

LARKIN HISTORY (#30) - JOHN D. LARKIN, JR.: A Mystery Unraveled

When I first considered writing about John D. Larkin, Jr. (hereinafter, "Jr."), I anticipated being highly critical of him. You know, wealthy, privileged kid who was sent to the finest private schools but screwed up and got ousted; travelled the world with his family; was handed employment and partial ownership of one of the most successful businesses in Buffalo, only to claim to be too unwell to show up at work and finally dragged the company to failure.

That is not the story that emerged after hours of research including conferring with several family members.

Jr. was the third child born to John D. Larkin (JDL) and Frances, (called "Frank" by family and friends). Charles was born in 1875, followed by Frances (called "Daisy") in 1876. Jr. arrived in 1877, followed by Edith in 1879; Harry, in 1881; Hubbard in 1887 (died at 3 months of age), and finally Ruth in 1891. This was a close, happy family. Despite JDL's responsibilities at his ever-growing business, he left his office most days at about 5:00 p.m. to go home to be with his wife and children.

He loved playing with the children and taking them for carriage rides, a favorite destination being Delaware Park. It is not surprising that a number of years later, JDL purchased a large parcel of land adjoining the park where he built a cluster of mansions for, by then, all his grown children and their families, as well as his own beautiful home on the corner of Lincoln Parkway and Forest Avenue. He named the parcel, "Larkland."



The family belonged to several Baptist churches, according to JDL's biographer/grandson, Daniel Larkin ("Dan"). The family enjoyed attending services as well as socials, concerts, festivals, art exhibits and theater. They were big users and supporters of the public library.

To round out the pleasant life style of this family, JDL and a group of his fellow businessmen, in 1882, purchased beach front property close to the present location of where Larkin Co. executive, Darwin Martin, would years later build his Frank Lloyd

Wright-designed summer home called "Graycliff." JDL and his friends subdivided the land into lots where beach homes would be built, but initially the families camped out in tents overlooking the beach. They called this place "Idlewood."

Usually children were accompanied by adults, often a nurse, to play by the lake. But on Sunday, August 16, 1885, Jr., then 7, almost 8, years of age, was with sister, Edith, age 6, were playing without adult supervision down by the lake. After a while, the two decided to build a fire. Edith, clad in a frilly dress, got too close and her skirt caught fire. One can only imagine the horrifying scene. Edith, undoubtedly screaming in pain and terror, began running up the beach toward the camp where the adults were. Young Jr., joined by another little boy, managed to tackle Edith and dragged her back to the lake where they doused the flames.

Edith was horribly burned. Back in 1885 there was no way to summon help. A message was somehow sent to Frank's brother and fellow owner of an interest in the Larkin Soap Co. (LCO), Elbert Hubbard, in East Aurora. By the time he got to Idlewood the next morning, Edith had died. One can only imagine the desperate effort of Edith's parents to treat and comfort her through that 24 hours, as well as all the concern of the other Idlewood families trying to assist and show compassion. What of Jr. during all of this? There is no record, but one can well imagine that he felt responsible, terrified, confused and helpless to assist in any way.

Did he carry with him the rest of his years, the sounds of Edith's screams, the sight of her dress falling apart in burning embers and ashes, the horror of seeing her burnt arms and face? No matter how reassuring his parents might have been, could he erase the sounds, smells and sights, including the desperate effort to save her that day and night, from his mind? In those days there would have been no counseling or other expertise to help Jr. deal with the emotional trauma.

Jr.'s mother never could make herself return to Idlewood, according to Dan. JDL only attended board meetings of the owners. Jr. must have been conscious of his parents' anguish. Without being accused (we don't know if he ever was), did Jr. nonetheless perceive his parents' pain as a silent accusation?

Two years later Frank was again pregnant. Would there be hope that a new baby would help soften the wounds? Unfortunately, that hope was dashed when baby Hubbard, born on July 11, 1887, died just before becoming three months old. How did Jr. react? And his parents? There is no record to inform us.

There is nothing in what is known about the family to suggest any overt behavior towards Jr. that would have made him suffer guilt. Likely, they made phenomenal effort to go on like normal, leaving Jr. alone with whatever scars may have remained.

Dan does tell us, however, that when Jr. was 16, he was sent by his parents to join Charlie at St. John's Military School in Manlius, N.Y. in the Fall, 1893. By December, both boys were apparently misbehaving, so JDL withdrew both of the boys from St. John's in Jan. 1894. His parents then again tried to get Jr. into a good private school, enrolling him in Cazenovia Seminary in Cazenovia, NY. He lasted there till November 1895 when JDL sent a letter to the headmaster that unless Jr made good progress, he would have to come home to go to work. Dan notes that JDL and Frank "had agreed that it would be better for the boy to be at home 'where we can look after him every day.'" Was this adolescent 'boyfulness' or did JDL's behavior reflect deeper issues?

Dan tells us that by Jan. 1896, Jr. attended his first LCO shareholders' meeting. He also began attending school at Lafayette College for two terms in 1896-97, at which point he ceased his formal education and began working full time in one of the chemistry labs at LCO in 1898. For JDL, the failure at school was of no great disappointment to him because, more than anything, he wanted his sons with him in the business.

One reported incident that suggests weakness in Jr. occurred in 1901 in the aftermath of Pres. McKinley's assassination. The funeral cortege had moved slowly down Delaware Ave. through the throngs of grieving citizens. Afterwards, Frank wrote to son Harry at college that "Jr. had stood in line for two hours and then was so tired and faint that he gave up – but Uncle Will (William Heath) and the Coss boys (other shareholders and officers of LCO) had no difficulty." (Dan, p. 120)



By Howard Beach, courtesy of Alexandra Stocker

So now that Jr. was employed by his father, he found himself trying to learn how to be a good businessman in a huge, successful manufacturing and marketing complex. It is doubtful he walked in the door as a capable, confident executive. Where his father would be most patient and tolerant about any missteps, there was Darwin Martin (DDM) and, later, William Heath (WH) with whom this young, inexperienced man had to contend. Early on after his sons joined the company, JDL proposed a 2% dividend to be paid to shareholders, but the proposal was voted down by DDM and the Coss brothers. JDL was quite alarmed by this incident, fearing that his company could be lost to nonfamily members. Even though he cared a great deal for DDM, JDL reacted by appointing his sons, Jr., Charlie and Harry to the board, thereby securing family control. The result, however, also created tensions between the two sides.

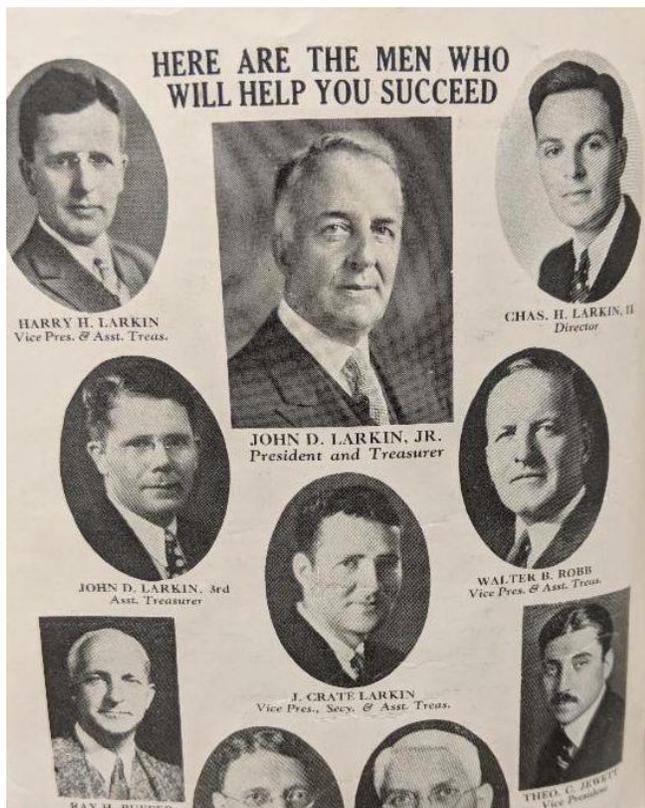
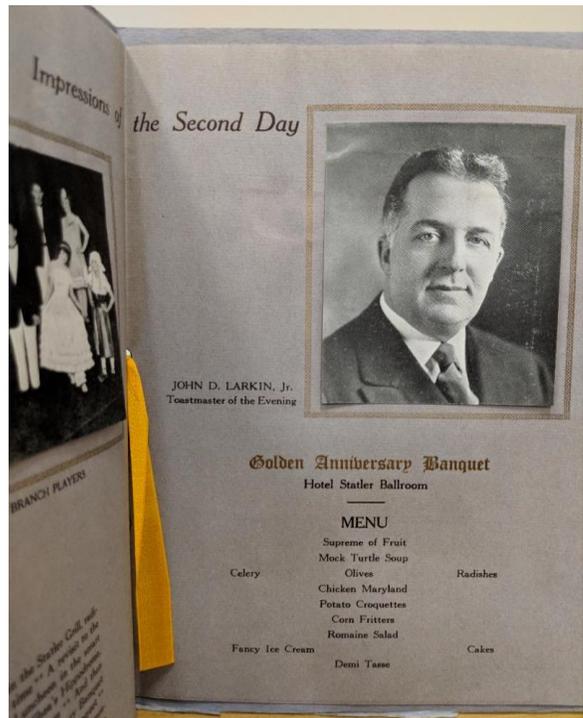
It became worse when Charlie decided, in 1919, to leave the company and move to California where he would pursue literary and philosophical endeavors. It was at this time that JDL brought his brother-in-law, WH, who was an attorney living in Chicago, as well as two sons-in-law, Harold Esty (married to Frances "Daisy" Larkin) and Walter Robb (married to Ruth Larkin).

In the years between 1919 and 1925 the tensions between family and "outsiders," intensified. A proposal for a cooperative ownership plan where employees could purchase stock and thereby have a stake in the LCo's success had been supported by the directors, both nonfamily and family. Articles by the directors were published in the company newsletter, "Ourselves", enthusiastically promoting the concept. However, employees feared loss of pay increases and the directors began to fear managers gaining too much power. The plan was never implemented with, oddly enough, Jr. supporting the plan and DDM opposing it.

With Charlie now in California and out of the company, Jr. likely often felt overpowered by DDM and WH, who, though part of the family, typically agreed with DDM. Jr. had been given increased power by his father, but typically avoided serious business decisions, preferring the more social types of activities. He loved playing host to the Travel Parties which LCo arranged as prizes for high selling Larkin Secretaries (the ladies

throughout the U. S. who hosted "Clubs of Ten" in their homes to sell products from the Larkin catalogs thereby also earning premiums based on amount of sales.) Jr. presided over the banquets which welcomed the winning Secretaries from all over the country. His concentrating on activities for the Secretaries rather than with other management issues, including decisions about manufacturing and other marketing ideas perhaps was Jr's. way of dealing with feelings of inadequacies that he might have felt in the shadow of DDM and WH.

Dan speculates that JDL was aware of the tensions between DDM and WH on one side, and Jr., Harry and JDL's sons-in-law, who he had also brought in to the company, but chose to minimize the tension. He loved them all.



But by June 24, 1925, in the midst of the festivities celebrating the 50th anniversary of LCo, WH had a major falling out with Jr. and resigned from the company. Marge Quinlan, a local historian, in her book, "Rescue of a Landmark," notes that DDM left LCo in 1925, also, after a heated argument with Jr. Other key employees soon followed suit.

After JDL's death in February 1926, Jr. became President. He began making changes with no evidence that they were needed, but rather perhaps showing a naïve conviction that any change was good. For instance, the mailing department which was the core of the mail order business, was renamed the "Buying Dept." and changed offices with the soap manufacturing dept. The Engineering Dept. was moved from the manufacturing complex (now the LCO), to the Administration Building.

To the scathing rebuke by Frank Lloyd Wright, windows, at Jr.'s insistence, were cut into the fifth-floor walls of the Administration Building. "They never realized the place their building took in the thought of the world – for they never hesitated to make senseless changes in it after years. To them it was just one of their factory buildings – to be treated like any other," said FLW in his "Autobiography." Then he took one more jab at the Larkin family: "In architecture they were still the pall bearers for the remains of Thomas Jefferson and subsequently built colonial houses for themselves in Buffalo." (p. 152)



The business itself, though still maintaining the Clubs of Ten and the catalog and premiums mail order programs, succumbed to the new wave of marketing. Clearly the middle man, so despised by JDL, had been invited back in.

I had assumed this was all the doing of Jr., who seemed to be madly flailing at the arms of a spinning windmill. Chain and department stores and other retail outlets were becoming the rage across the country. On the one hand, Jr. has historically been frequently criticized for doing too little to adopt to change. But what changes he did make were decried because they were – well – changes.

But in re-reading material, I found that the roots of these changes were not planted by Jr. at all, but by his father!

There is a wonderful Univ. of Buffalo Masters Degree thesis dated February 1932, written by Mildred B. Schlei entitled "The Larkin Company, a History." It is a thorough piece of research, including interviews with Jr. and other officers and department heads of LCo. Schlei describes the mail order and Clubs of Ten marketing strategy conceived by Elbert Hubbard when he was still with the company. But she also notes that a showroom of products had been located as early as 1918 in our building in the corner by Seneca and Van Rensselaer - the very area now occupied by, among other tenants, the Larkin Gallery. The showroom quickly morphed into a retail store and by 1925 it had become a department store. Other Larkin retail and department stores opened around the country, some more successful than others. By 1923, LCo was opening specialty household shops, selling curtains, linens and household accessories. All this while JDL was alive and making the decisions.



(One fascinating marketing strategy that Jr. did initiate was rather startling. After Elbert Hubbard had done away with the door-to-door sales of soap in the mid 1880's, replacing it at that time with the mail order concept, Jr. initiated a door-to-door sales program in 1933. An elaborate Manual was written to instruct sales men on how to set their routes, what products to be carried in their cases, how to demonstrate them to their customers. This program is not mentioned in any of the literature I have seen, so I suspect it was a strategy quickly abandoned.)

It appears that Jr.'s mistake was an inability to let go of what his father had created as our country plunged into the Great Depression of the 1930's. Marge Quinlan suggests that, among other signs of rigidity, he was determined to maintain a large, diversified premium catalog that could not be sustained without incurring a lot of corporate debt. A relative, who preferred not to be identified, advised me that "Jr. was resolute in his determination that the employees deserved his loyalty, just as they had given the family theirs over the years. This was the focus of management discord outside the family. The company would have carried on longer with a more 'modern' philosophy."

As a result, Jr. did not alter the diversity of product being manufactured, nor did he significantly reduce the number of employees. He followed in his father's footsteps, having neither the experience nor the confidence to venture in a new direction. By 1938, obviously overwhelmed, Jr. ceased going into his office. His brother, Harry, came to Jr.'s home every evening to confer with him. There is no record as to how effective this arrangement was. In 1939, Jr. resigned as President of LCo. and a year later, he resigned as a director.

Brother Harry succeeded Jr, with brother Charles (now back from California) and sisters, Frances (Daisey) Esty and Ruth Robb as well as Jr. and Jr.'s son, Crate, serving as Directors.

It is not known what malady afflicted Jr. that caused him to retreat from the business world. It is known that he became quite involved with studying the mystic readings of

Gurdjieff and was a generous donor to her work (as was FLW's wife, Oglivanna). One can speculate that Jr., likely having never developed confidence about himself, was still searching for the meaning of his life.

The last straw for Jr. that may have compelled him to so deeply withdraw may well have been an event that occurred in late Sept. 1939. His grandson, Allen "Lanny" Kellogg, age 5 and son of Jr.'s daughter, Mary Frances Larkin Kellogg, burned to death while playing with matches in bed. It would have been a horrifying, tragic event in itself, but it is likely it evoked agonizing flashbacks to Edith's death and reignited emotions of terror, guilt and inadequacy to save her.

This incident was described in a letter shared with me by Jerry Puma, longtime Larkin collector and co-administrator of the Larkin Gallery. Willem Nyland, an employee in the chemistry dept. at LCo. had apparently sent a letter to Jr. and when he did not respond right away, he sent a letter to Jr's son, Crate Larkin, inquiring about Jr. Crate replied, explaining the horrific death of this child, saying that his father was "profoundly affected." He mentioned also that Jr.'s son, John Larkin III's wife was in the hospital with toxemia so severe that she was likely to lose the baby. She was 6 ½ months along in her pregnancy. Crate concluded by adding, "I know you understand how these things would affect him." (Apparently the baby was lost, because, Jerry advised me, another child, Anne, was born later and was an only child.) PHOTO 7.

It is likely that the decision to resign the directorship occurred soon after this event. Jr. lived a few more years, dying on April 2, 1945 of nephrotic hypertension at the age of 67.

So, I conclude now that Jr. was a far different person than I imagined. He probably never was able to feel totally secure about his parents' feelings toward him after Edith's death, though it was very clear that they loved him and gave him every opportunity, ex. education, position and ultimately President, of a very important business, and a home in 'Larkland.' He probably perceived DDM as a threat and was insecure about his own lack of experience and skills in running the company.

He focused on his father's business and personnel choices to a fault when unable to adapt to coping with the Depression and make cutbacks in expenses. Jr. remained very loyal to the employees, failing to cut back on the numbers and steadfastly clinging to the benefit program offered them. He lacked a clear vision of his own and the experience to make sound business judgments. Jr. was a hardworking, honest man who was insecure and in over his head.

I believe Jr. did the best he could in an economy in which the most capable management would have failed.

The unnamed family source provided his own epitaph which I quote: "I hasten to clarify that while John Jr. was perhaps ... focused more on internal thoughts, feelings and moods rather than seeking out notice and recognition, I do believe him to have been an inordinately sensitive man, highly evolved, who prized the Larkin Company's employees and the company's welfare practices. He championed the struggle to maintain the workforce and their unique benefits throughout the great depression and ultimately, he had to give up the fight. This was a great hardship and sorrow for him, consuming the end of his days."

- From the Desk of Sharon Osgood