

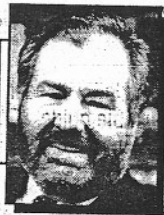
# Josephine Lauter Greer: Willimantic's last red hot momma

When Josephine Lauter Greer died in December 1969, Lucy Crosbie recalled that "She was happiest before an audience waving a chiffon handkerchief, eyes sparkling. We can hear her now singing 'Some of these days, you're going to miss me honey.' And we will."

Who was this handkerchief-waving singer so sadly missed? Many will recall her, but it is time to remind a new generation about Josephine Lauter Greer.

We have to go back to the days when Willimantic was a forerunner to Silicon Valley. The Electro Motive Co. was founded by a Rumanian immigrant, Philip Lauter (1885-1945), in New York City. He came to Willimantic in 1939 and began manufacturing radio parts in the city's old cotton and velvet mills. His wife, Josephine (Rosenstein) Lauter, born in 1891, had fond memories of Willimantic. Her father had been the rabbi for the city's fast-growing Jewish population back in 1916.

Mrs. Lauter was better known as Josephine Harmon, an accomplished singer and comedienne on the vaudeville circuit. By 1920 she was starring with Sophie Tucker in New York City cabaret, and later became an understudy in "The Last of the Red Hot Mommas" shows on Broadway. Josephine Harmon



MAY 31, 1946  
Tom  
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retired from the stage in 1937, and settled in Willimantic when her husband's company relocated to the city's old cotton mills on Bridge Street.

Lauter's company had grown steadily in New York City, thanks to the growing popularity of that new medium, radio. The outbreak of World War II, and the explosion of the TV industry in the late 1940s, ensured that the small company manufacturing mica capacitors would grow to be the world's largest supplier by the 1950s, and the Electro Motive Manufacturing Co. expanded to South Carolina and Jamaica.

Philip Lauter died in 1945, and Josephine became Electro Motive's president. She later married Jesse Greer (1896-1970), a prolific Tin Pan Alley songsmith. Greer was a contemporary of the Gershwins, Rodgers, Berlin, Hart and Hammerstein. Indeed, Greer's first job on Broadway, like George Gershwin, was as a "plugger" for songs. He played the piano and sang new songs in music stores, before the advent of radio, to introduce them to the public.

Greer wrote some 200 songs. Many appeared in Broadway musicals during the 1920s and 1930s, and in Hollywood musicals when he was contracted to MGM and Fox. Greer's "Kitty from Kansas City" propelled Rudy Vallee to prominence in the 1930s. Several songs were revived in the 1950s. "Just You, Just Me" was performed in "Rear Window" (1954) and "Jailhouse Rock" (1957). "Gonna Meet My Sweetie Now" was featured in the 1955 film "Pete Kelly's

Blues."

In 1957, Willimantic became the recipient of its own theme song when the local Chamber of Commerce persuaded Jesse Greer to write the song "Willimantic, USA." And Josephine Lauter Greer, with her Ethel Merman voice, was only too glad to perform it, to further the cause of Willimantic.

The Electro Motive Co. has been gone for more than a generation, but the Lauter-Greer name lives on. The area occupied by Willimantic's Philip Lauter Park was an old 19th century swimming hole on the Natchaug River. It was landscaped and opened to the public in the mid 1950s. The Lauter-Greer Foundation has benefited Windham Hospital and Connecticut College, and countless organizations across Connecticut too numerous to mention.

This Dec. 9 will mark the 27th anniversary of Mrs. Greer's death. It would be nice to hear her husband's song, "Willimantic USA," on WILI that day.

*Take a look at the map of the U.S.  
and you'll find Connecticut  
Take a look at the map of Connecticut  
and you'll see my place of birth  
it's the grandest place on earth.*

*Tom Beardsley, a free-lance public historian, was the scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum from 1990 to 1995.*

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