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From book 3
Put Another Nickel In

Chapter 9

Sometime in 1905 Howard Wurlitzer wandered to a downtown Cincinnati cafe. There, confronting him, was a most unusual musical instrument — self-playing harp! Upon hearing it play Howard was impressed with its soft and melodious tones. It was just the thing to add to the Wurlitzer line!

Diligent inquiry revealed that J. W. Whitlock & Company of Rising Sun, Indiana (located about thirty-five miles distant) had made a few of these self-playing harps as an experiment and had put them on location in Cincinnati, the nearest large city.

The Rudolph Wurlitzer Company lost no time in contacting Whitlock. An agreement was made whereby Wurlitzer agreed to sell the harps on an exclusive basis. A contract for the purchase of one thousand harps was signed. On the strength of this contract J. W. Whitlock & Company constructed a new wooden factory building and set up production and manufacturing facilities.

The new machine was immediately re-introduced as the *Wurlitzer Harp*. One of the initial catalogue descriptions read:

THE WURLITZER HARP

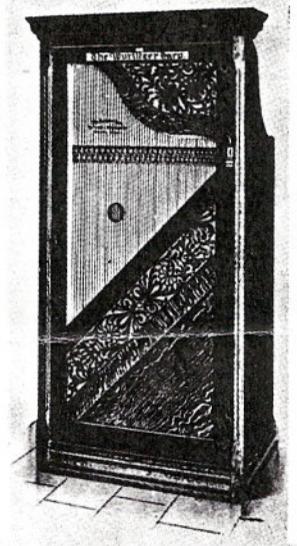
After nine years of constant labor, at great expense, we have succeeded in perfecting the *Wurlitzer Harp*, a most refined musical instrument for places where the piano cannot be used on account of its being too loud.

This beautiful instrument is conceded by everyone who has seen and heard it to be the most wonderful as well as the sweetest musical instrument ever produced.

The Harp contains sixty strings which are picked by automatic fingers (almost human in their operation), and produces a volume of soft, sweet music equal to several Italian Harps played by hand. The face of the instrument is covered by a large harp-shaped plate glass, showing the interior lit up by electric lights and the wonderful little fingers picking the strings. This feature gives the instrument an exceedingly attractive appearance...

As a money-maker in fine hotels, cafes, restaurants, cigar and drug stores the harp has proven itself to be the King of them all; its soft,

THE WURLITZER HARP



A Refined Musical Attraction, with Nickel-in-Slot Attachment and Operated by Electricity

Style A Wurlitzer Automatic Harp.

sweet music making it exceptionally popular in places where other instruments would be too loud.

- Price including motor and 1 roll of music . . . \$750.00
- Extra rolls containing six selections, each . . . \$6.00

One or two years later a new type of Wurlitzer *Automatic Harp* appeared, the *Style B*. Unlike the regular *Style A* model which was rectangular in outline, the *Style B* had the profile of a real harp. At the time of its introduction the *Style B* was offered for \$600.00 which was \$100.00 more than the then-current retail price (\$500.00) for the *Style A*. Only a few of the *Style B* machines were ever made.

During the years from about 1905 to 1915 additional orders for two or three thousand harps were placed with Whitlock. These re-orders plus the original order for one thousand placed the total number made at three to four thousand.

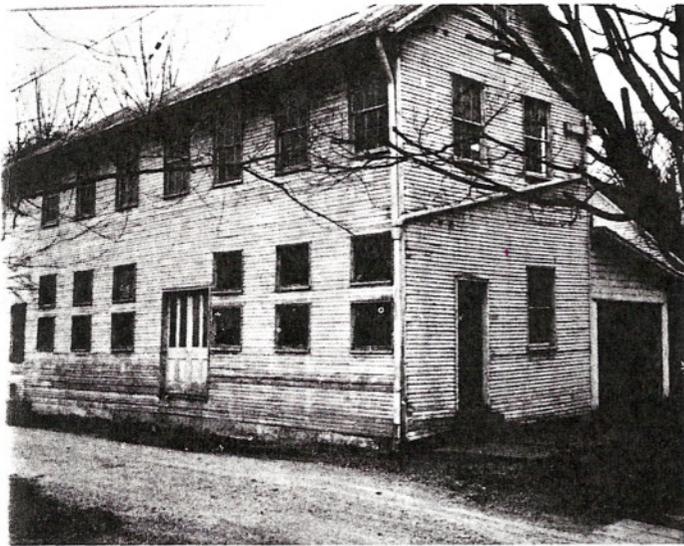
Demand for the *Automatic Harp* dwindled as the novelty wore off. The retail price was reduced from \$750.00 to \$650.00, then to \$500.00 and then, in 1916, to \$375.00. Shortly thereafter the *Automatic Harp* was dropped from the Wurlitzer line. A few years later the sale of rolls (also made by Whitlock) for the machines was discontinued also.

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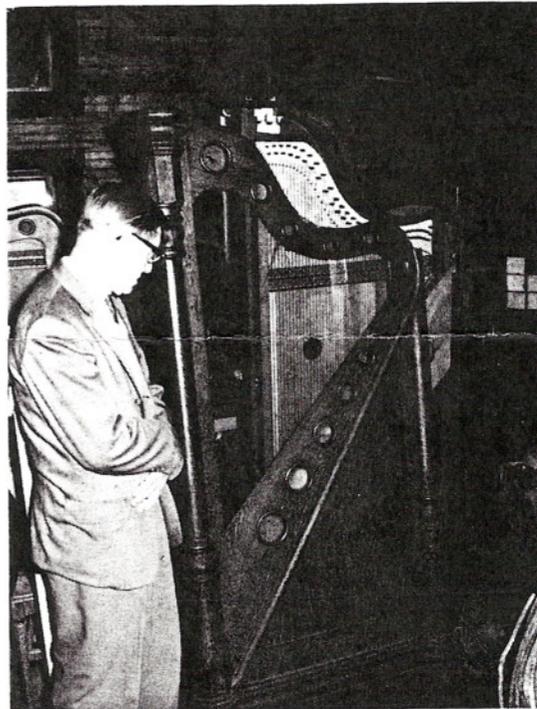
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The original J. W. Whitlock factory as it stands today in Rising Sun, Indiana. In this factory the first Automatic Harps were built.



Stewart Whitlock, son of J. W. Whitlock, examines a style B Automatic Harp, one of three Harps (a Style A and two Style B machines) he sold the author in 1965. The Harps were in "mint" condition and had been stored on the Whitlock premises since their manufacture over half-century ago. A few rolls and spare parts were also acquired — all that remained from the once-extensive Harp manufacturing facility.



This larger factory also stands today in Rising Sun. This factory was built in order to provide facilities to fill Wurlitzer's order for one thousand Harps. (see text, page 185).

THE J. W. WHITLOCK COMPANY

Rising Sun, Indiana is a pleasant little community located on the west bank of the Ohio River about thirty-five miles downstream from Cincinnati, Ohio. The author travelled there in 1965 and talked with Stewart Whitlock and his sister, both of whom had many recollections of the days of the Automatic Harp.

After a year or so of experimenting J. W. Whitlock patented the Automatic Harp in 1899. In 1905 an agreement was signed with the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company of Cincinnati whereby Wurlitzer agreed to buy one thousand machines. A new building was built to provide the space to manufacture these. On the second floor of the new building the rolls for the Automatic Harp were produced. The rolls were arranged by two women (one of them Mrs. J. W. Whitlock) who marked and edited pieces of sheet music and then played the tunes on a recording device which cut a master roll. The roll perforator then made copies from the masters. In later years the perforating machinery was sold for scrap metal.

After the original order for one thousand Harps was filled Wurlitzer ordered an additional thousand. Demand for the Harps waned and the total number produced from a second order was only five hundred or so machines. (This account as given from the recollections of Mr. Stewart Whitlock differs from Mr. Farny Wurlitzer's recollections of orders for 3 or 4 thousand Harps).

Following his success with the Automatic Harp J. W. Whitlock experimented with a violin-playing machine. A prototype which used bowing discs (similar to the Mills Violano-Virtuoso) was produced, but the device was not successful.

In later years the J. W. Whitlock Company engaged in a number of other ventures including the manufacture of radios, race-horse amusement machines and other items. Today the J. W. Whitlock Company is active in the boat and furniture business.

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