

Don LaRussa and His Appliance Store

Mel Montemerlo

If you lived in Windsor Locks in the 1940-1965 timeframe, you knew the **D. F. LaRussa** appliance store and its proprietor, Don LaRussa. Don was an entrepreneur who was blessed with a great personality and an amazing stroke of luck. He opened an electrical appliance store just as television was being introduced to the public. He was not just a businessman. He was president of the Rotary Club, president of the Chamber of Commerce, an active member of the Knights of Columbus, and he was very active in Little League baseball. He was also generous in helping the less fortunate.

From 1936 to 1937, Don was the manager of the Carlisle Hardware store in Windsor Locks. Later, he opened a Western Auto store at the corner of Oak St. and Main St., next to the A&P. In 1947, he replaced his Western Auto store by opening the "**D. F. LaRussa**" appliance store at the same location. Below is a photo of store.



**Don LaRussa's first appliance store. Dec.4, 1948.
Crowd awaits parade taking Santa to the store**

Televisions were brand new at the time, and the phenomena of TV caught on quickly. Don's business did very well selling televisions and appliances. Don was an excellent businessman. He knew how to get the public's attention. Shortly after opening his store, he came up with the idea of having Santa Claus fly into Windsor Locks by helicopter, and then having a parade take Santa to his store to distribute presents to the children.

The next photograph shows Don LaRussa on the left, with Fred Barberi as Santa, Dexter Coffin, Charles Kaman, Henry O'Leary and the Kaman helicopter.



Don LaRussa with Santa (Fred Barberi) and dignitaries, Dec.4,1948

Before landing at Windsor Locks High School, Santa and the helicopter stopped at the County Home in Warehouse Point, where each of the children was given a present by Santa. After flying in the helicopter to Windsor Locks High School, there was a parade which went to the D. J. LaRussa store on the corner of Oak and Main Streets. As you can see from first photograph, a large crowd was waiting

Don LaRussa's business thrived at its location at the corner of Oak and Main Streets, but Don wanted to expand his inventory and the types of items he carried. Always an innovator, Don's new store was the first store in the new Dexter Plaza. The next photograph was taken of the new store in the 1958 Christmas season in Dexter Plaza.



Don LaRussa's second store. Dexter Plaza, December 1958

Don was the first businessman to get involved with Dexter Plaza, which was the first Shopping Center in that entire area of the country. Shopping Centers were a new thing in the United States. Soon Shopping Centers would become a national phenomenon. But in the beginning, that was not obvious. Don's store thrived in Dexter Plaza, but he didn't stop there. He took control of a large retail space next to him. He subdivided the large area, and leased the smaller spaces to tenants which included Roth's Men's Wear, Connecticut Light and Power, Gicones Barber Shop, and Dr. Bacharach the dentist. This was a brilliant entrepreneurial move. It was not something that he learned from others. He was one of the first to do it.

Don LaRussa was a successful and visionary businessman and a civic minded community leader. Unfortunately, Don died much too early, at the age of 49 in 1964.



Don LaRussa

If you would like to read my other articles on the history of Windsor Locks, you can download them from my website:
windsorlockshistory.com