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Willimantic gets a nod from the War Department

Part four of four

Although Willimantic's new Pratt & Whitney aircraft engine factory was grabbing all the headlines in 1942, another local company, Electro-Motive, also played an important role in the local war effort. It received praise from L. H. Healy, an official of the War Department, who in late 1942, was in negotiations with Electro-Motive Co. President Philip Lauter and general manager Joseph Flanzer, to double the firm's output of mica-capacitors, which were vital components of communication equipment used by all branches of the armed forces.

Electro-Motive's experienced workers were due to receive an immediate raise of 13 cents an hour, which meant a weekly raise of \$6.25. "Girl" learners were paid at the rate of 48 cents an hour for a 48-hour week, and the new deal meant that "efficient" girl learners could now earn up to 61 cents per hour. The company employed 200 women and expected to double that total in the next two months. Healy stressed the importance of this vital war industry, which he considered more important than the production of guns, bullets and aircraft. Nevertheless, locals followed Pratt & Whitney's building project with high

interest.

In November, 1942, Willimantic's Rotary and Lions Clubs and the Chamber of Commerce organized a dinner meeting at the Nathan Hale Hotel to greet officials of the Pratt & Whitney Aircraft Corp. Mayor Russell Hinman welcomed the plant manager George Miller, to Willimantic, who gave a brief history of the company.

In 1935, Pratt & Whitney had employed some 2,000 workers in its East Hartford plant, but war conditions had led to massive expansion.

It currently employed 31,000 workers, and its workforce would soon increase to 47,000 when production commenced at the new plants in Willimantic, Southington and East Longmeadow, Mass. Miller then introduced company accountant Newton B. Turney, general manager Thomas F. Kahoe and personnel managers Morgan Mooney and Tennant Downs. The new Willimantic plant eventually provided employment to 4,400 workers.

The official designation of Willimantic's new aircraft plant was "Plant L," an auxiliary unit of



Tom
Beardsley

the Pratt & Whitney Aircraft Division of the United Aircraft Corp. It would soon be fully operable on three shifts to produce "airplane parts to check the Axis." Seven brief months before, the site of the gigantic plant had been a "mowing field."

Tons of machinery arrived at the plant daily. Some weighed more than 7 tons, and "stretched as far as the eye could see."

Air conditioning and neon lighting gave the building a contemporary feeling. The basement also contained a huge, elaborately equipped cafeteria, under the charge of Frank Sledjeski. The administration building was separate from the main plant.

Visiting newspapermen noted that there was a large female workforce. In response, the management replied that, "some of the processes are carried out better by women."

The Pratt & Whitney plant attracted workers into Willimantic from many surrounding districts. The Connecticut Bus Co. laid on 11 hourly runs, Monday through Friday, to and from the plant originating and ending in Norwich and stopping off at Taftville, Baltic, and South Windham.

The first bus set out from Norwich at 4.45 a.m. The running

time from Norwich was 1 hour and 10 minutes, from Taftville 59 minutes, from Baltic 48 minutes and from South Windham 13 minutes.

Sixty-two years have elapsed since Willimantic geared up for World War II, generating employment for thousands during the '40s and '50s. However, after 1945, the Pratt & Whitney plant closed down.

Nevertheless, the American Screw Co. filled the vast space during the 1950s, but that too closed, as did the Electro-Motive factory.

Other closures followed and finally in 1985, the shutting down of the American Thread Co. bought Willimantic's rich industrial history to an end.