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Willimantic Was Home to One Successful Saxophone Player, (Part One of Two)

Willimantic-born Ray Beller was one heckuva saxophone player. Here he is pictured recently on the deck of his Manchester home.



In researching the history of the Hosmer Mountain Soda Company for this column, I discovered what many longtime residents already knew -- that Willimantic was home to one of the country's leading saxophone players in the 1940s. This individual played saxophone with such famous Big Bands as the Benny Goodman and Ray McKinley Orchestras. Ray Beller is the son of Abraham Beller, the second proprietor of Willimantic's Hosmer Mountain Soda Company. Here is his story, this week and next, edited from an oral history interview I conducted with Ray in Manchester, earlier this year.

"I was born in New York City in 1920. My father Abraham Beller was born in Russia in 1889, and emigrated to the United States in his youth. He arrived in New York City and got a job picking up laundry by horse and wagon from hotels. He made enough money to eventually buy three of the small hotels he was servicing with the laundry. My parents decided it was time to leave New York, as they had a young family, and Pop wound up in Willimantic having purchased a soda plant, the Hosmer Mountain Bottling Company, without knowing a thing about soda-but he had a good business sense and made a go of it.

My two brothers Bernie and Sidney were older and they worked with Dad in the business, but I was more involved in practicing my music. I do recall the spring up on the hill, and every year Pop would send some people up there to clean it out, and keep it flowing. There were several houses attached to that spring, and they were supplied with water. And there was a house way up the hill called the Eagle's Nest. I think it could have been something to do with an old mica mine that was up by the reservoir.

My father also had a great singing voice, and he was involved with the Temple B'nai Israel. He was a great music lover. Back in New York, when he was only making three dollars a week, he would spend 50 cents, for standing room only, to hear Caruso sing in the New York Hippodrome. That's where he spent his Saturday afternoons in those days. He found it difficult when he first came to Connecticut, because he experienced a certain amount of prejudice, a wall of silence in places, but he worked very hard, and became deeply involved and respected in the local community.

I was only a young boy when we arrived in Connecticut, but it was in Willimantic that I first started playing the saxophone, when I was about nine or ten years old. I saw a parade in Willimantic and saw this guy playing a saxophone, and I told Pop that that was what I wanted to play. I went to the Windham Street Model School and Windham High School. I started playing the saxophone in high school, and one of the first jobs I had playing was at a strip joint in Danielson. One of the players was Ted Haddad, and we played for a couple of dollars per night at Bill Sledjeski's Shell Chateau. Then I started playing with the Matty Mattison Orchestra in Willimantic. Lester Foster was a singer, and Bill Sledjeski's brother was a fine piano player with that band. There was also a girl singer called Evette, and she eventually married Lester. Matty was in the automobile business, and Tommy Provone, who had the Cadillac agency, also played in that band. There were 16 musicians, and we played more dance music than jazz. We played all over New England. We played down in Misquamicut in the old dance hall there, before the hurricane blew it down, and we played in Hartford at the Women's club.

I studied music in Willimantic with Charlie Wheeler, the local impresario who put on minstrel shows at the Gem Theater. When I was a kid I was a boy soprano singer, and did a radio show on WDRC and was known as the "Boy Soprano of Willimantic." I was in fifth or sixth grade, and my dad drove me over to Hartford to do the show, every other week. So I was singing before I started playing. Charlie Wheeler took an interest in me, and taught me how to play the saxophone. He lived on Pleasant Street, and was a highly schooled musician who had graduated from the Conservatory in Boston. He also ran a local orchestra. My voice changed when I was about 12 or 13, so then I concentrated on the saxophone."

Continued Next Week. Ray's life on the road with the Big Bands, a return to Willimantic in the 1950s to run the Rock Garden restaurant, and the opening of the music store in Manchester.