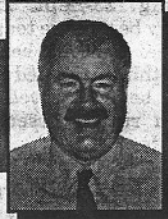


History

Kitchen full of sweet treats



Tom Beardsley

"As American as apple pie." You can also say the same about soda fountains and ice cream shops. Between 1898 and 1950, Willimantic had one of the best, but it was Greek-owned and operated. The Thread City Candy Kitchen, fondly remembered by many, was located in the commercial block destroyed by the

1968 Valentine Day's fire. It was opened by Peter Nicholas Yonclas (1875-1955) in 1898. Yonclas arrived in New York City in 1897, from Sparta, Greece. He quickly obtained a job delivering fruit and vegetables in a horse-drawn wagon. However, after being struck across the face with a leather strap by the owner of the business, Yonclas decided it was time to move on.

Yonclas arrived in Hartford soon afterwards and found employment in a candy store. He arrived in Willimantic in 1898 and opened the Thread City Candy Kitchen at 661 Main St. Yonclas' early years in the business were not easy. Willimantic

businessmen refused to sell sugar to the Greek immigrant, so he had to drive a team into Hartford to pick up supplies.

Yonclas converted the basement of his store into a workshop, where all the "goodies" emerged from mixing bowls to be rolled and shaped on three large marble tables. The early discriminatory actions were soon forgotten as Yonclas' candy and ice cream business boomed. In 1900, he sent for his nephew, 12-year-old Costas George Yonclas (1886-1941), and taught him the skills of the trade. In fact, Peter Yonclas became so popular and well known that he was approached to run as city mayor — a request he declined. The business continued to grow, and Peter brought over at least six boys from Greece to serve their candy-making apprenticeship in the Thread City Candy Kitchen.

Peter and his nephew Costas both married Greek girls. Peter married Georgia Nekos and they had five daughters, Sophie, Georgia, Ora, Katherine, Helen, and a son, Nicholas. Costas, or "Johnny," married Effie Fegiania in 1920, and had four children, George, Marion, Helen and Bessy. The Yonclas children, particularly the girls, all helped out in the family business.

Signs outside the Thread City Candy Kitchen declared that "fine chocolates and bon bons" were "made fresh" every day in the store, for the wholesale and retail trade. Upon entering the store, there was a 70-foot-long row of glass cabinets on the left, carrying the many varieties of



The interior of the Thread City Candy Kitchen is pictured circa 1930. Peter Yonclas can be seen on the left, and the three girls at the counter are Doty Shortelle, Helen Yonclas and Sophie Yonclas. Costas Yonclas is standing behind the counter.

chocolates and candies. Many of the candies and chocolates were stored in large apothecary jars, and then dispensed via weighing scales. On the right was a marble counter, lit by two Tiffany lamps, where soda and ice cream were dispensed. A popular feature was the store's nickelodeon that had playable piano keys. One of the store's best-selling products was "cherry smash" soda. Broma soda was also popular for upset stomachs.

Costas Yonclas had an artistic streak, and he designed many of the patterns on the chocolates and candies. Easter was a profitable time of the year, and Costas designed the chocolate molds made into the shape of bunnies. Costas' daughter, Helen (Yonclas) Laramie, recalls a popular line — chocolate shaped into Zeppelins.

The premature death of Costas Yonclas after a short illness in 1941 was a great blow to the

business, his family and his many friends in Willimantic. Peter continued the business but retired in 1949 after 51 years of manufacturing and selling ice cream and candies. When the business closed shortly afterwards, an important part of the city's history also closed. Peter Yonclas died Nov. 29, 1955, age 80, at his home at 175 Prospect St. He left daughters in Groton, Floral Park, Long Island, Leonia, N.Y., and Norwich, and a son, Nicholas, who still resided in Willimantic.

Willimantic is known primarily for its Irish, French-Canadian and Polish heritage. There were few Greek families, such as the Contos and Papas, but along with the Yonclas family, they played an important part in the development of the city. The Yonclas children primarily married into other Greek families, but Costas' daughter Helen married a local boy, Roland Laramie, the well-known local photographer.

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