

Dial 'R' for 'Radium'

The 'Radium Girls' didn't learn until it was too late that their work of was killing them

By Tracey O'Shaughnessy
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William Lamb's mother was a beautiful woman. Striking and slender, her wavy onyx hair and stunning complexion accentuated her Italianate features.

Lamb might have liked to have known what she thought of his own looks, but he didn't dare ask. Josephine Lamb went blind before she set eyes on her only child.

Josephine Lamb was a "Radium Girl," one of the hapless women the Waterbury Clock Company (now Timex) hired to paint the faces of watches at the beginning of the 20th century. The paint was laced with radium, then a new and exciting element discovered by Marie Curie at the turn of the 20th century. Women were hired to paint the watch faces with the greenish paint because of their small, delicate fingers. In the factory, they were encouraged to apply the paint, now known to be toxic, first by wetting the brush hairs on their lips.

Within a few years, women complained of dental pain, bone fractures and abscesses in their gums. Some would seek help from dentists only to find that their entire jaw had deteriorated and had to be excised. The women began dying of anemia and radium poisoning, which ate away at their jawbones.

Obituaries in the Waterbury American from the mid-1940s tell the stories of women like Margaret O'Brien, 39, and Edna Steberet, 35, who died of radium poisoning after working on the radium dials, usually for six cents a dial.

Honoring the Radium Girls

Lamb's mother didn't go so quickly. She was bedridden for 50 years with the effects of radium poisoning. Her son, William, who would eventually become a Waterbury police officer, ministered to his ailing mother virtually since the time he was born. His father couldn't take his wife's change in fortune. He deserted the family when William Lamb was 5. Josephine Lamb died in 1974 at the age of 79.

This week, the Judy Dworin Performance Ensemble will present "Hot Licks," a dance and video production that explores, and in a sense, memorializes the young women who worked in clock factories as dial painters for luminescent watches. The story of the ill-fated women is juxtaposed to that of Marie Curie, the only woman to ever win two Nobel Prizes, and a leading supporter of radium's salubrious effects. The Polish-born Curie died of aplastic anemia, which many believe was caused by radium poisoning.

"I'm interested in stories that haven't been told, giving voice to people who thought they were voiceless to reinsert into history women that in some measure have been overlooked," said Dworin. "I really saw these women as being truly innocent victims of a larger corporate structure that really enticed them to do something that was totally

unsafe, perhaps unknowingly, but, once knowing that there were ramifications, did virtually nothing to take precautions or to make sure that women stopped doing these things."

The performance, which runs Thursday through Saturday at Charter Oak Cultural Center explores "who these women were and what are the dances that they would have danced if they had lived," said Dworin, whose interviews with Lamb and Mae Keane, a former dial-painter, are included in the performance. "It was kind of their innocence and how they chose to take that into their lives until they realized that what they had put on their lips in playfulness was killing them."

Lamb, who has retired from the police force, traveled with his family to watch the production in rehearsal, an emotional experience for him, he said. "I kind of was brought to tears," he said. "I was a little emotional, as was my family, and the dancers, when they saw my reaction. I just couldn't believe that they could make a story about what little bit of knowledge there is of that situation. It certainly was moving."

Dworin learned of the radium girls after reading Claudia Clark's 1997 book, "Radium Girls: Women and Industrial Health Reform, 1910-1935." She had intended to construct a dance piece out of the dramatic story, a desire that accelerated after the death of one of her friends, Maureen McElhone, of Hartford, who died in 2002. Dworin was stunned to discover that McElhone had created a series of paintings inspired by the radium girls. "I never knew that we shared this interest," said Dworin. "It was only after her death, when we did this show in honor of her work, that I saw those pieces. When I looked at (McElhone's) sketchbooks it was almost like seeing the (dance) piece unfold on the page. I said, this is a sign that you have to do this piece."

McElhone's series "The Radium Girls" will be on display at the gallery at Charter Oak.

Radium Craze

The discovery of radium created a radium craze in the early 20th century. It was thought to be a miracle cure for diseases like stomach cancer, leading many victims to ingest radium-tinged water in the hopes of curing the disease. The women who painted

the luminous watch dials in Waterbury, like those in watch factories in Orange, N.J., even painted their nails and teeth with the substance to surprise their boyfriends, wrote Bill Kovarik in a 2002 text "Mass Media and Environmental Conflict." Kovarik wrote that some women thought it a bit strange that when they blew their noses, their handkerchiefs would glow in the dark.

By the mid-1920s and 30s, many who had been painting the watch dials were dying or degenerating. Radium paint was used from 1919 to 1927, when five former female workers of U.S. Radium sued the company, asking

three times weekly to tend to his mother.

Lamb's mother spoke little about her degenerative illness, a reticence Lamb believes was rooted in her fear that her medical benefits might be taken away. "I think they were afraid if they brought so much to the surface they might lose the little bit that was awarded to them" he says of women like his mother. "I just think they were under fear."

Deborah Goffe, videographer and sound designer, wove Dworin's two interviews together to create a story that accompanies a video that opens the piece, which is per-

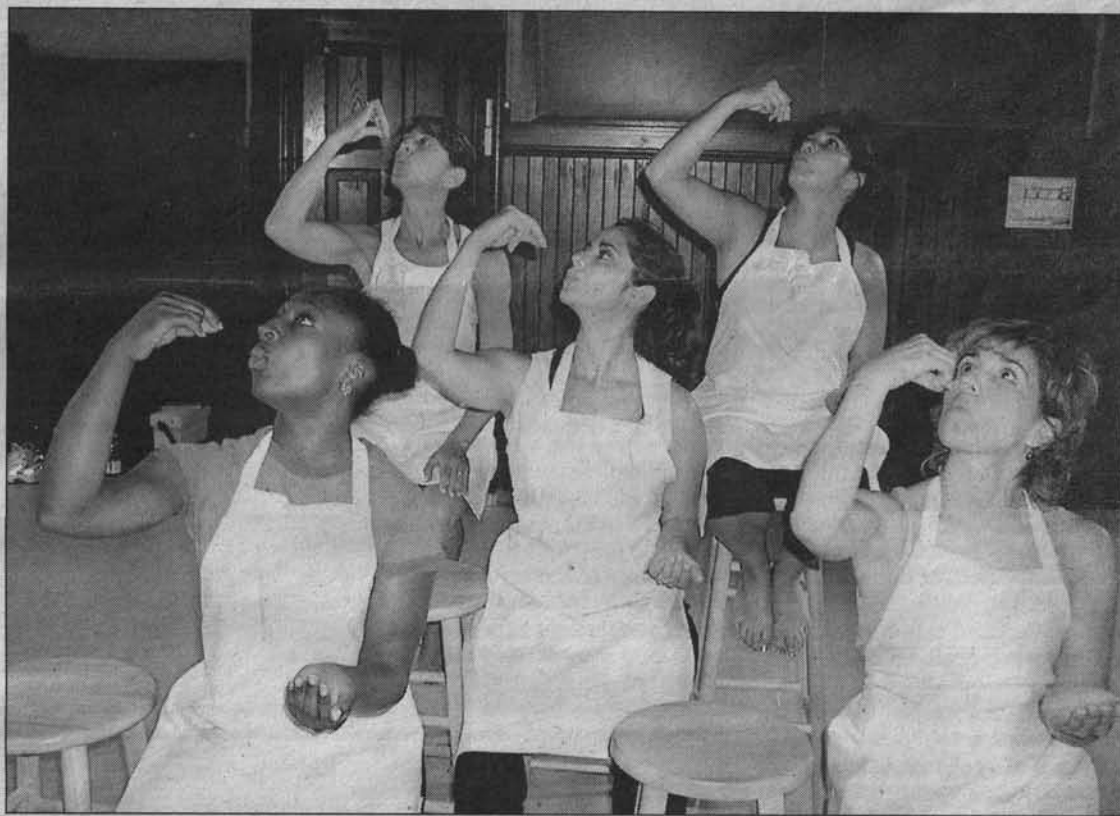


Photo courtesy of Jill Henderson

From right: Deborah Goffe, Kathy Bortek Gersten, Alexa Melonopoulos, Tracy Lombardo, Lisa Matias. Dworin fused workplace gestures with dance in 'Hot Licks.'

for \$250,000 in compensation for medical expenses and pain. One of the women's sisters, Amelia Maggia, had died in 1922, allegedly of syphilis. But when her bones were exhumed in the fall of 1927, they were found to be radioactive. By the time of the first court hearing, all five of the "radium girls" were dying, unable to raise their arms to take the oath in court.

Eventually, under pressure from media personalities like Walter Lippmann, U.S. Radium agreed to a \$10,000 settlement.

Lamb's mother was not so lucky. The Waterbury Clock Company never admitted guilt but paid Josephine Lamb's medical bills and half of her pay, which was \$8 a week. "I can remember those \$8 checks coming in weekly," said William Lamb, who added that doctors and dentists visited his home at least

formed with five dancers and two actors.

"When I talked to Bill and Mae I found the core of what I was looking for because Mae knew Bill's mother very well," said Dworin. "There were other family members of radium dial painters that I was going to interview but then I decided to focus on Mae and Josephine. I think it's important to see that something you saw in your own life that you thought no one would ever hear about is something that was universal. Somehow, there's this bond between all of these women."

"Hot Licks" will be performed with "Hometown Hits" at the Charter Oak Cultural Center, Hartford, Oct. 14, 15, and 16 at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$20 general and \$10 students and seniors. For details, call (860)249-1207.