

The Way We Were in the 1940s

Amelia Wilber gave the Historical Society a promotional booklet about Winsted that although not dated, seems to be from 1941 or 1942. It makes for fascinating reading for those of us who remember that time. It is aimed at tourists and vacationers in general and compiled by the editorial staff of the *Winsted Evening Citizen*.

We all like to make comparisons between what we are today and what we were “back then”, and the first category is in communications. Back in those pre-WWII days we were proud that there was prompt service in the dispatching of a telegram, cablegram or radiogram through the Western Union Telegraph Co. For a trip back to the city, a timetable will disclose when the next train leaves on the New Haven Railroad. Several bus lines also served the region.

The town boasted having two national banks and two savings banks as well as a new federal building and Post Office. There is a full-page ad for both the Winsted Savings Bank and the Mechanics Savings Bank (with a parenthetical saying “the bank near the park”). The Hurlbut National Bank has a smaller ad stating, “Capital \$205,000 Surplus \$205,000”. The First National Bank had a still smaller ad of four lines with the statement, “A good bank to be with.”

Highland Lake was, of course, the crown jewel in their recreation department and in the text describing it they say the following: “Nowhere in New England is boating pursued on a larger comparative scale. The ample aquatic facilities include good diving boards of several heights, water chutes and other such fun contraptions. Gala water carnivals are annual fixtures.”

“Length-of-the-lake swims are frequently essayed by crack marathoners. The current record for the course, which approximates three miles, is a flat 59 minutes, set in 1939 by Naugatuck’s Alex Sullivan. For many years the mark was held by the outstanding movie actor, Leo Carillo, who churned over the route in fast time when here for a vaudeville appearance back in the long ago.”

There is both dancing and roller-skating to be enjoyed at Highland Lake every season and the members of the younger set patronize these enterprises liberally. The revival of the old-time recreation of roller skating has flourished here in no uncertain manner in recent years, particularly so as many of the adult visitors use this medium to obtain a beneficial exercise.”

There is an ad reading: “When in Winsted be sure to visit Highland Lake Park. Supervised roller-skating on the finest dance floor in the state, with special classes for beginners, whether children or adults. We also have the finest beach for swimming at the lake with a float, diving tower and water chute at your disposal. Soft drinks, candy, light refreshments are available. Located on Third Bay – Wakefield Boulevard.”

The pleasures of fishing on the various streams and lakes in the immediate vicinity are extolled. Hunting, including coon and foxhunters, whom they say had many followers in the area.

Some ads read: “Four and five room cottages to rent by week, month or season, situated on Third bay, Highland Lake, call telephone 84.” “Royal Scarlet Food Store featuring free delivery and low prices. Located in the Hotel Winchester Building.”

Reuben Toplitz of 508 Main St. advertised a full line of men, women and children's clothing as well as a large assortment of house furnishings. "Our motto: Big sales – small profits."

There is a photo of the Colebrook River Ski Jump accompanied by text that reads: "Connecticut's largest ski tow, the 'Silver Streak', is located here, as is the Winsted Ski Jump, one of the greatest such slides in the world. (No mention of Colebrook!) The ski tow has a 1,400-foot run and features both advanced and beginner's slopes. The perilous ski hill was erected in 1934 and drew an estimated 20,000 fans to the inaugural tourney, causing the biggest traffic jam in the state's history. Anton Lekang, former national amateur champion, holds the hill record of 230 feet. A junior hill built by the North End Amateur Ski Club is within the limits of the city proper and a wide variety of cross-country trails, downhill runs and practice slopes are scrupulously cared for by both state and private interests.

"Among Winsted's important enterprises is a modern theater, the Roger William Strand, which installed in 1940 the first complete theater air-conditioning system in Litchfield County. The management presents a double-feature program, which is changed three times weekly with a set policy of showing the major attraction starting at or shortly after 8:30 each evening."

Other advertisers are: The Standard Cycle and Auto Supply Co., Morris Dolinsky, proprietor; Francis Bros. Meat Market "Open Day and Night", tel. 537; J.C. Burwell, (then in their seventieth year); Daniel's Curtain and Decorating Shop at 420 Main St.; Robert Morgan, Contractor and Builder; The Amoco Service Station, operated by Peter L. Maloney at 787 Main St.; The Tiffany and Pickett Co. "All kinds of lumber, mason and building materials, coal and coke."

The lingerie Shop, 619 Main St., owned by Miss. Louise L. Collins; The Winchester – a friendly hotel. James R. Bailey, Landlord. Featuring the new men's bar; Barreuther Bros., Chevrolet sales and service, 7 – 11 Lake St.; Smith's – a complete line of men's clothing, shoes and furnishings, 404 Main St.

The Economy Market, 607 Main St. "We maintain free delivery service with two daily deliveries to Colebrook and vicinity."; J.J. Newberry's 5-10-25 cent store; The Boston Store, owned by J.P. Davidson & Son; King Bake Shop, Walter and Paul King; Hutton Brothers Plumbing, 9 Union St. (I would like to add here that the Hutton Bros. had come to this country from Scotland, where all hot and cold water fixtures are reversed from those in America, and as they never changed their ways, I wouldn't be surprised if there are still a few of the Hutton Brothers versions scattered about the region.)

The Park Hotel – Rooms from \$1.00; with private bath, from \$2.00. A. Bonadies, Prop.

Supervised playgrounds enable the younger folk to pass their idle hours in sunshine and safety. There are two such projects – Rowley St. playgrounds in the east end and the Fourth School playgrounds in the west end. Both operate over an approximate ten-week period."

Numerous summer camps for boys and girls flourish nearby, namely Camp Berkshire, Camp Delaware, Camp Neewah, Camp Pioneer, Camp Sequassen, Camp Wabigoon, Camp Wahanda and Camp Workoeman."

Much was said about the medical facilities available to the entire area with much justifiable praise to the Litchfield County Hospital.

“Fraternal activities are carried out on a large scale, with the groups including the Winsted Club, Elks, Eagles, Knights of Columbus, Italian-American lodges, Red Men, Odd Fellows, Rebekahs, Masons, Winsted Women’s Club and others.”

Visitors enjoy hiking through the thousands of acres of woodlands ideal for such a purpose. Popular destinations of the various walkers are Jumbo Rock, a massive boulder perched near the edge of a sheer cliff on First Mountain, so called, and Devil’s Jump-off, another sharp cliff.”

The churches mentioned are First and Second Congregational, First Baptist, Methodist, St. James Episcopal, Beth Israel Synagogue, St. Joseph’s Roman Catholic and A.M.E. Zion.

The members of the Board of Selectmen at the time of this publication were: Robert E. Maher, mayor; Joseph W. Darcey; W. James Walker; Theron N. Bronson and George L. Benedict, Sr.

Winsted was justifiably proud of their fire dept. The text points out that few towns the size of Winsted receives the caliber of fire protection the Laurel City boasts. Supt. Donald McPherson and his 130 fellow firemen worked from four fire stations that housed a pumper having a 100-gallon booster tank and a pumper of 200-gallon capacity that responded to chimney fires and other small blazes. (Today’s pumpers have 1,000-gallon capacity.)

Perhaps the greatest change between sixty some-odd years ago and today can be seen in what they referred to as their “typical industries”. Here is their paragraph on the subject:

“Typical of New England cities of this size, Winsted has its share of industries, and manufactured goods bearing a local trademark are shipped to all points of the globe. Gilbert clocks, woolen products of the Winsted Hosiery Co. and the New England Knitting Co., electrical appliances made by the Fitzgerald Manufacturing Co., Jewell Manufacturing Co.’s wood articles, scythes, tools and similar implements turned out at the Winsted Manufacturing Co., and Winsted Edge Tool Works, the Mason Silk co’s thread, wire fashioned by the Sweet Wire Corp., Dano Electric and Hudson Wire concerns, the products of Union Pin and American Knife companies and name tapes of the Stirling Name Tape Co. are noted commodities.”

Among the institutions mentioned as giving a sense of uniqueness were the Laurel Festival, the Winchester Historical Society and the Little Red Schoolhouse.

Perpetuating the remembrance of the early educational era is the Little Red Schoolhouse, typical of those quaint buildings set in a scene of matchless rustic beauty and which are fast disappearing from the hilly New England terrain where they have long been a familiar sight.

This shrine where our forefathers studied their three R’s is located on the Platt Hill-Winchester Road at the fork branching off toward Highland Lake and was built in 1815. The school today almost exactly resembles the original model. The pitched roof, covered with hand-fashioned, rived shingles, is a throwback to the olden days. Desks, books and other mementoes of an earlier period are on display and is in addition to an increasing number of exhibits each year.

The school doors now swing open to the general public only once a year when the Little Red Schoolhouse Association holds its annual conclave on the third Sunday in June. Alumni, erstwhile teachers and friends from far and near congregate in a pleasant assemblage. The day's celebration opens with a special service in the Winchester Congregational Church in the morning, following which the group adjourns to the schoolhouse for a basket lunch, business meeting and an hour devoted to reminiscences.

The Little Red Schoolhouse Association with its yearly reunion is indeed one of the most unique organizations in the country.”

Here are some additional advertisers not mentioned previously:

“Ralph R. Meggison, Smith Hill...phones 1302 and 524. Contractor and Builder, tile bathrooms and tile kitchens a specialty.”

“Sceery's Atlantic Station, next to the Park Hotel. Open 24 hours a day. Tel. 500.”

“The Clinton Studio and Camera Shop. Authorized dealer for Eastman Kodak, Bell & Howell, Agfa-Ansco and Keystone. Clinton Ford, Prop.”

Gladys Ford, Clint's wife, many of you will remember as one of those tireless workers for the Red Cross who somehow got us through those terrible weeks following the Flood of 1955. She was one of the kindest women I ever knew.

“Candies that are pure and fresh – salted nuts; we roast and sell them. Atkins Kandy Kitchen, originator of the world-famous Christmas Ribbon Candy. 560 Main St. Established 1887.

“Maden & Kelley Garage – Pontiac sales and service, 337 Main St.” I remember the garage simply as Maden's Garage, and it was built spanning Mad River. You could drive in off Main St. and exit on Willow St. just west of the Case Ave. Bridge. The flood of '55 carried off all the middle of this building.

We'll bring this reminiscence to a close at this point, but I must say that the most momentous change from then until now is the virtual extinction of every single one of the manufacturing plants that had been the life-blood of the community.