

The Story of CeCo and Triad

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Old Timers Bulletin, December 1980, vol.21 no.3, pp. 12-13

CeCo was one of the many radio-tube makers that sprung up like mushrooms in the late 1920s, but unlike most, it did not originate in Newark. Instead, it was the creation of three Providence, Rhode Island men who had formerly manufactures electric lamps: George Colby, William Cepek, and Ely Egnatoff. Coby, the president, may have financed the venture; Cepek and Egnatoff had recently emigrated from Poland. The C. e. Mfg. Co. took its name from these three partners.

Their first ad was in the August 1925 Radio News, for a series of three standard tubes using letter designations instead of the usual numbers; later their line was expanded to include many more types. A was a 201A, B a 99, C a 99 in a large UV base, D a rectifier (L-S, a gaseous rectifier), E a 20, f A 12, g A 40, H an 01a detector, J a 71, K an 01A for RF use, M a 26, N a 27, and so on until the letters were dropped. In addition to the standard types, CeCo also made a number of unusual tubes; they were among the first to make an AC version of the 22 screen-grid tetrode, before RCA announced their 24. In January 1930 they made the first RF pentode, an unusual design with a "space-charge" grid between the cathode and the control grid of a normal 24A (not a suppressor grid as in most pentodes). Later they made still more varieties of Pentodes, which saw very limited use in manufactured radios, possibly only the Norden-Hauk LX-5 from mid-1930.

The three partners, who at first knew nothing about tube manufacturing hired Ernest Kauer as their chief engineer. Kauer made excellent tubes, and CeCo's reputation and sales grew rapidly. In June 1925 Kauer bought out the three partners, changing the company name to CeCo Mfg. Co., and expanded production still more. By mid-1930 CeCo had made 10 million tubes, was producing them at a rate of 4 million per year, and had a 3 1/2- acre plant employing 1000 workers.

Meanwhile, by the terms of the sales agreement, the three Polish partners were not to make vacuum tubes for at least one year. They moved across the river in Pawtucket and manufactures Triad pens, which were triangular and wouldn't toll off the desk. Apparently the lure of radio was too strong, for in June 1929 Triad announced a new line of standard radio tubes, in distinctive triangular cartons. These were immediately successful, and Triad remained in business at least until 1938.

By 1931 Ernie Kauer was restless; he had become something of a big wheel in Providence and was anxious to enter politics. He sold CeCo to Abraham Pletman, founder of Lafayette Radio, and Leonard Welling, holder of the lucrative Majestic franchise in New York.

The depression had reduced business drastically, and the two new owners decided in early 1932 to move the plant to France, where conditions were better. As foreigners were not allowed to own French manufacturing companies, they put the CeCo company in the name of their French lawyer, who promptly ran up the Jolly Roger, booted out Pletman and Welling, and took the entire company for his own. Pletman spent the next nine years in an asylum recovering from a mental breakdown, but eventually returned to reclaim Lafayette and to run it successfully until his death in 1973.

References: interviews with James Millan, interview of a CeCo engineer by Lauren Peckham, and ads in Radio Retailing, Radio News, and Electronics.