caisse supervised the city clean, after church spires, roofs power lines, trees, and chimneys blocked the streets. The damage to American Thread's Recreation Park was extensive, and on July 6, 1939 the company donated it to the city. It was Caisse's job to get things into working order, and a job that may have helped spark his passion for creating urban parks, the lungs of cities of all sizes from New York to Willimantic. Willimantic changed dramatically during Caisse's tenure, although he was not responsible for the redevelopment project of the late 1960s and early 1970s that saw the disappearance of large sections of Union Street, Valley Street, and the demolition of Jackson Place, Center Street, Temple Street and Broad Street. Caisse oversaw the updating of the city's water and sewage systems, and storm drains. He was responsible for the building and administration of the city's new sewage treatment plant, built on the east end of Recreation Park in 1959. Today, that sewage plant is more delicately referred to as the Windham Water Pollution Control Facility. Caisse was also responsible for the upgrading and modernization of the city's traffic lights, and traffic patterns -- a problem all cities faced as automobile traffic grew after World War Two.

Shortly after Alex Caisse's death in 1983, it was obvious that Whittemore Park was in need of renovation. Frank Ereshena, then a city alderman, was a prime mover in getting the project off the ground. He supervised the draining and cleaning of the park pond, and the fixing and remodeling of the park's spill way gates, which takes drainage through Lauter Park and into the Natchaug River. Ereshena also supervised the construction of the fountain in the center of Park Springs lake.

Continued Next Week