

LARKIN HISTORY (#42) - LARKIN CO. & THE SPANISH FLU EPIDEMIC OF 1918

Research for this article has been a challenge given the restrictions placed on our community as a result of the current pandemic, the Covid-19 virus. Necessarily, my research has been limited to books in own collection and to my computer, my ability to use being legendary (in a bad way!). With the Buffalo History Museum and Buffalo Public Library being closed, two major resources were unavailable.

But even with those impediments, I anticipated being able to find out a lot about how Buffalo and the Larkin Co. (LSC) fared during that dismal period.

I first turned to the "Chronicle of the 20th Century", published by Chronicle Publications, Inc. and Jacque Legrand in 1987. This compendium of history reported that as of 10/31/18, "Public health officials in the U.S. and abroad estimate that the influenza epidemic now raging across the globe may cause 20 million or more deaths. The epidemic has raced around the world with unprecedented speed and virulence."

A study authored by Thomas Garrett for the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis in 2008 provided a history of the pandemic in an effort to reveal its implications for any future pandemic of a similar outbreak in the future. While concerned particularly about the U.S. Midwest states, its careful and extensive analysis informs all states about such epidemics and is a road map for handling such catastrophes in future years.



The study noted that the epidemic came in three waves, March-Summer 1918, Autumn (the worst wave) and Spring 1919. He asserts that it began with the soldiers battling in Europe during World War I. (However, historian Christopher Romanchuck, writing for the Winter 2019 issue of "Western New York Heritage Magazine" (Vol. 21, No. 4) suggests that there had been an outbreak sickening over 100 soldiers at Fort Riley, Kansas which not only spread rapidly through the U.S., but may have transported the flu with them when they were deployed to Europe a short time later. (The Belgian Press claimed that it was the US soldiers who brought the disease to Europe). At any rate, the flu did not discriminate between U.S. and European armies, nor between soldiers and civilians. ("Buffalo and the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918." pp. 8-15")

By the time the pandemic ended in 1919, it had killed 50 million people worldwide (more than twice as many predicted in 1918 in the "Chronicle"), 675,000 Americans, 61,700 New Yorkers and 2388 Buffalonians. (Chris Horvatitis, reporter for WIVB.COM

has opined that mortality in Buffalo would have been much higher had Buffalo not taken action in time. "A Look Back at How Buffalo Handled the 1918 influenza Pandemic:", 3/30/20) In contrast, the U.S. lost 116,516 soldiers in WW I and 405,399 in WW II, for a total of 521,915 (not even including civilians) or putting it another way, about 150,000 fewer Americans died in combat than were killed by the Spanish Flu in the U.S. ("Wikipedia" deemed the Spanish Influenza to be the "greatest medical holocaust in history.")

But so little was known about such a potent influenza as the Spanish Flu back then. For instance, Garrett writes that early after the flu appeared in the U.S., Philadelphia held a Liberty Bond parade with about 20,000 people attending. Days later the mortality rate caused by flu soared, making it one of the hardest hit cities in the U.S. In contrast, St. Louis closed nearly all of its public spaces as soon as the flu showed up there, resulting in a much lower mortality rate than Philadelphia.

New York State became actively involved with dealing with the epidemic, according to Romanchuck, in the third week of September 1918 when NYS classified the influenza as a reportable disease, with reports to be made to the community Health Dept. At the same time, the U.S. Surgeon General recommended a number of flu control measures that a community could adopt. The suggestions included totally quarantining a community and shuttering all places of entertainment, churches, shops and schools. Also, he proposed that all spitting be banned and that masks be required to be worn at designated places.

But these were just recommendations with no plan for enforcement; that was left to the local government. Romanchuck points out that underlying the rather limp approach of federal, state and local government in dealing with the epidemic was the "reluctance of President Woodrow Wilson's administration to create public panic that might interfere with the flow of troops and material to the front. (p. 10)

This policy was evidenced in a statement by Pres. Wilson published in the Oct. 15, 1918 issue (Vol. 11, No. 1) of "Ourselves", the Larkin employees' newsletter. The front page article by the President urged U.S. citizens to adjust to war conditions requiring increased production of essentials and the saving of materials and labor required for the support and equipment of the Army and Navy. He wrote, "Thoughtless expenditure of money for nonessentials uses up the labor of men, the production of the farm, mines and factories, and over burdens transportation, all of which must be used to the utmost and at their best for war purposes." (p. 1) He made no mention of the Spanish influenza pandemic that was raging at that time.

A review of 1918-1919 issues of "Ourselves" (at least the issues in the Larkin Museum's possession), while not revealing anything about LSC company policy during



the pandemic, certainly hint that it was a concern of the employees as evidenced by the publication of obituaries, death notices and expressions of sympathy related to the epidemics, including mention of employees leaving or returning to work, after a period of absence to care for a relative suffering from the disease. Beginning with the April 1918 issue, there were one or two such notices in each publication, but they gradually increased. In October, there were 5 notices, but the very next month, November, there were 16. They slowed after that till the third wave of the epidemic the next year, when there were 18 such notices. They again slowly lessened till the last time there was only one death notice in November 1919.

Throughout WW I, "Ourselves" published articles about employees enlisting for service, letters from such employees and articles about their joyous return or their obituary. As described in my recent article about LSC and WW I, there were articles published about, for instance, the Liberty Bond sales and the Liberty Gardens.

Other than obituaries and condolences, there were no articles about the epidemic. There was not even mention in them, nor in other LSC publications like the "Larkin Idea" and the Larkin catalogs. The absence of any article about change of work-related procedures literally stunned me. No indication of any layoffs. No mention of, nor photos of protective masks, gloves or gowns other than what was normal wear for a particular job, like a lab coat, for example.

I previously wrote about John Larkin, Sr. 's almost obsessive commitment to cleanliness of the buildings, equipment and clothing and persons. But the only article I found that even alluded to such cleanliness during the two years' presence of the epidemic was in the October 1919 issue of "The Larkin Idea", a magazine intended for the women who ran the "Clubs of Ten" around the country, holding "parties" in their homes where they perused Larkin catalogs and ordered from them. That article cautioned about "hidden dirt".

It is described as a most dangerous kind because it is easily overlooked. "The dirt is in such inaccessible places as sinks, drains and closet bowls." The author recommended using Larkin chlorinated Lye, diluted with a little water, left to soak in the locale of the dirt, followed by a "sprinkling of Larkin Lime". Presto!! No more hidden dirt! (p.6) Though not mentioned, was this advice meant to help cope with the spread of the Spanish flu?

The effort made by John Larkin to keep the company a safe, clean and healthy environment for his employees was extraordinary. At a time when industry was not very attuned to hygiene, health or safety (no OSHA then), LSC had a Committee on Safety as well as a staff of 3 physicians, a dentist and 3 nurses, all full-time employees. Besides care given to employees, daily inspections were related to safety, sanitation, heat and ventilation, to assure sanitary conditions in the plant, restaurants, workshops, lockers, washrooms and showers.

I noted in a previous article that the drinking fountains provided filtered, cooled water; telephone mouthpieces were disinfected. Office air was filtered of outside impurities. Uniforms were laundered frequently. Employees who handled food products wore clean uniforms and caps. Food handlers were personally examined from time to time to assess physical condition, whether or not there were any skin eruptions and to ascertain personal cleanliness. A report detailing all this had been made by LSC on

January 24, 1913 and published in the "Proceedings of the National Association of Corporate Training."

But I could find no evidence beyond this routine cleanliness that any particular effort was made by LSC to deal directly with the pandemic. That is, until Oct 13, 1918.

Buffalo, itself, was in pretty good shape during the early months of the pandemic. Romanchuck points out that Buffalo, even before being seriously invaded by the flu, nevertheless enacted a whole menu of anti-flu measures. Locally, Buffalo's Acting Health Commissioner, Dr. Franklin Gram, who was educated, experienced, informed and decisive, was a major asset in preparing Buffalo. He had been appointed in April 1918, before there were any reported cases in the community. The "Influenza Encyclopedia", produced by the University of Michigan's Center for the History of Medicine, published a paper by Charlotte Hsu, entitled "American Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1919 Buffalo, NY". According to that paper, by ten days after Dr. Gram's appointment, 50 cases of flu in Buffalo had been reported. By October 7, Gram had had the city appoint a special committee to deal with what he knew was going to be a crisis. The Committee consisted of himself, Mayor George Buck, the Chief of Police, the Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce and the City Counsel President. Dr. Gram himself came down with the Spanish flu in late October 1918, though he survived it. (Buffalo News, "In Spanish Flu Stricken Buffalo of 1918, Death and Fear Marched Hand in Hand:" by Stan Evans.)

The core Committee quickly convened meetings with representatives of the school system, Buffalo Medical Society, industrial plants, retail shops, theaters and movie houses. Though they all understood that a sweeping closure order might become necessary, each group sought arrangements that would justify its staying open. The city was divided into 21 sectors with an "inspector" appointed to enforce any order.

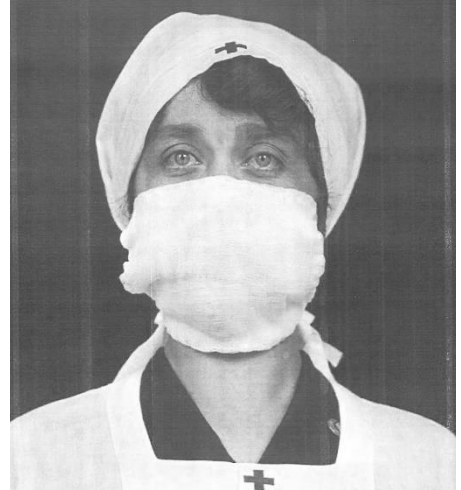
According to "Influenza Encyclopedia", Saloons and breweries in Buffalo were (predictably) quite opposed to being shut down till the committee pointed out to them how upset they would be if they lost a family member to the flu. Mayor Buck, on October 10, issued an edict closing churches, theaters, schools and "places of public assemblage", according to Romanchuck. Though Buffalo was officially quarantined, factories continued in full production. Many (not all) required the wearing of masks at work, and windows were to be kept open. Gram and Buck first planned to allow churches to hold meetings outdoors, but when Sunday, October 12 was cold and rainy, fearing any further flu cases, they fully closed the churches. Between September 18 and the end of that year, a total of 28,398 cases of flu in Buffalo were recorded, of which 9% or 2561 had died.

So where was LSC all through this? Aside from its usual cleanliness and benefits for employees, did the company adopt any other measures to combat the flu? It had been amazing to me that I had found so little in Larkin ephemera to enlighten me. As mentioned earlier, "Ourselves" did publish flu-related obituaries and condolences, but there is virtually no other mention of the effect of the epidemic on the company or its employees. "Ourselves" continued with its newsy columns about the various clubs and programs that continued to be held at LSC and were part of the culture of the company. I saw only one notice of a cancellation and that was of a Men's Club performance, which was the result of finances, it says. The YWCA, it was reported, continued to make dressings and other hospital items (masks?), but they were for the troops in Europe.

The Clubs of Ten all over the country (there were 900,000 of them at one point) continued with their parties and merchandise orders of Larkin products. There is no suggestion of layoffs, furloughs nor lack of sales.

I was quite frustrated, till one evening, working late in my office and finding nothing to help me in my books, other writings or on the internet, I was about ready to give up on this article, when, Oh, exquisite pang of joy!!! — there on my screen was a page from the October 13, 1918 "Buffalo Courier" newspaper. The title of the article was "Thousands in Plants to Wear Gauze Masks at Work Tomorrow."

The article then reported that employees at industrial plants throughout Buffalo would be wearing these masks as a result of a decision made by the newly formed Industrial Physicians and Surgeons Assn. of Buffalo at its very first meeting held last night at (OMG), the LARKIN MEN'S CLUB. The masks would be worn both in the plants and the offices. The meeting's purpose was to discuss the flu epidemic and the best way to prevent its spread through Buffalo's industrial plants. Attending the meeting, among others, were plant medical staff and officials. They further agreed that this group would meet monthly until the epidemic ended, with the next meeting being held again at Larkin. The article also mentioned that a motion had been passed requiring plants to wash telephone receivers with a 2% solution of carbolic acid, noting that LCO had already been doing this for some time.



The Courier reporter threw in a last, but soft, punch at the industrialists: "That the industrial plants have been about the only places left running, was a source of gratification to the manufacturers, who voted to aid the health department in every way because of this concession. The propaganda of this department is already in free circulation among the plants."

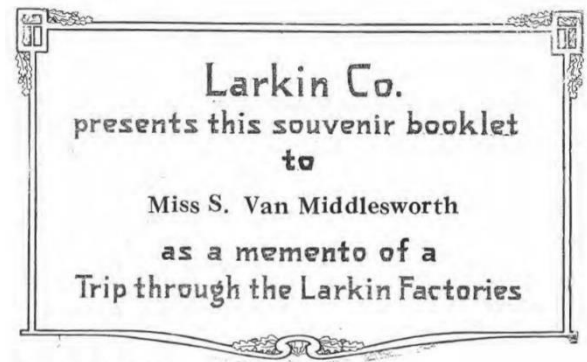
It may be that LSC already enjoyed an exemption from having to close. The October 15, 1918 issue of "Ourselves" printed a response from apparently an employee who had inquired why LSC was considered an "essential industry". The response was that it was so designated "because a large portion of its manufactured output consists of soap, glycerin, foods, clothing, pharmaceuticals, food containers, etc. for many of which classes of goods it has large contracts with the U.S. and Great Britain". Presumably, these were military related contracts to provide necessities for the soldiers which, at the beginning of the War resulted in LSC's standing as a necessary industry.

So, though I have dug up some useful information, it still leaves quite unanswered why none of the publications that I have in the Larkin Gallery discuss the effect of the pandemic on the LSC at all. There are only the quiet references in obituaries and condolences, but no article describing what effect the Pandemic might be having on production and marketing. Though the "Ourselves" published lots of photos, none in my possession have any pictures of workers in masks or other protective clothing, which we all now call "Personal Protection Equipment or PPE". Larkin labor went on, even as all its social and other organizations, continued their programs.

Even the late Daniel Larkin, grandson and employee of JDL, whose fabulous well researched biography, I often quote, says nothing about the pandemic.



Tours of LSC, totaling hundreds each year, continued. A booklet for such visitors was first published in 1916 and then republished in 1918. Forty-eight pages long, it is adorned with the artwork of famed art director of the company, Alexander Levy. Inside its front cover is a welcome message, saying that the booklet is being given to the tourist as a memento. It includes the name of the recipient and the date of the tour. The booklet on exhibit in the Larkin Gallery reveals that Miss S. Van Middlesworth went on the tour on August 26, 1918, just as the epidemic was building up steam for its onslaught in September and October.



August 26, 1918

I believe that JDL and his company did play a major role, first in protecting its own employees, and then in being a role model and advocate among fellow industrialists. Was the lack of documentation of this a result of his quiet, humble personality? Was the lack of any mention of or photos of the plant, offices and employees an effort to not alarm customers that products purchased from LSC might convey influenza germs?

The Larkin periodicals would suggest that there never was an epidemic. If any Larkin family member, employee descendant or historian out there (in my vast readership) can offer me any insight, I will welcome it.

- From the Desk of Sharon Osgood