

LARKIN HISTORY (#31) - The Larkin Companies: Cleanliness is next to Healthiness

We have seen in prior articles the concern that John Larkin, Sr. (JDL) had about safety and cleanliness in the physical structures of both the Larkin Soap Co. (LCO) and Buffalo Pottery. From 1875, city inspectors conducted favorable inspections, commenting on not only the facilities, but also the good treatment of the employees and of employee morale.

From the outset, visitors were welcomed to tour the companies, which they did by the thousands every year. The thousands of visitors who came to the Pan-American Exposition in 1901 specifically to see the Larkin exhibition hall were given passes and



shuttle service to follow up with a guided tour of the manufacturing complex (what we now know as the Larkin Center of Commerce). In 1919 King Albert and Queen Elizabeth, monarchs from Belgium, visited the factory complex (i.e. the LCO building) as well. They were effusive in their response to the seeing the manufacturing processes, the cleanliness of the facilities and the happiness of the employees.

The NYS Dept. of Labor inspection of the facilities in 1903 resulted in praise of not only what they saw, but what they heard from employees. They were quite impressed with the employee rest rooms, professionally staffed medical facilities and clean and ample dining areas. Of particular note was the presence and organization of a coffee break for employees. The report quoted one employee who enthused, "It is a grand, good thing...one of the nice features about our factory."

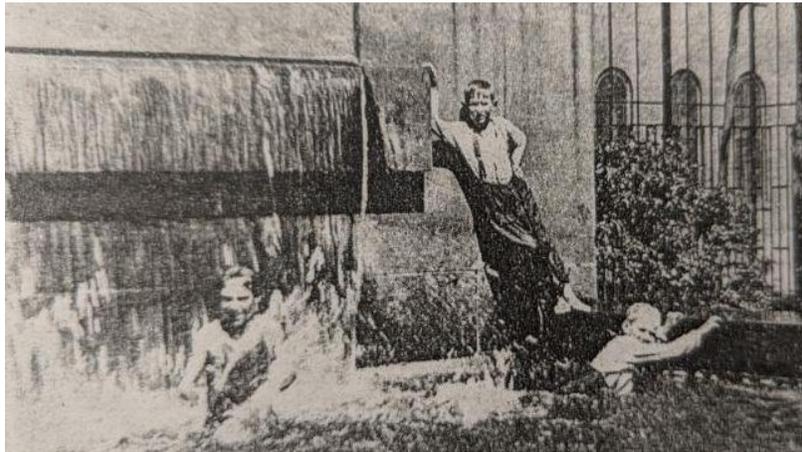


The National Ass'n. of Corporation Training, in Vol. I of its Annual Proceedings (1/24/1913) published an article by the LCO Director of Committee on Safety, Dr. Lucy Kenner. Kenner described the staff comprised of three physicians, a dentist and three nurses, all of whom worked full-time on the premises. "This dept. exists to engender a feeling of security among the employees

– to make them feel that they are working under the best conditions possible, that their physical welfare is cared for, that in case of illness or accident, immediate care will be given. This helps to make a contented, productive, efficient body of workers.”

Dr. Kenner described the daily inspections related to safety, sanitation, heat, light and ventilation to “assure sanitary conditions in our plant – in our restaurants, workshops, lockers, washrooms and shower baths.” Drinking fountains provided filtered, cooled water, telephone mouthpieces were disinfected, office air is filtered free of outside impurities. Uniforms worn in the paint shop and dusty places like the spice, coffee and upholstery departments were laundered frequently. Employees were urged to use the LCO’s showers and electric hair dryers. “The people who handle food products wear clean uniforms and caps and are examined from time to time to ascertain physical conditions, whether or not there is a skin eruption, and as to personal cleanliness.”

A hint of this commitment is lightheartedly reflected in a photo in the 9/15/1916 issue of the “Ourselves,” the newsletter by and for Larkin employees. Three young boys are shown splashing in the fountain by the front door of the Administration Building. It is captioned, “Cleanliness is Next to Godliness.”



So, with this background of JDL’s commitment to the cleanliness and healthiness of the work environment and employees, we will examine the emphasis of these attributes in LCO’s manufacture of food, medicinal preparations and personal care products. But first, a quick look at the state of law addressing these issues. It becomes quite clear that LCO’s philosophy was to provide only clean, pure, unadulterated products for its customers long before the first federal statute was enacted in 1913.

“The Food Chronology” by James Trager (1995) provides an excellent overview. It appears that England was the earliest country to impose legal statutes addressing adulteration of food. In 1860 a law was passed, after three people died of copper arsenic poisoning after consuming at a banquet, buns dyed with a yellow substance. (This was the same year that Louis Pasteur developed the process of sterilization of milk to prevent milk-borne diseases, but it took another 50 years before that process was commercially accepted.) The British law was amended in 1872, but, like the earlier law, it only required disclosure to consumers of noxious ingredients. For instance, it was required to disclose on packaging the addition of chicory to coffee to increase its weight.

In 1875 it became illegal in England to make any adulteration that was injurious to health. A penalty of a heavy fine was imposed for a first offense and a subsequent conviction could result in imprisonment. However, the law was not strictly enforced. By 1891 if an English butcher was caught a second time selling meat unfit for human consumption, he could be required to put up a sign in his shop disclosing the record.

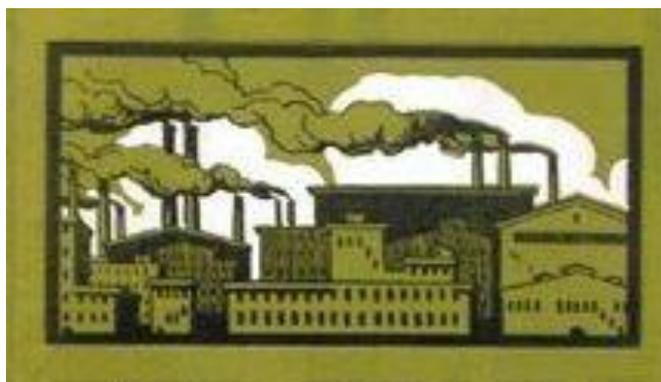
The first statutory controls in the U.S. occurred in a couple of states including New York in 1881 but were largely ignored. Ten years later it was reported that, for example,

merchants continued to sell with impunity, 'deviled ham' that was actually minced tripe dyed red. Adulterated ground pepper was abundant, so much so that customers often found pure pepper shockingly sharp! Though the U.S. Congress had enacted legislation requiring disclosure of the country of origin, Maine herring, for example, was frequently sold as an expensive French import.

By 1881 Congress had created a Committee to study the problem, expressing its concern that adulteration of food and medicine was a fraud on the consumer and injurious to health. In 1883 the federal Dept. of Agriculture created a Division of Chemistry, which was informally referred to as the 'Poison Squad.'

But passing federal laws was difficult. A bill introduced in 1889 failed, after being ridiculed by Congressmen. A law passed in 1891 which required the producer to disclose the true nature of a product, was still largely ignored.

It took extremely shocking events to get government to take these issues seriously. More U.S. soldiers died in the 1898 Spanish American War from food poisoning (i.e. eating embalmed beef) than from battle wounds. Even after Upton Sinclair's explosive 1905 publication of "The Jungle," which included such scandals as goat meat being sold as lamb and mutton, sausages made which included ground up rats which had been killed from eating poisoned bread and lard sold containing the remains of employees who fell into boiling vats, there was still resistance to enacting effective legislation.



The Jungle, Upton Sinclair

President Theodore Roosevelt (TR) refused, in 1906, to sign a bill passed by Congress dealing with food adulteration, complaining that the duty of Congress was not to tell people what they should and should not eat and drink. He did, however, allow the funding of a meat inspection program. By 1907 the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Bureau of Chemistry, issued guidelines leading to a statute limiting the use of sulfuric acid in the preparation of dried fruits. TR, however, ignoring the opinion of the administration experts, suspended the law and appointed a group of five scientists to test a select group of men to each eat 28 pounds of dried fruit within a 30 day period. The 'study' concluded that there was no problem found except for a few allergic symptoms. The proposed remedy was disclosure on labels of the presence of sulfuric acid in the dried fruit.

A more effective statute was finally passed in which product safety standards were tightened by the federal government in 1913, but only after 36 people became ill of which 23 died from botulism in canned food. It was not till 1921 that milk pasteurization became a statutory requirement.

So where was LCO amidst all this inactivity? Before any federal law existed and only the NYS law dealing with labeling governed, LCO began making and marketing food products in addition to the body care products it had been making since 1875. Right from the beginning, the purity of soaps and laundry products had been touted in marketing. One such ad, run in "Woman's Home Companion," for example, features a drawing of a



beautiful lady at her sink, holding a bar of soap gracefully in her hand. The ad reads, "For the most delicate Skin" – 'Tis her right to be proud of her exquisite complexion! And she keeps it so by using regularly a pure toilet soap. Her favorite Larkin Toilet Soap has taught her that 'purity first', the watchword of the Larkin laboratories, safeguards the most delicate skin." (A treasure trove of early magazine Larkin advertising was recently contributed to the gallery by Sylvia Kleindienst). McCall's Magazine's ad promoted Larkin laundry products,

which were pure and safe even for babies' clothes. Another ad featured Maid of the Mist floating bath soap, which "meets every requirement for a pure, mild all 'round toilet soap."



Seven laboratories were scattered throughout the manufacturing complex to serve a number of departments. Ingredients for making personal care items, foods and medicinal products were carefully examined for quality and purity. The finished products were sampled and tested to assure that the consumer would not only love the product, but would not, in any way, be hurt by it.

According to the Vol. II, No 19 issue of the employee's newsletter, "Ourselves", published in 1922, the food department at LCO was created in 1904 and placed in the charge of P. G. Harlow, who had had extensive experience in the coffee, tea and spice business. The first food product created was coffee, in 1905. Beans from South America were inspected, sorted, blended and cleaned under Harlow's knowing eyes. They were then roasted in one of four coffee roasters. By 1912 another four roasters were added. That year, 608,000 pounds of coffee were produced! Tea was imported from the Orient or from other select importers, carefully inspected and sorted with particular attention to the health and freshness of the leaves.



Harlow's expertise in spices led to rapid development of their production. He purchased only whole spices which he put through the spice grinder three times to assure a fine, pure grind. No additives were permitted, which had been a huge issue with other spice purveyors.

Chocolate pudding powder, introduced in 1906, became a resounding success. Initially producing 5000 boxes monthly, the demand quickly grew to 100,000 per month. Small dishes of this treat were served to each of the many tourists and Larkin Secretaries (the ladies who ran the "Clubs of Ten" throughout the country to sell Larkin products) who visited and toured the company. Other flavored puddings quickly were added to the offerings.

The Food Dept. began making peanut butter in 1909, using only the best varieties of peanuts, which were roasted and ground. It was so popular that LCO had to enlarge the inventory of its equipment three times.

1910 saw the addition of macaroni and noodles. Its success resulted in more study of the manufacturing process leading to improvement in equipment and methods. King Albert and Queen Elizabeth of Belgium were particularly fascinated in 1919 when they visited the company. (How did they make the holes in the macaroni?)



A product susceptible to adulteration elsewhere, baking soda, was a particular success. The formula for making it was developed in one of LCO's labs.

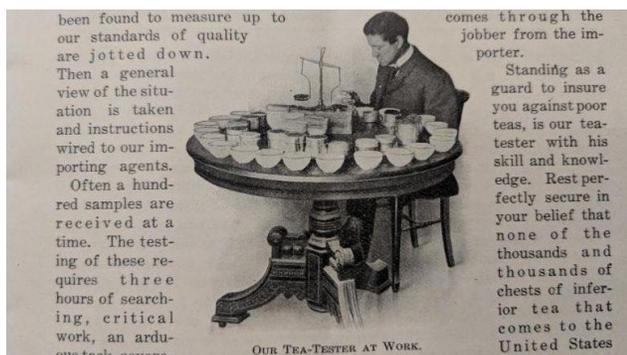
Other products like roasted cereals, cocoa, gelatin, cornstarch, pie fillings, prepared mustard and even ice cream powder, were developed in the labs and added to the merchandise catalogs. The Food Department used over six floors in what is now our building.

JDL's pride in the quality and purity of its food, medicinal and personal care products reflects the passion for cleanliness and healthiness that he exhibited towards the company environment and its employees. He was proud of his company's achievements in this regard, and it is reflected in the marketing. It is also significant to note that the Food Dept. and its products were well underway before the first of any effective federal legislation (i.e. 1913).

In addition to the aforementioned early magazine advertising, LCO published much of its own promotional literature. A pamphlet dated 1900, "The Larkin Idea," (not to be confused with the publication by the same name that was developed to educate Larkin Secretaries about Larkin products) extolled LCO's soaps, pointing out, "Our soaps contain no free alkali and all excess of moisture is perfectly abstracted... which insures full fragrance until they wear to a wafer. They have nothing in common with the alleged toilet soaps sold today - which are imperfectly made from inferior materials by incapable men, who allow them to contain hurtful free alkali." Re: laundry soap, it noted, "It is pleasant for the hands and cannot possibly injure the finest fabric."

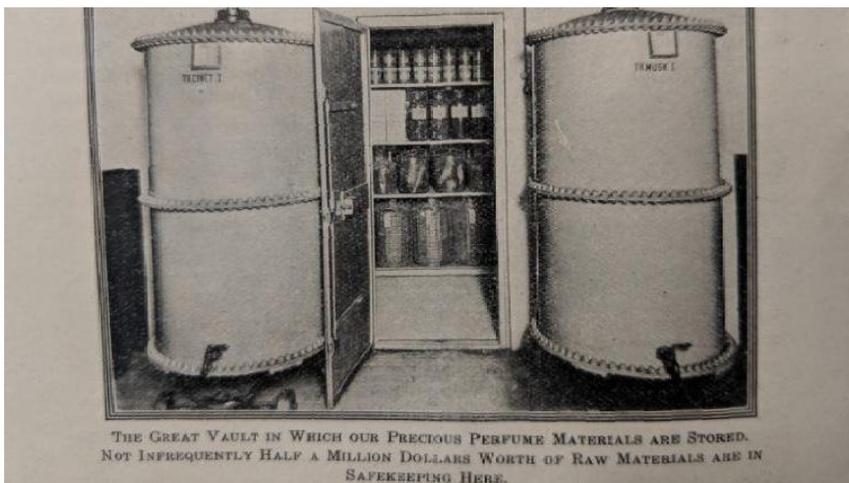
Food products were often described in the "Larkin Idea" publications so that the Secretaries had detailed information to assist them in promoting products. For instance, the March 1906 issue criticized the 'modern' use of such substances as coal-tar for food colorings, and of injurious preservatives as practices that are "not especially beneficial or creditable to man." Food should be pure and contain the maximum of nutritive qualities and should be clean."

The Sept. 1906 issue of "The Larkin Idea" has an interesting article about Larkin Baking Powder." Describing the three ingredients necessary to make baking powder and the careful process required to keep it from becoming contaminated by ammonia and fluorides, the article points out the necessity of using more expensive ingredients and a slow, careful process to keep the product pure, unadulterated and dry. To assure purity, periodic testing is performed during the process.



The same issue describes the necessity of testing teas beginning with sample of lots arriving at the harbor in N.Y.C. Inspection of shipments occurs at the dock to assure that no nefarious objects are mixed in like "twigs, stems and old leaves that have been spoiled in curing or that have lost their aroma by standing unsold for months in warehouses", the tea is then tasted by an expert under very controlled circumstances before being accepted to become a Larkin product.

Sources of the wonderful fragrance of flowers, herbs and woods from all over the world are described in the 1906 Christmas edition of "Larkin Idea". Extraction of the plant's aroma through natural means leads to the distinct but delicate fragrances embraced in perfumes, talcums, sachets and creams included in the Larkin product inventory. The article includes a photo of the vault where blocks of lard-like, wax-like and alcohol-based distillate imbued with the concentrated aromas are kept to mature before being extracted to use in the manufacture of the products. The caption states that "not infrequently, a half million dollars of raw material are kept" in the vault.



Because of these fine ingredients and meticulous processes, the article concludes, "The industry is not a science, but an art, in which success depends upon the exercise of a creative imagination carefully tempered with good taste. The great perfumer is a musician in odors." (To this day, if the glass display case containing these products in the Larkin Gallery is opened just a crack and one inserts one's nose, one is amazed at the floral, pleasant bouquet of smell emanating from these nearly 100 year-old products.)

The same issue of "The Larkin Idea" advertised Larkin egg noodles. "Pure and palatable. Made of eggs, specially milled wheat and a little salt – nothing else, no coloring or adulterating of any kind."

The challenges of procuring the highest quality spices are also described in that issue of "The Larkin Idea". Cloves are imported from Zanzibar, cinnamon from Saigon, ginger from Jamaica, etc. – the best sources for each in the world. The article concludes, "Of these spices and all others on our spice list, LCO feels justly proud, because in these days of adulteration, spices are almost always treated with adulterating substances. The labor and care needed to maintain our established standard are great, but not too great for LCO to undertake, that they may give to their friends strong and absolutely pure products." Speaking specifically of cinnamon, an article in a 1908 issue pointed out that the flavor and aroma of Larkin's reminds people of old memories of it, before producers began to grind up all manner of impurities to mix in with just a small portion of the spice.

Just a week ago, I was inventorying some Larkin products donated to the Larkin Gallery. It included a box of ground cloves, that had been previously opened. I lifted the flap and was immediately treated to the sweet aroma of what seemed like fresh ground clove. It was at least 100 years old!

An encounter with a spice grinding machine salesman was described in the June 1906 issue. Visiting LCO for the first time, he was surprised upon learning the quality of LCO spices. He said, "There isn't another house in the country grinding that grade of goods." He added that he had just recently booked orders for a dozen mills to reduce sawdust to a powder to be used in adulterating mustard, cinnamon and other spices.

The article then discussed an exhibition that had been held dealing with adulteration of food. A group of dogs were fed food containing apparently high amounts of food coloring. They lost weight and flesh till the SPCA stepped in and removed the dogs from the demonstration. Also exhibited was a large pile of beautiful, white shredded coconut. A sign warned people not to eat it because it had been confiscated from a Philadelphia firm intending to place it on the market. It had been contaminated by sulfites. The author lamented that "fraud in the manufacture and sale of food-stuffs is rampant... despite state laws, and products are permitted in this country that make us a scandal among all civilized nations". He advocated a strong national pure food law, like the then pending Heyburn Bill banning adulteration of any food, drugs, medicine or liquor. The bill had passed the House but was still pending in the Senate, but the author doubted it would succeed, noting the many previous failed attempts at such legislation. He concluded that the only reassurance that he could give was that Larkin customers had the company's guarantee that every food product offered to customers was pure and safe. "WE KNOW IT" he exclaimed. "Our skilled chemists protect us in the purchase of materials. Every morsel of food-stuff sent by us to our customers will be found absolutely pure." The author's prediction, however, came true. The Heyburn bill did not pass. It would not be until 1913 that effective federal law became a reality.

- From the Desk of Sharon Osgood