

History

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'40s brought transition to Willimantic school



Tom Beardsley

Part Three

By 1933, the Willimantic Trade School was receiving federal aid from New Deal programs to help alleviate the miseries caused by local unemployment and the deepening national economic depression.

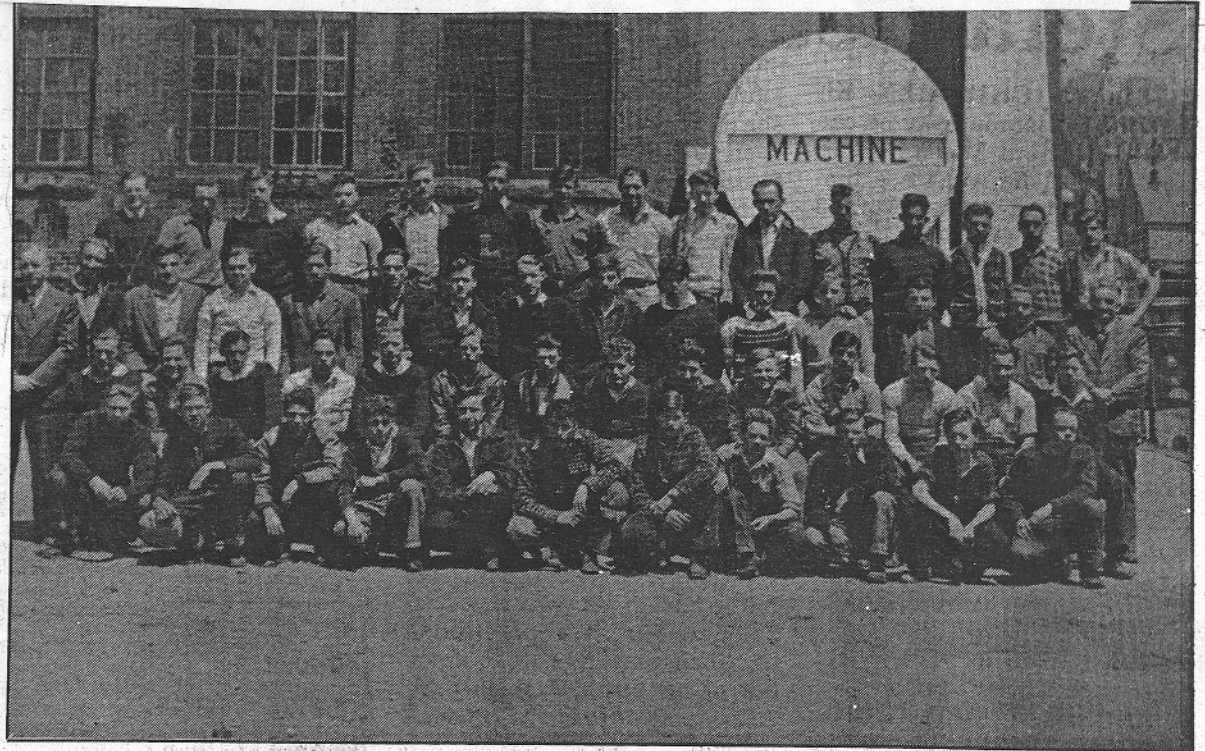
The school's curriculum was expanded to conduct classes in all aspects of mechanical and electrical engineering for the unemployed — many under the auspices of local companies such as American Thread. Workers from the regional Civilian Conservation Camps based at Hampton and Union also came to Willimantic to study at the trade school. Between October 1936 and February 1937, free courses were offered to all CCC members of Camp Fernow in Eastford.

In late 1934, the school board had appointed a commit-

tee to study the feasibility of opening a machine shop and automobile repair department. This came to fruition in the summer of 1936, when the state Department of Education allocated \$40,000 to the Willimantic Trade School to complete the project.

Remodeling began immediately on the old silk mill and an automobile repair shop was installed in the basement, and the carpentry department was relocated there from the first floor. The vacant space on the first floor was turned into a machine shop, and the two new departments came into operation in January 1937. Eighteen students were enrolled in the automobile division, and 21 students were enrolled in the new machine shop. By the late 1930s, the school's diversification led to the elimination of the painting, plumbing and masonry programs. Students focussed less on the practical and more upon the academic side of training, and began studying trade sciences, mathematics, economics, hygiene, sketching, drafting, and blueprint reading.

The foundations laid down in



The Willimantic Trade School machinists, Class of 1939.

the Willimantic Trade School during the Depression era became useful during the war years, as the booming American economy demanded skilled machinists mechanics and welders. The economy was expanding in the years before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and Willimantic introduced special 200-hour welding and machinist courses in 1940 to meet the growing demand for skilled workers. The 1940s saw the transition of the Willimantic Trade School into the

Windham Regional Vocational-Technical School, which became more commonly known by the name "Windham Tech."

The current assistant-director of WRVTS, Bill Zenko, has explained that the years between 1944 and 1947 were transitional. "The organizational, jurisdictional, philosophical and curriculum changes made at the state level in the 1940s led to the demise of the trade school concept in Connecticut Education." Otto Nyffler retired in

1946, and his successor, John D. Clark, guided the school into the modern era, bringing it more into line with the state's comprehensive public high school education. Students subsequently graduated with a trade certificate and a high school diploma.

Clark quickly realized that the old Turner Silk Mill was becoming out-of-date and overcrowded. It was time for a move. But that move would not occur until 1956.