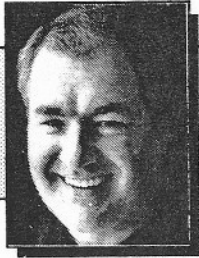


## History

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# Former student remembers trade school fondly



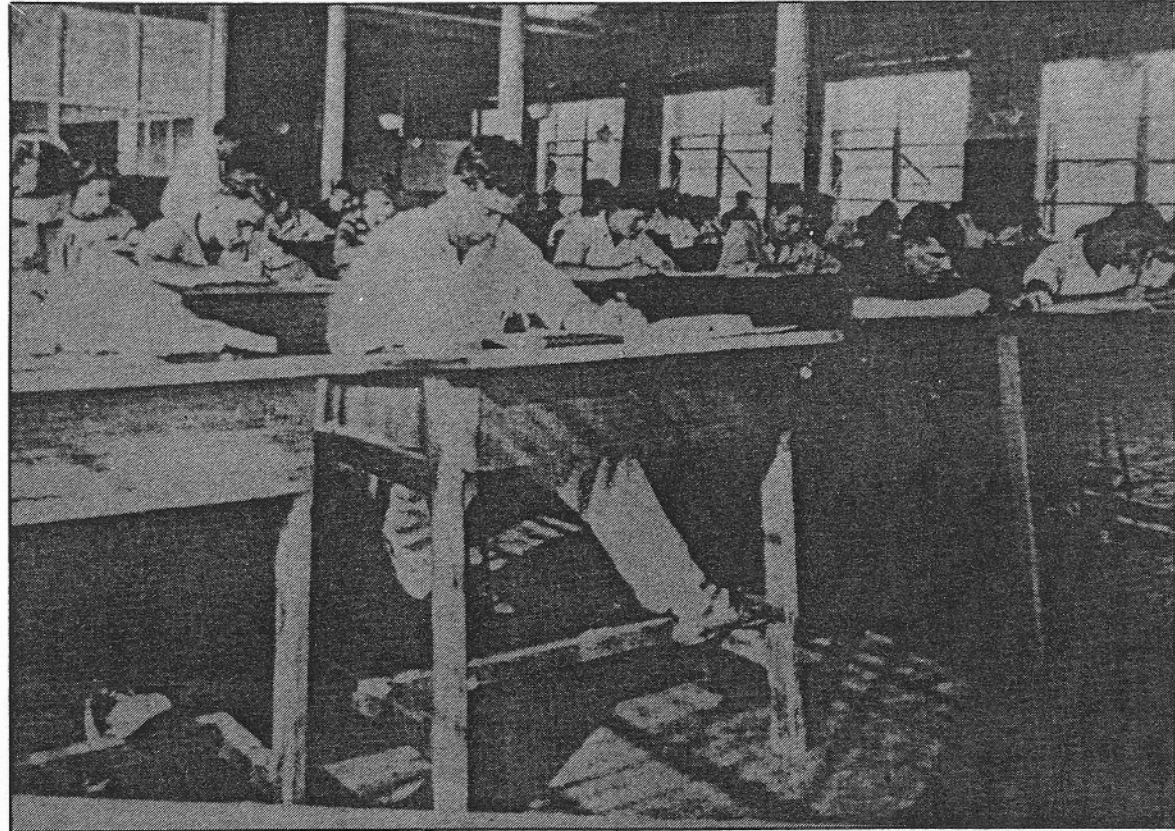
Tom  
Beardsley

### Part Four

Students from surrounding towns were allowed to apply to the Willimantic Trade School, now known as the Windham Regional Vocational-Technical School. In 1951, 13-year-old Joe Celmer arrived to study and train in carpentry at the Willimantic Trade School. He left the Hall Memorial School in Willington, and arrived for his first day at the Bank Street building in September, 1951, with four other students from Willington.

Joe recalls that the old Turner silk mill was of typical robust structure, with oil-soaked floors — and that it had no canteen. The machine and automotive shops were located in the building's basement, classrooms were on the first floor, carpentry and electrical shops were on the second floor, and drafting, science and math classes were on the third floor.

Joe's carpentry class had around 17 students. Their long-serving carpentry instructor was George Jay, who had been at the Willimantic Trade



The engineering drawing and drafting classrooms, pictured here in the old trade school building, were located on the third floor.

School since its 1928 opening.

Joe, a loyal New York Yankees fan, was a keen baseball player and a member of the Windham Tech baseball team. They played their regular games on Recreation Park in Willimantic. However, Joe recalled the athletic fields down in the Ridges section of Mansfield, across the railroad lines

and adjacent to the Willimantic River. The fields, donated by the Trade School's first director, Otto Nyffler, were still in partial use during the 1950s. The site was accessed via Mansfield's Old Kent Road, off Route 32, and past the site of the old Ridges fabric shop — which has coincidentally relocated to Bank Street in Willi-

mantic, across from the site of the old trade school. The area around the school's old athletic fields is today occupied by the Ridges housing development, but the actual fields, although overgrown, can still be seen. Joe recalls that students piled into the back of an old truck, or into the school's old blue bus, and went down to the "Ridges

fields" for recreation and exercises.

Joe Celmer's course of study included studying the academic and practical basics of carpentry, which included actual house building on site. Two weeks were spent in class and the next two weeks were spent on the job. Along with other carpentry students, he built houses in North Windham and at Andover Lake, and did house repairs in Staffordville. In 1954, the carpentry students demolished two large 19th century Victorian houses located on High Street in Willimantic, to create a parking lot for the Willimantic State Teacher's College. Joe recalls how well-built those houses were, and the high quality wood and stone used in their construction.

Joe Celmer looks back with affection to his Willimantic Trade School years. The graduating Class of 1955 attended a ceremony held at the Willimantic State Teacher's College, and the students and teachers then attended a graduation party at the Shell Chateau Restaurant. Joe recalls the carpentry class ring, which was inscribed with the motto, "He who hath a trade hath an estate." After Joe's graduation, future Windham Tech students would study in a brand new facility located on nearby Birch Street.