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## Western Electric: 'This was Silicon Valley'

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**Editor's note:** The Western Electric-Lucent Technologies-Agere Systems presentation is the ninth in an occasional series on the major industries, the people and the legacies for which Berks County is known. The rest of the series and the publication dates were The Berkshire, Aug. 27; Reading Brewing Co., Oct. 8; Gilbert Associates, Nov. 5; Pomeroy's and Whitner's, Dec. 10; early Reading TV broadcasting, Jan. 21; Luden's, Feb. 11; Birdsboro Steel, March 18; and the Reading Railroad, April 15.

No one remembers exactly how it happened, or who made the first move. But it went something like this.

Western Electric had a plant in Allentown that was involved in the design and making of a new electronic component called the transistor, which the U.S. government increasingly needed for communications, radar systems and early computers.

Western and the government were looking for a site that would manufacture components exclusively for government needs.



*Courtesy of Milton Embree*

**Western Electric employed great numbers of women in jobs that required manual dexterity. As time went on, many also moved up into the ranks of management.**



*Courtesy of Chuck Russo/Mattlin Photographics*

**Operators manufacture components in a clean room at the Reading Works in 1986. The special suits and the filtration of air kept dust particles from contaminating the products.**

It so happened that at the same time, business and government leaders in Berks County were looking for new manufacturing to fill the vacuum left by textile mills which were closing throughout the county and moving southward.

Sidney D. Kline Jr., past chairman of the law firm of Stevens and Lee, said his father, who had been president of Greater Berks Development Fund, and Thomas Cadmus, head of the Reading-Berks Chamber of Commerce, as it then was called, were among the leading figures in the drive to bring new business to Berks County.



*Photo courtesy of Earl Haas*

**Earl Haas works on production of transistors in a vacuum jar at Western Electric in this 1957 photo.**

"Our industrial base was beginning to change," Kline said. "The impetus was to bring industry to Berks County."

The corporation's and the community's needs converged at the Rosedale Knitting Mills, a women's hosiery operation that had been founded in 1914 in a warren of prosaic brick buildings tucked away in a quiet, residential enclave of Laureldale.

Western Electric took a five-year lease on the property and opened its plant there on Aug. 22, 1952. By the end of the year, it employed 130 workers, then doubled that number within a year.

By the end of the decade, Western Electric - along with its successors, the Reading Works of AT&T Technologies, Lucent Technologies and Agere Systems - mushroomed into one of the county's largest, best-paying and most prestigious employers.

Part of that prestige accrued to the 1958 addition of a Bell Laboratories branch at the Laureldale site. Bell Labs, henceforth part of the local operation, was the design arm of AT&T and Western its manufacturing operation.

Western moved in 1962 into a new modern plant on North 11th Street in Muhlenberg Township which was built by Greater Berks Development Fund and purchased by Western two years later. Greater Berks President Edward J. Swoyer Jr. said the plant remains by far the largest project the fund ever has undertaken. The Laureldale facility closed in the late '60s.

At about the same time it moved into the new plant, Western transitioned away from government contracting and into communications products for the Bell System - products which were made under ever more exacting and specialized conditions.

Many workers, especially in the early days, were drawn from the local textile industries, where the work also required great manual dexterity.

Many of these were women, and Western Electric was foremost among area employers whose work force

included a large female component. The organization also fostered a climate of tolerance as an equal-opportunity employer.

Pay was good, both for production workers who in some cases hadn't had the benefit of higher education, and for employees in the more skilled and technical areas, such as Bell Labs, where master's degrees and doctorates were not uncommon.

In some cases, employees acknowledged there could be a disconnect on exactly what the high-tech gizmos they were making would be used for.



*Courtesy of Chuck Russo/Mattlin Photographics*

**The Muhlenberg Township plant of Lucent Technologies in 1998.**

"It's kind of like making a valve stem and conceptualizing a car," explained Karl E. Luckhart of Exeter Township, a 25-year employee who retired as a maintenance technician. In some cases, employees acknowledged there could be a disconnect on exactly what the high-tech gizmos they were making would be used for.

"It's kind of like making a valve stem and conceptualizing a car," explained Karl E. Luckhart of Exeter Township, a 25-year employee who retired as a maintenance technician.

The purity of materials used in production and the avoidance of flaws were maintained throughout production, in some instances involving clean rooms - environments exceeding even hospital standards, in which air was filtered to reduce dust and workers had to wear special outfits.

Utmost caution also was taken with the handling of such toxic ingredients as gallium arsenide.

"One bottle had enough to kill the city of Reading," said Elem E. "Skip" Freeman Jr. of Robeson Township, an 18-year employee who retired as a maintenance technician.

Something of a self-contained city, the plant had its own fire department and, of course, security, a cafeteria, its own water-treatment system - to supply highly purified water for production requirements. The plant was highly socialized. Events such as picnics and family days were regularly held, and workers further organized events on their own time.

The number of these workers, which waxed and waned according to customer demand, hit a peak of 4,900 in 1984. That, by comparison, is a range in which Berks County's top employers today, Reading Hospital and East Penn Manufacturing Co., only very recently have topped.

With a sad symmetry of sorts, it all ended almost exactly 50 years after it began, with the decommissioning of the Agere plant in May 2002.

There are various opinions on why it closed, often with strong feelings attached to them, but on one thing there is no disagreement: the pride in the work that was done there.

Lewis E. Miller of Wyomissing, who was among the small contingent of Allentown Bell Labs employees who started up the Reading branch, put it most succinctly.

"We were making transistors here before Silicon Valley started," he said. "This was Silicon Valley."