

October 17, 1998

The Willimantic Elks (Part Two of Two)

The Elks Fairgrounds in Willimantic during the late 1950s.



The approaches to the new home of the Willimantic Elks were laid out in curving walks, and the local Elks were proud of their English country garden-appearance, and fine old English architecture. The building is constructed on a steel frame. Its walls consist of hollow tile, red tapestry bricks with stucco and panel work. The roof is finished with dark brown fire flash tile of various shades. In giving the tour of the new house, the Elks proudly pointed to

its verandas and sun porches which offered a fine view of the city.

On its dedication, Seventy-one years ago, the building's large cellar and basement contained bowling alleys, pool and billiard tables, showers and kitchens. The main floor housed a parlor, music room, reading room, ladies room, secretary's office, and a coat and cloakroom. The second floor contained the lodge room, finished in mahogany with a beamed ceiling, and the third floor housed three sleeping rooms. The other floors of the building were finished with oak and brown ash. All the furnishings were supplied by the Martineau-Bacon Company, and the building's sophisticated lighting was installed by the Handel Company of Meriden. Over 1,000 people took up the Elk's invitation and toured the new headquarters. Visitors in the afternoon were entertained by a pianist, and those who came in the evening were entertained by the Ralph H. Gibson trio. The grand official opening and dedication of the Elks home was planned for June 9, 1927, and it was conducted by the Elks Grand Exalted Ruler, Charles H. Grakelow of Philadelphia -- the first time an Exalted Ruler had visited the city since the Lodge was inaugurated in Willimantic in 1914. The Ruler and numerous high Elk officials from Connecticut's other 23 Elks Lodges, were due in Willimantic at 5 pm. They were to be treated to a dinner at the town's most recently completed building before the Elks Home -- the Nathan Hale Hotel.

At 6 pm Charles N. C. Wheeler directed the Elks Orchestra in a concert in front of the Nathan Hale Hotel on Main Street. The concert lasted for 45 minutes, and the orchestra then crossed the footbridge to set up in the Elks Park, where it played until 8 pm and the time of the dedication ceremony. At the same time, members and guests were treated to a "cafeteria luncheon" during the dedication ceremony in the specially floodlit Elks Park. After the dedication, the assembled crowd were treated to another concert by the eight piece Peerless Orchestra, followed by a five-act vaudeville in the open air Elks dance pavilion, located on the park grounds at the rear of the new home.

Over 1,000 Elks members and special guests witnessed the concerts and dedication. The

leader of the Willimantic Lodge, P. D. Donahue, gave over his seat to the head of Elkdom. Occupying other chairs at the head table were Past Exalted Willimantic Rulers, Charles W. Hill, Valentine L. Murphy and R. Ernest Melody.

So the next time you speed down Pleasant Street, pull over and take a close look at this fine Willimantic building. The Willimantic Elks are better known, to non-Elks, as the holder of the Elks Annual Fair every Labor Day weekend, on the Elks grounds behind the home, which took place from 1914 until 1952. The Elks suffered greatly during the years of the Great Depression and membership dropped alarmingly. Many Lodges around the country had to declare bankruptcy. But the opening of new silk mills on Bridge Street, and the continual employment provided by the American Thread Company, ensured the survival of BPOE 1311, through those difficult times. It is today one of 35 Connecticut-based Elk Lodges.