

D.F. LaRussa and His Appliance Store: A History

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March 19, 2016

If you lived in Windsor Locks in the 1940-1965 timeframe, you knew the **D.F. LaRussa** appliance store and its proprietor, Don LaRussa. Actually, his name was Dominick J. LaRussa, but, he went by the name of "Don". Don was an entrepreneur. He opened an appliance at a very opportune time - when 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.

He was born on April 25, 1915 to Anthony and Antonina (Saladino) LaRussa in Birmingham, Alabama. He had six brothers: Angelo, Joseph, Samuel, Philip, James and Thomas. He had two sisters: Mrs Joseph Scavatto and Mrs. Edward Ambrosini. In 1937, he married Dora DeCaro of Thompsonville. They had two sons, Anthony and Raymond.

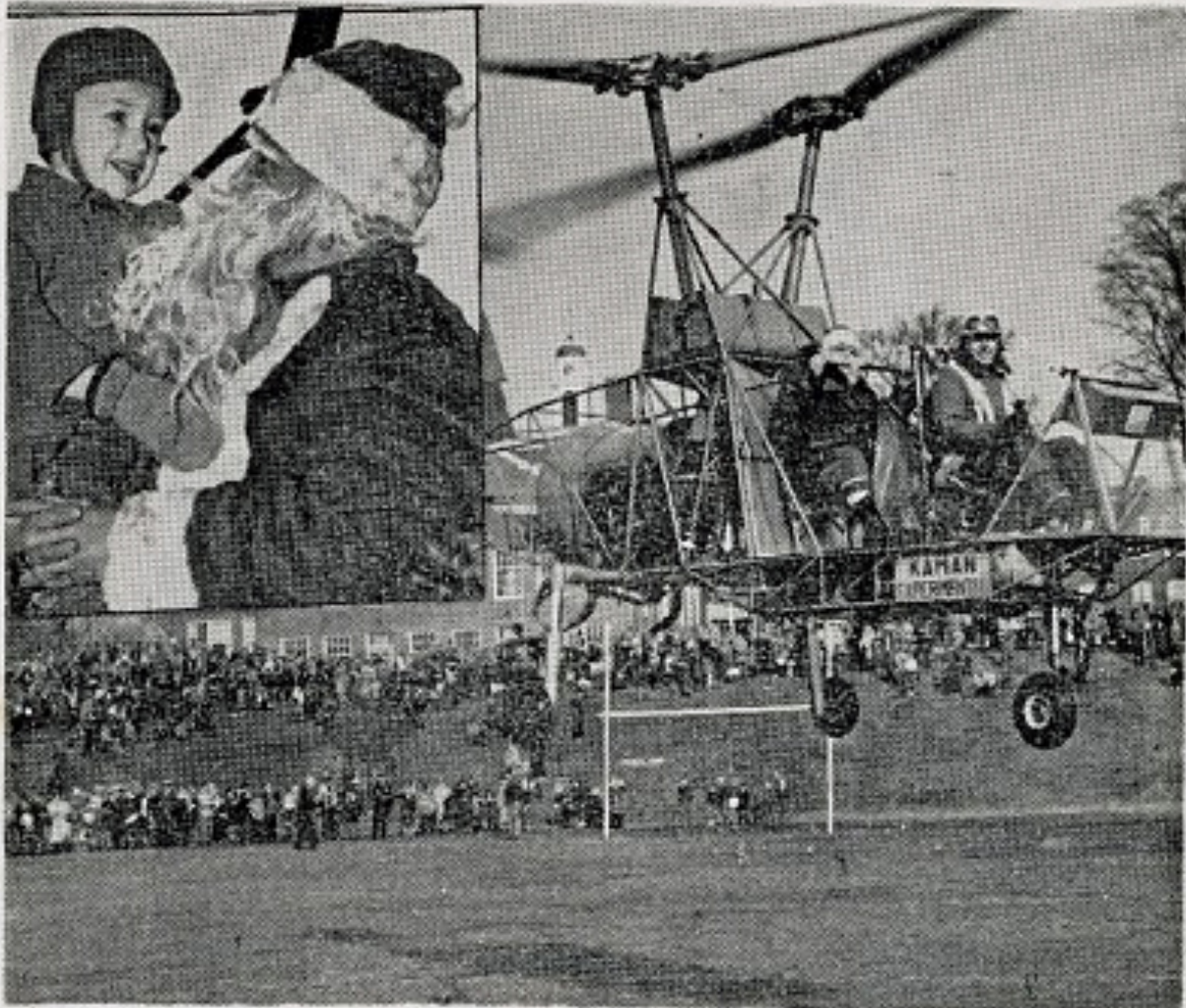
The First D.F.LaRussa Store

Right after they married, Don and his wife moved to Windsor Locks. 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



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 going by means of a parade, to his store to distribute presents to the children. The following Hartford Times article describes the event.

Santa Claus Rides High



HELICOPTER bearing Santa to Windsor Locks hovers over high school field. Pilot of Kaman ship is William R. Murray. Novel means of transporting St. Nick to town was conceived by D. F. LaRussa, owner of general store, but his son Anthony, 8, really did promoting. Mrs. LaRussa and other son, Raymond, 3, were also among 2,500 who greeted 'copter-minded visitor. Insert, upper left, shows Santa with one of his young welcomers.

Hartford Times, December 4, 1948

Santa Arrives By Helicopter

Special to The Hartford Times

Windsor Locks—About half the town's 5,000 inhabitants, including seemingly all its children, were at the high school field this morning to greet the first Santa ever to arrive in these parts by helicopter.

There to receive the red-frocked visitor officially were First Selectman Henry O'Leary, State Aeronautics Commissioner Dexter D. Coffin, Charles H. Kaman, president of the company which produced Santa's whirling-bladed conveyance, and D. F. LaRussa, the event's sponsor.

Reprinted from

The Hartford Times

of December 4, 1948

BEFORE SETTING the helicopter down, Pilot William R. Murray eased it sideways along the edge of the field so the crowd lining it could get a good look at the airborne St. Nick.

Among the first to reach the side of the craft were two mothers with snowsuited tykes in their arms. The children soon were in the arms of the helicopter's occupants, Murray taking one, Bill Jr., and the man from the North Pole the other. The latter turned out to be 2-year-old Eugene Barberi, son of Mr. and Mrs. Fred Barberi of Windsor Locks.

The gift-laden fellow with the pilot, Mrs. Barberi softly volunteered, was Master Eugene's "d-a-d-d-y."

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THERE WAS some snap in the air, so the 'copter riders both wore sheepskins. The red in Santa's face wasn't entirely the result of rouging.

The Warehouse Point Fife and Drum Corps led a parade that brought Santa to LaRussa's store, where there were presents for all the boys and girls who tagged along. A fire truck, an ambulance and a balloon vendor gave added color to the celebration.

The Hartford Times article points out that this was an important event. First Selectman Henry O'Leary participated, along with Charles Kaman, owner of the company which produced the helicopter, and Dexter Coffin, who was Connecticut's Aeronautics Commissioner.

The following article from the Dec. 2, 1948 Springfield Union provides details that the Hartford Times article left out. You will see that the helicopter first went to the County Home in Warehouse Point. Each of the children was given a present by Santa. After the helicopter flew to Windsor Locks and landed at the High School's field, there was a parade which went to the D.J. LaRussa store on the corner of Oak and Main Streets. It included the Warehouse Point Fife and Drum Corps.

Santa Claus Coming To Windsor Locks By Helicopter Saturday

Windsor Locks, Dec. 1—Everything is in readiness for Santa Claus' visit to Windsor Locks, via helicopter, Saturday morning at 9.30 at the high school field, when he will be greeted by the youngsters of the community as well as the officials and the Warehouse Point Fife and Drum Corps. After a program at the field, the drum corps will lead the parade to Don LaRussa's store on Main St. where Santa will be a guest for the day to meet the youngsters and present them with a gift.

Before his flying visit to Windsor Locks, Santa will land by helicopter at the Hartford County Home grounds in Warehouse Point at 8.30 and bring presents to the children there.

Springfield Union, Dec. 2, 1949

When the parade got to Don LaRussa's store, a large crowd had already formed, as can be seen in the following photograph. As they say, a good time was had by all.



Following are four photographs of the event, which the citizens of Windsor Locks will never forget. Fred Barberi played the role of Santa Claus.





Don LaRussa and Fred Barberi as Santa.

The next photo was taken in the “downstairs” of Don’s store. Don LaRussa is holding the box. Fred Barberi is Santa. The boy and girl are Peter and Patricia Samulrich.



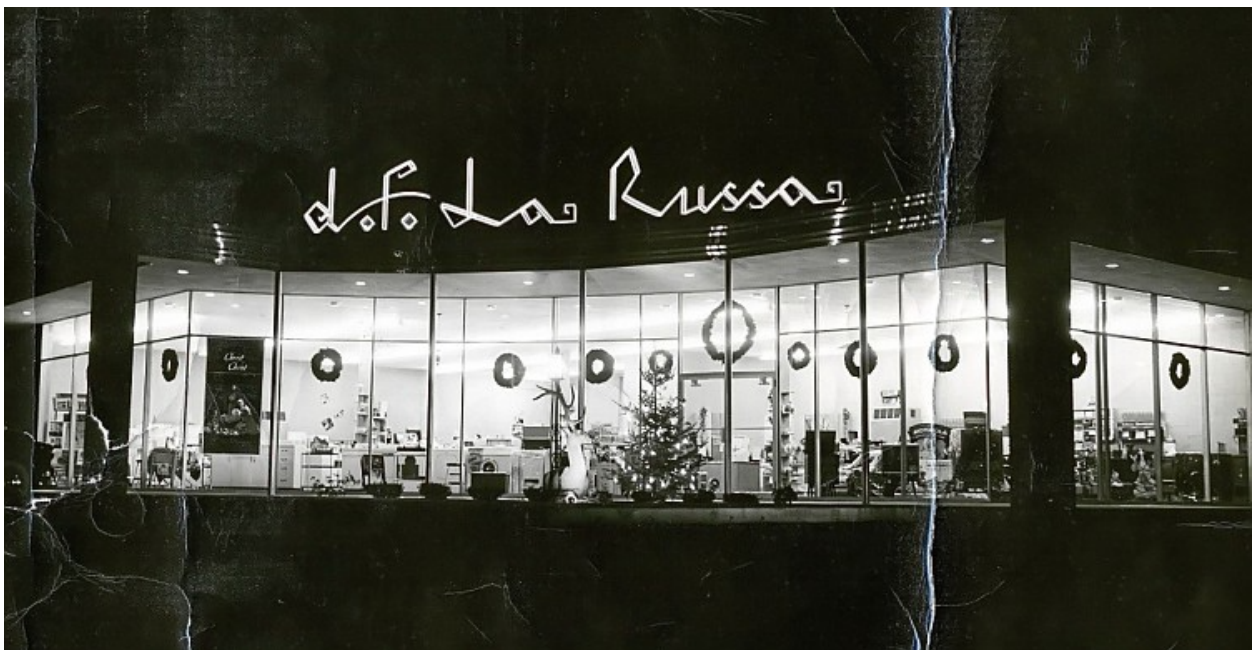
Looking at the above photos, you see that Don always wore a big smile.

The Second D.F. LaRussa Store

Don’s business thrived at it’s 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, which hadn’t yet been built. In the next photo, you can see the Ashmere Inn on the left, the new high school in the back, and the new **D.F.LaRussa** on the lower right. This was in 1958.



Below is a photo of this store during the 1958 Christmas season



Next is a photo of Don's son Ray with Santa and with Blondie the horse.



Here is the large outdoor advertisement from 1958, the store's inaugural year.



Following are two photos of the interior of the new store.



Since 1948 was the initial year of the **D.F.LaRussa** store, the 12th anniversary must have been about 1960. Below is the story of Don's 12th anniversary contest.



Clifford Pierce, a young gentlemen from the County home, is shown as he handed the winning ticket for the 17" table model Westinghouse Television to Dom LaRussa. The winner is Marion Briggs, 11 Bridge St., Warehouse Point. Clifford also drew the name of P. J. Nolan, 66 Spring St., Windsor Locks which entitles Mr. Nolan to a table model Westinghouse radio.

Drawing was held last week for a Westinghouse radio-phonograph and the name drawn by cute little Carol Islieb, also of the County Home, was C. Szymczyk, 14 Ahearn Ave., Windsor Locks.

The “Other” LaRussa store

Folks who lived in Windsor Locks remember another LaRussa appliance store in Windsor Locks, and there was another LaRussa store in Thompsonville. However, there was a difference in ownership. Don’s store could be identified by the sign “**D.F.LaRussa**”. The other store in Windsor Locks and the one in Thompsonville had signs that just said “**LaRussa**”.

The explanation is as follows. Don’s brother, Angelo, opened a TV and appliance store which he named “**LaRussa**” in Thompsonville. Later he opened another store with the same name, in the old F.S. Bidwell building on Main St. in Windsor Locks. Angelo’s store did not have the “D.F” in the name.

Following is a pair of ads is from the 1954 Yellow Pages. You can see the difference in the names, and you can see that Don’s store was still at the corner of Oak and Main Streets, by the fact that the address is 170 Main St.

<p>La Russa APPLIANCE STORE</p> <p>12 PEARL ST., THOMPSONVILLE</p>  <ul style="list-style-type: none">• ZENITH• PHILCO• WESTINGHOUSE• MOTOROLA• SYLVANIA• RCA <p>Expert Installing & Repairing</p> <p>TELEVISION SALES & SERVICE THOMPSONVILLE RIVERVIEW 5-5595</p>	<p>for TELEVISION in WINDSOR LOCKS Call D. F. LaRussa</p>  <p>SYLVANIA <i>and other popular makes</i> TEL. WINDSOR LOCKS NATIONAL 3-7365 SEE OUR COMPLETE DISPLAY at 170 MAIN ST. WINDSOR LOCKS</p>
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1954 Yellow Pages

Below is a photo of Angelo's store in the old F.S.Bidwell building. Look at the sign in the lower left of the photo says "LaRussa". The sign is easy to read when the photo is expanded on a computer screen. Angelo's store was two stores down from Wuzzy's (the Marconi Brother's Luncheonette.)



Don LaRussa's Other Roles

We have seen Don LaRussa's entrepreneurial prowess. Following are some newspaper articles which show Don's involvement and leadership in the Chamber of Commerce, in the Rotary Club, and in Little League baseball. The first two articles are about Rotary Club activities. He later became President of the Rotary Club.

The regular meeting of the Windsor **Locks** Rotary club will be held in the dining hall of St Mary's school Monday, luncheon to be served by the Catholic council at noon. The nominating committee has made the following selections for directors: Arthur G. Bissell, **Don** **LaRussa**, Clemence J. Clark, William W. Prout and Fred S. Bidwell. These directors will present a list of club officers who will take office on July 1.

Springfield Republican, Apr.8.1939

Here is another Rotary Club activity in which the Rotary Club takes the children from the County Home in Warehouse Point on a trip.

The Suffield and Windsor Locks Rotary Clubs will join forces again this year to take about 95 children from the State Receiving Home in Warehouse Point on the annual outing to Riverside Park and Shady Lake. Committee members from the two clubs are Suffield—H. Clyde Taylor, John D. Casson, Daniel F. Sullivan, Charles Pysz, president; Windsor Locks—Angelo Alfano, Herbert E. Russell, Don LaRussa, Henry Holcomb, Joseph Raccone, president. Plans include a police escorted ride from the Home to Riverside where the children will be given tickets for the various attractions. At 5 p. m. they will go to Shady Lake for a swim and a hot dog roast, returning home by dark.

Springfield Union, July 15, 1956

In the following article, we see Don's involvement with baseball for Windsor Locks youth.

Locks, Warehouse Point and Suffield Teams Will Participate

Windsor Locks, Conn., Jan. 29—The Windsor Locks Rotary Club will sponsor the Windsor Locks Little League, which promotes baseball activities of boys between 8 and 12. Includes the towns of Windsor Locks, Warehouse Point and Suffield, having four teams in the league. Two teams are from this town, as the Lions Club and the Windsor Locks Rotary will each sponsor a team.

The following committee from the three towns has been appointed to complete the arrangements: Warehouse Point, Scott Vinlug, John Shaughnessy and Albert W. Redway; Suffield, H. Clyde Taylor and Daniel Sullivan; Windsor Locks, Francis Coll, James L. Conley and Don F. LaRussa. The officers of the league are: President, Don LaRussa; vice-president, Francis K. Coll; secretary, Daniel Sullivan; treasurer, James L. Conley.

It is planned to have the baseball field at the public park grounds put in good condition and new uniforms and equipment will be purchased for the boys.

Springfield Union, January 30, 1950

Don LaRussa's Extraordinary Final Business Venture

Don was the first 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 Roths 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.

The Passing of Don LaRussa

Don LaRussa was a successful and visionary businessman, a civic minded community leader in the Rotary Club, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Knights of Columbus. We have seen his involvement with the County Home in Warehouse Point. He left his mark on Windsor Locks. He was a role model, a man to be emulated.



This is how we remember Don LaRussa.

Unfortunately, Don died much too early, at the age of 49. His obituary, which appeared in the Springfield Union on May 6, 1964, is below.

D. F. LaRussa Dies at 49

WINDSOR LOCKS, Conn. — **Dominick F. LaRussa**, 49, of 119 Elm St., died Monday night in Mercy Hospital, Springfield. He was the owner of D. **F. LaRussa** furniture and electrical appliance store in Dexter Plaza, and was active in many civic organizations.

Born in Birmingham, Ala., April 25, 1915, son of Anthony and Antoinena (Saladino) LaRussa, he spent his early years in Thompsonville.

From 1936 to 1937 he was manager of the Windsor Locks Carlisle Hardware store. After his marriage in 1937 to the former Dora DeCaro of Thompsonville, he moved to this town and opened his own electrical appli-

ance business on Main St. He later moved the business to Dexter Plaza and added a furniture line.

He was past president of Windsor Locks Rotary Club, past president of Windsor Locks Chamber of Commerce, a member of Riverside Council K. of C. and of St. Mary's Parish. He was also organizer of the Little League baseball in this town.

Besides his wife, he leaves: two sons Anthony J. and Raymond R., both of this town; six brothers, Angelo N., Joseph P., Samuel J., Philip P., and James J., all of Enfield, and Thomas N. of Springfield, Mass.; two sisters, Mrs. Joseph Seavatto and Mrs. Edward Ambrosini, both of Enfield, and two grandchildren. Funeral will be Friday at 8.30 at Thomas W. Johnson funeral home with a solemn requiem mass at 9 in St. Mary's Church.

Burial will be in St. Patrick's New Cemetery, Enfield. Calling hours are tonight from 7 to 9 and Thursday from 2 to 4 and 7 to 9.

Riverside Council K. of C. will meet at the council home Thursday at 7.30 to take action on his death and to name a delegation to attend the funeral service.

Springfield Union, May 6, 1964