

Willimantic's 'Red Hot Mama'

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The Electro-Motive Co. was founded by Romanian immigrant, Phillip Lauter (1885-1945) in New York City.



Tom
Beardsley

He transferred the company to Willimantic in 1939 and began manufacturing radio parts in the vacant Rossie Velvet Mill on South Park Street.

Electro-Motive received massive orders from the government for its radio parts during World War II and in October 1944, the company expanded into the old Bridge Street cotton mill previously occupied by the Corn Silk Spinning Co.

At the end of the war, Electro-Motive employed more than 1,200 workers in its two mills and more than 90 percent of them were women.

The company became Willimantic's largest employer during the 1950s and 1960s and produced television, computer and electronic parts for the defense and space industries, but in 1967 it transferred operations to Jamaica.

Reprinted here is an article I did on Josephine Lauter Greer, a well-known local personality who was featured in a 1930 movie.

When Josephine Lauter Greer died in December, 1969, *Chronicle* current president and former publisher Lucy B. 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 Romanian immigrant, Phillip Lauter ... 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.

Josephine 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 "The Last of the Red Hot Mamas" understudy in Broadway shows.

Josephine Harmon retired from the stage in 1937 and settled in Willimantic when her husband's company relocated to an old velvet mill in the city.

Lauter's company had grown steadily in New York City, thanks to the growing popularity of the 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, grew to be the world's largest supplier by the 1950s and the Electro-Motive Manufacturing Co. expanded to South Carolina and Jamaica.

Phillip Lauter died in 1945 and Josephine became Electro-Motive's president. She later married Jesse Greer (1896-1970), a prolific Tin Pan Alley songsmith and a contemporary of the George and Ira Gershwins, Richard Rodgers, Irving Berlin, Lorenz Hart and

Oscar Hammerstein. Indeed, Greer's first job on Broadway, like that of 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 20th-Century 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 the movie "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 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 Community Memorial Hospital and Connecticut College and countless organizations across Connecticut, too numerous to mention.