

LARKIN HISTORY (#35) - SUMMERTIME AT THE LARKIN SOAP COMPANY

It was spring, 1916. Buffalo began to crawl from under the pile of smoke and ash coated snow cocoons. Trees began to display light green-yellow lacey leaves.

Though the manufacture of about 900 products at the Larkin Soap Cp., (LSC) continued as enthusiastically as it had that winter, the footsteps of its over 4000 employees were lighter and their eyes emitted a glimmer of expectation of cheerier days arriving soon.

That spring had begun with sadness because of the death of a well-respected and well-liked employee, Edgar M. Birdsall, who had worked up till two weeks prior to his death at age 78. He had been an usher in the beautiful Frank Lloyd Wright designed Administration Building since it had first opened in 1907.

Birdsall's obituary, published on the first page of the June 15, 1916 issue of the Larkin employee's newsletter, "Ourselves", included the following accolade:

"In the nine years of his employment here we have all learned to admire Mr. Birdsall's delightful character and personality, his bravery and cheerfulness, his dignity and his unfailing kindness and courtesy. His consideration for businessmen calling on buyers and others in the building, and the kindly way in which he greeted them, won him a host of friends in business circles in and out of Buffalo."

This fondness for a fellow employee was typical of the work force of LSC as would be evidenced over the next several years as obituary after obituary was published for fellow employees who had left the warmth and affections of not only their homes and families, but of their co-workers, as they went off to fight in World War I, or who died of other causes. The affection shown at sad times was even more evident in the ability of the employees to enjoy each other in their company-sponsored social and sporting events.

In May, 1916 the employees were able to tuck away their sadness about Mr. Birdsall as they prepared for a major event, a pageant celebrating the "Industry" of manufacturing which they named "The New Vision: A Masque of Modern Industry." Every bit of this major performance had been created by employees: the concept of visualizing the birth and rise of industry, its fall into disorganization as a result of "Ignorance" and its rebirth to become the servant of the people under the influence of "Inspiration." While an experienced producer from Buffalo, Hazel

Our Boys At The Front

Below we are proud to give you the names of our associates who have responded to their country's call and are now with their regiments either at mobilization camps or some point on the border. We hope to be able during their absence to publish a number of interesting letters and articles from them which we are sure will give us all a higher appreciation of the soldier's life and the sacrifices which must of necessity be made in order to uphold the dignity of the Stars and Stripes.

	FACTORY	Regiment
Captain	E. S. Pilcher	74th
Corporal	O. Dobbins	74th
	Wm. Power	74th
Private	A. Rogers	74th
"	C. Stolberg	74th
"	D. Ward	74th
"	W. Mover	74th
"	H. Ashdown	74th
"	J. Miklas	74th
"	A. Covey	74th
"	J. Horch	74th
"	J. Cornell	74th
"	R. Melhorn	74th
"	G. Sands	74th
"	A. Clause	74th
"	N. Green	74th
"	P. Schnitzspahn	74th
OFFICE		
	Allan B. Sutcliffe	
	John Boechat	
	Frederic V. Kendall	
	Oral Horton H. Heath	

MackKaye, guided them, about 1000 employees acted, danced, sang, played an instrument in the 60 piece orchestra, designed and built sets and moved props and structures from LSC to and from the site of the performance LSC Art Director, Alex Levy, went to N.Y.C. to select some costumes and he designed the rest of them himself, which were then sewed by employees. Scenic sets were also designed by and built by LSC employees. LSC engineers surveyed and mapped the stage and seating area, built the bleachers and some of the props including a working giant "kettle" which spewed steam. Characters included personifications of concepts like "Disorder," "Sloth," "Greed", "Ambition," "Imagination," "Research," "Science," "Cooperation." A section of the pageant saluted LSC – manufactured products with actors representing 22 countries which contributed to the making of LSC products. (See "Ourselves", Vol. 9, No. 22, June 15, 1916 and No. 23, July 15, 1916 as well as the description of the event in Daniel Larkin's biography of "John D. Larkin: A Business Pioneer."



The Pageant would be the culminating event of a weeklong presentation of entertainment held on a sloping lawn adjoining Rumsey Woods at the head of Delaware Park Lake. (This is likely the same location where Shakespeare in the Park now performs, and quite near "Larkland," the residential compound John D. Larkin (JDL) had created for himself and his wife and for each of his children, also adjoining Rumsey Woods and a little further south down Lincoln Parkway towards Forest Avenue. The land had been purchased in 1910 and all the houses were completed by 1915.)

The pageant was held the week of June 26. 500 guests from around the country including Larkin Secretaries who had won sales competitions, attended. LSC employees and their families enjoyed with great pride the colorful performance. On June 29 the pageant welcomed the public to attend free of charge. In total, about 9000 people attended.

The July 15, 1916 issue of "Ourselves" expressed the great satisfaction and pleasure that had been generated by the Pageant. "It brought a new vision of the work we are doing and the way we are doing it. Brought a new vision of the things the Office and Factory, working enthusiastically together, could accomplish, and we hope, it brought a new vision to our fellow citizens of the ability of Larkin women and men to acquit themselves creditably at other than their work-a-day tasks....Nothing could have been finer than the spirit the whole organization showed...It is an inspiration to us all... and the Pageant was worth all it cost in time and effort, if it did nothing else but demonstrate that the spirits of Imagination, Order, System, Ambition, Service and Cooperation, were not only with us for the day of the Pageant, but are ever present in all branches of our organization."

While the Pageant was the largest and most unusual event of the summer of 1916, other social structures within the LSC moved forward with an accelerated schedule of events. Howard Stanger, a Canisius College Professor, presented a paper in 2003 entitled "Ourselves': Welfare Capitalism in the Larkin Company, 1900-1939." He notes that the Larkin work force had multiplied tenfold between 1895 and 1901. Given that growth and the success of his company, "JDL pledged to "unite the interests of employer and employee making all work more pleasant and better paid." These changes included reduced hours; more pay; safe, fireproof buildings; a new ventilation system; a thrift plan, free coffee; a lunch cottage and company outings. The employee newsletter, "Ourselves," began publication in 1903. A number of financial benefits were initiated, but this article focuses on summer activities.

Stanger says, "Social activities, including recreation, sports and employee clubs were integral parts to Larkin's corporate culture. These activities and clubs provided employees with much-needed leisure time and opportunities to form social bonds with other employees and managers. For the company, leisure activities and the clubs that sponsored them helped build an esprit de corps and facilitated teamwork, cooperation, and company pride on and off the job."

The first important social club established by the LSC was a women's club in 1905. It was a YWCA. Stanger notes that it had its own headquarters and dorms for out-of-town employees. By 1914 it had 778 members and had a full-time physical director as well as an executive secretary. The June 15, 1916 "Ourselves" reports that the YWCA started its season on June 6, dodging the June rain (some things never change!) to hike from Fort Erie to Erie Beach (could this be Crystal Beach?) where they enjoyed a picnic and a ride on a merry-go-round. They did not so successfully avoid rain on July 7 when there was to be a wiener roast at Athol Springs (south of the city on the lake where LSC maintained a clubhouse and recreational facilities).

There had been 41 successive days of rain showers resulting in the driftwood intended to be used to build a fire, being water soaked. After the initial disappointment, the 50 "girls" who had signed up decided to do the roast inside the clubhouse over an electric hot plate. They then went to the club gym where they played games. "Such fun, such exercise, such noise. We couldn't have had so good a time as this in Athol," they exclaimed in the "Ourselves" article.



June 24 saw the Larkin YWCA group take a boat, the "Seabreeze" on a trip around Grand Island. The sail was enhanced by partying, music and eating a picnic lunch. The music was played on a symphonola like one that was located in the clubhouse, and perhaps like the one on display at the Larkin Gallery. On another day, Grand Island was the site of a hike.

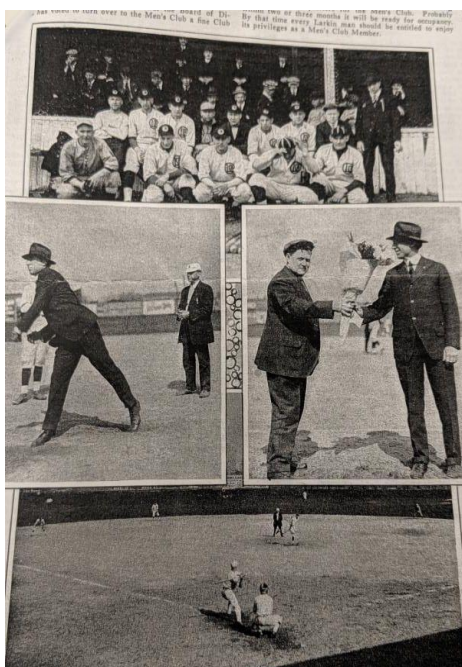
Did you ever hear of a "peanut party"? Me either. But a group of YWCA "girls" got together with a group of men from one of LSC's men's clubs, "the Royal Hunters of Arcadia." The "Ourselves" article said, "Partners were selected by means of peanuts

and strings, the young men auctioned off to the girls who bid the most peanuts for them, and then there was a peanut cracker race." (I cannot picture this!) They then danced and sang, and the evening concluded with the "boys" forming a circle and yelling, 'cheers for the Company, the soap, the dorm, the girls and things in general."

Stanger mentions other activities specifically for women: a branch of the Campfire Girls, formed in 1914, and the "Falcom Club" (Faithful Comrades) and Co-opus Club (for women with more than 5 years experience – presumably as an employee). An athletic club for women was formed in 1930 to "promote sports, competitive... and to endeavor at all times to promote the spirit of good sportsmanship." But even earlier, the 1916 "Ourselves" mention the women playing tennis and getting tennis lessons in the athletic field "on Larkin territory," i.e. at the corner of Carroll and Hydraulic Streets. Female Larkin employees could use the tennis courts on Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings after work and alternate Saturday afternoons. Presumably male employees used the courts at other times. Summer also brought the opportunity for women to play baseball.

Similarly, for men, they had a company YMCA, and in addition to its own many activities, they created a Larkin Boys Club for their sons. They swam in the YMCA pool, played baseball and went on camping trips. Roasting marshmallows was a favorite activity.

They also enjoyed a Larkin Men's Club which played each summer in a league, the Buffalo Industrial League. Opponents included businesses like Pratt and Lambert, Bank of Buffalo, and Authentic Transportation Co. Their sons also had their own Boys Team. A favorite baseball activity in the summer was teams from different LSC departments competing with each other.



A separate club, the Larkin Men's Alliance, was formed in 1907 which Stanger notes was an "association of all Larkin men, for the purpose of becoming better acquainted." They participated in a number of social, athletic and civic activities, says Stanger. He also discusses a club created in 1914 called the "Welfare Club, which grew quickly and was renamed in 1917 the Larkin Men's Club. Its purpose, according to Stanger, was "to conduct and encourage such recreational and educational activities as shall promote social, physical and intellectual improvement and good fellowship among all Larkin employees." They played basketball, baseball, bowling and golf. PHOTO 5

Another facility provided included an athletic field near the company which was available for both sexes to play baseball and outdoor basketball. Net ball,

volleyball and other games were played on the roof of the Administration Building!!

One article submitted to "Ourselves" was by an employee extolling the practice of 'black bass thumping'. One would take a flat-bottomed boat into shallow water where such fish could be found. The writer said that the men in the boat would make as much noise ("as much as the neighbors permit") till the bass jump into the boat.

An exciting benefit for employees, especially in the summer, was the opportunity to schedule a weekend or more at the Larkin Country Club in Athol Springs. Activities there included swimming in the lake, and hikes along the beach or through the woods to seek wildflowers. Amenities at the club included facilities for playing tennis, baseball, basketball, soccer and hockey. Bonfires inspired singing while in the house, vacationers played board games. In addition to rooms for overnights in the club building, tents could also be erected for guests who desired to 'rough it.'

While this article focused on 1916 primarily, a review of "Ourselves" over the years reveals the comradery of the Larkin employees through the history of the company. Add to this, the involvement of the Larkin Secretaries who ran the hundreds of "Clubs of Ten" selling products from their homes and who were rewarded with trips to Buffalo from all over the country, as well as the customers who purchased products by mail order or from Larkin stores, all were considered part of the Larkin family who were able to participate with the LSC beyond a simple employee-employer or buyer-seller relationship. The LSC truly was a community.



Misses Christian, Possinger and O'Connell at the Country Club

- From the Desk of Sharon Osgood