

Connecting the dots...

(First in a series of **LARKIN HISTORY**)

Larkin, Wright and Roycroft

The privately-owned Larkin Center of Commerce, a 1.3 million square foot commercial building located in the Larkinville district of Buffalo, was acquired by the current owners in 2010. It was once the manufacturing complex of the Larkin Soap Company. John D. Larkin established the then small soap company in 1875. As it grew over the years, the original manufacturing building was supplemented by the addition of eleven more adjoining buildings, around which eventually an external 'skin' was wrapped, creating one massive structure.



Executives of the company included, in addition to John D. Larkin, Darwin Martin, William Heath, Walter Davidson and Elbert Hubbard. By 1903 a separate building was needed to house the administrative offices, including the staff that was responsible for the huge mail-order business that had been created through the marketing genius of Hubbard. Frank Lloyd Wright was retained in 1903 to design the Larkin Administration Building, which was completed in 1906. Innovative in terms of style, function and decor, the building was the first to provide an 'air conditioning' system by enclosing fresh air ducts within the massive columns which supported the building and gave it the appearance of strength and stability, reflecting the image of the company itself. A large central area, called the light court because it was lit by a skylight six floors up, was to be used by typists, and was surrounded by three floors of balconies overlooking the ground floor. File card boxes built into the walls of each of the balcony's wall to house the mail orders, all arranged in a geographical system. The building contained amenities to make the employees more comfortable, including a conservatory at the sixth floor level containing an array of leafy green plants. An organ was installed there, as well. Concerts and

lectures were provided for staff. Both exterior and interior sculpture decorated the piers and walls. Walls were engraved with inscriptions extolling the work ethic and spirituality. A retaining wall with huge piers at each of its four corners surrounded the building, adding to the sense of stability and strength. Tragically, by 1943, because of the depression years, and poor management after John Larkin's sons took over, the Larkin Soap Company (by then renamed the Larkin Co. Inc) liquidated its assets and became extinct. The Administration Building ended up in the hands of the city because of unpaid taxes, and it was demolished in 1950. All that remains of it today is part of the west retaining wall running from Seneca Street to Swan Street and the massive brick pier at its end of Swan Street.



However, while FLW was working on the Administration Building, Martin, Heath and Davidson commissioned Wright to design their homes. Later Martin and his wife hired him to design a lakeside summer home in Derby, known as Graycliff. In more recent years previously unbuilt designs by FLW have been realized in Buffalo: the FLW Fontana Boathouse, originally designed for a college in Madison, Wisconsin, the Blue Sky Mausoleum, originally designed for the Martin family, and a gas station located inside the Buffalo Transportation Museum. Originally designed for a project that Heath was working on.

Hubbard left the Larkin Soap Company in 1893 after nearly twenty years of contributing to the success of the company through such marketing initiatives as the mail-order sales, larkin clubs throughout the country, catalogs, a premium program and creative slogans such as 'Factory to Family'. Having been influenced greatly by the cultural life

and spiritualism he had come to know through marketing visits to the Chautauqua Institute, he moved himself and his wife, Bertha (Heath's wife's sister). to East Aurora where he founded the Roycroft Movement and Campus. He used many of the marketing technics he had seen or had created at the LSC, such as pamphlets, inspirational inscriptions and promoting a sense of community among the 'staff', namely artisans who became associated with the movement and produced many products of leather (including book bindings), copper and wood. Premiums given away at LSC such as oak furniture made by subsidiary of LSC, were remanifested in much fine Roycroft furniture. Dishes designed for use at Hubbard's Roycroft Inn were purchased from LSC's subsidiary created in 1901, Buffalo Pottery. The name, 'Roycroft', became known internationally and was considered synonymous with the American Arts and Crafts movement.

In a very real way, the Larkin Soap Company was the heart and soul of the Buffalo area Arts and Crafts movement and led Buffalo's becoming a centerpiece of significant examples of the architecture of America's greatest architect, Frank Lloyd Wright.



~ From the Desk of Sharon Osgood