

— HISTORY —

# Many jobs, but he was loyal to the city

Part two of two

Kirk Foster was born in Willimantic in 1912, and spent almost a lifetime living and working in the city. He and his wife moved out to Windham on retirement in 1974, and needless to say, Kirk experienced many changes in a 40-year working lifetime in the old thread city.

Foster graduated Windham High School in 1931, and attended the Connecticut Agricultural College in Storrs. The small college bore no resemblance to today's state university.

Kirk took Latin for four years, but preferred math and physics. He recalls an electrical engineering instructor named Daniel Noble who established the college's first radio station, WCAC. Noble went on to become the vice president of the Motorola Corp.

When Kirk graduated in 1936, at the height of the Depression, with a degree in mechanical engineering. Needless to say, there were few jobs available in his field, and he began work as a deliveryman at the Nation-Wide Grocery store, operated by Anthony and Slater at 49 High St. which is better known today as Blarney's Café.

Shortly afterwards, Kirk was employed by the Newton-Robertson Bakery Co. of Norwich.

The arrival of World War II gave Kirk Foster the opportunity to put his degree to use.

In 1942 he was hired by Pratt and Whitney of East Hartford, and worked as a production engineer.

Kirk came back to Willimantic when Pratt and Whitney opened a plant on West Main Street that manufactured engine cases and cylinder blocks.

However, shortly after V-J Day the majority of the workers at the plant were laid off.

There were many rumors that circulated the city at that time concerning whether or not the influential American Thread Co. officials convinced the city fathers to make life difficult for Pratt and Whitney in Willimantic, so it would abandon the city after the war.

Apparently, American Thread was fearful that it would not be able to compete with the plane



Tom Beardsley

makers for the local pool of available labor.

Kirk believed that American Thread had never done much for the city, certainly not as much as Jesse Greer.

After the closure of the Pratt and Whitney plant, Kirk was hired by Electro-Motive's engineering laboratory on South Park Street where he was employed testing the capacitors manufactured by the company in the old cotton mills on Bridge Street.

He noted how Electromotive grew rapidly in the 1950s and '60s, when it was supplying capacitors for TV sets and for the government's Minuteman missile program.

During this period, the company developed its own process for manufacturing the silver paste that was used to coat the mica capacitors. Kirk recalled that, at its height Electro-Motive was shipping half a million capacitors a day.

It was at Electro-Motive that Kirk met his wife, Hazel Potter, who was working as a secretary in the purchasing office.

The Potters, an old Windham family, worked a farm on Mullen Hill. Kirk and Hazel were married in 1952. They have three children,

Patrick who lives in Windham, Wendy who is in Texas and Annette in Florida. Kirk and Hazel Foster celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary this year.

Kirk reflected that it was a great blow to the city's economy when Electro-Motive decided to relocate to South Carolina to take

advantage of cheaper labor costs.

This was 1974, and a new company Semco, purchased part of the plant and continued to manufacture capacitors on North Windham Road. Kirk worked for them part time as a consultant before his retirement.



Kirk Foster's first job was at this Nation-Wide grocery store operated by Anthony and Slater at 49 High St. in Willimantic. Today it houses Blarney's Café.

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.