

FOUNDING FATHERS: DARWIN MARTIN (Continued #7)

Over the past few months a lot has been said in these columns about the founder of the Larkin Soap Company (LSC). This month I will focus entirely on this extraordinary man. Fortunately, a lot is known as a result of the extensive research done by his grandson, Daniel Larkin, with input from other Larkin relatives and from Prof. Jack Quinan, author of the book, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Building: Myth and Fact." Daniel Larkins's book, "John D. Larkin: A Business Pioneer," is a treasure of primary source references.



darwinmartinhouse.org



wright-up.blogspot.com

Similarly, D.D.M. lost a parent, his mother at age 6. He had been born in rural Central New York, the second youngest of five children. His father, Hiram, unable to both work his farm and cobbler shop as well as care for the five children, married a widow from Nebraska and moved to Nebraska with D.D.M. and his brother, William, to live with Ann and her four daughters. Before he left New York, he placed his three older children, Frank, Alta and Delta, with relatives to raise them.

D.D.M. and William were miserable in Nebraska. They slept in a loft with the four step sisters and were not treated well by their stepmother. Jack Quinan, retired professor of Art History at U.B., curator of the Darwin Martin House and co-founder of the National Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, has written extensively about D.D.M., and last I talked to him last Fall, he was nearing

completion of a biography of D.D.M. However, he has already written much already about him. He quotes an unfinished autobiography of D.D.M., in Frank Lloyd Wright's Martin House Architecture as Portraiture, where D.D.M. said, "Willie and I were rather frequent victims of the blues in those years and often cried ourselves to sleep." D.D.M. referred in a letter to Willie in 1880, to his step-mother as "a dirty greasy bitch." (see p. 228 of Jack's book).

So it comes as no surprise that D.D.M. seized his first opportunity to flee Nebraska. Brother Frank, who was employed by the Larkin Soap Company as a soap salesman in New York City in 1878, invited D.D.M., at age 13, to come live and work with him. They sold soap from a horse drawn wagon on the streets of N.Y.C., and after a short time, moved to Boston, Massachusetts to continue their sales in a fresh market. D.D.M. wrote of a visit to Boston by J.D.L., describing him as a "quiet spoken young man with a black

full-beard in his thirties." Daniel Larkin, grandson of J.D.L., in his biography of J.D.L., comments, "The sight of young Darwin working the wagon for the slingers must have stirred memories of his own days as a young boy working to help support his mother and his siblings. John always had a soft spot in his heart for a boy who was energetic and willing to work. When he found out that Darwin was making only three dollars a week, he promptly raised the lad's salary to five dollars."

Bert Hubbard, in the meantime, was developing new marketing techniques. One of the changes resulted in shutting down the soap slinging sales and, instead, shifted to selling to retailers or in response to mail orders. As a result, Frank was transferred to the mid-west. On August 7, 1879 Frank showed up in J.D.L.'s office in Buffalo with now 14 year old D.D.M. in tow to ask J.D.L. to give his little brother a job. After a short interview J.D.L. recognized the potential of this sad boy. He hired him, not for the factory, but to assist J.D.L. with bookkeeping, which J.D.L. had been doing by himself up till then. Clearly there was something resonant in J.D.L.'s heart with young D.D.M. J.D.L. immediately called his wife, Frank, to come to the 663 Seneca offices to pick up Willie and D.D.M. and they all picnicked that evening in Delaware Park as a celebration.

D.D.M. then moved into a nearby boarding house in this strange city, surrounded by rowdy railroad workers and having no friends or family nearby. Thus began about 45 years of employment of D.D.M. at Larkin Soap Co. where he eventually became its corporate secretary and shareholder at a salary that was one of the highest in the nation at that time.

The relationship between D.D.M. and J.D.L. was not always smooth. D.D.M., even as a teen, was so eager to work that he came in early and stayed late (the regular work hours for LS.C. was 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., six days per week. D.D.M. usually worked till 10:00 p.m. on week nights and till midnight on many Saturdays!) But the books were kept locked in J.D.L.'s safe making it impossible for D.D.M. to work till J.D.L. came in. Watching J.D.L. open the safe, D.D.M. learned the combination, so one morning he went ahead and opened the safe and began working. When J.D.L. came in, he didn't scold D.D.M., but rather simply changed the combination. After more weeks of frustration, D.D.M. learned the new combination and again opened the safe and began working on the books. This time J.D.L. again said nothing but he never changed the combination again, yielding to this ambitious hardworking kid.

A more serious incident occurred in 1881 when D.D.M. made a tissue copy of a letter from Hubbard to J.D.L.'s brother, Levi, which was apparently meant to be a private communication. D.D.M. make a second copy and sent it to his brother, Frank. When

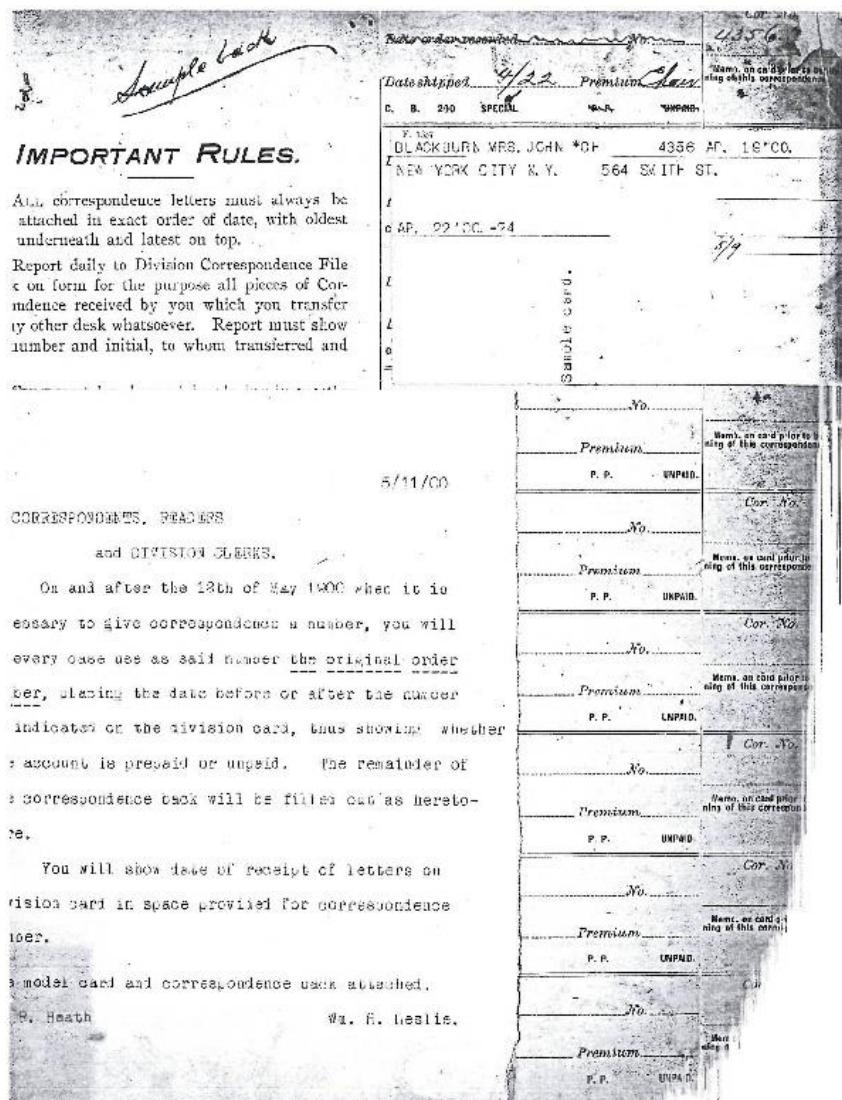


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Bert found out, he was furious and persuaded J.D.L. to fire D.D.M. D.D.M. begged forgiveness and pled with them to keep his job. He succeeded. He was only 16.

During those early years, D.D.M. was not only working full-time, but also taking classes at school and studying late into the night. His only social life was generally with Bert Hubbard's family with whom he would occasionally go on outings. Bert also gave him theater tickets and let him use his library card. He made friends with an assistant bookkeeper who had been hired by the company and also with one of his fellow boarders who worked as a railroad brakeman.

One of D.D.M.'s most known accomplishments at the company was in 1883, converting the enormous ledgers in which mail orders were recorded, to a custom made index system. For two months D.D.M. transferred 96,000 customers' names and addresses and orders into the index. He was rewarded by a pay raise to \$12 per week! Two years later he improved the system by replacing it with a library-style card catalog system, again transferring all the data. Those cards became a design element of the Larkin Administration Building where Frank Lloyd Wright included built-in card catalogs drawers into the walls.





Around 1884, both J.D.L. and Bert Hubbard, perhaps recognizing the chronic depression and recurring medical problems that D.D.M. had been experiencing, began inviting him to participate in Larkin - Hubbard family events. He spent a great deal of time with the Hubbards in East Aurora and at the Larkin retreat called "Idlewood" on what is now Old Lake Shore Road near Graycliff. (Which was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright for the Martins in 1926.)

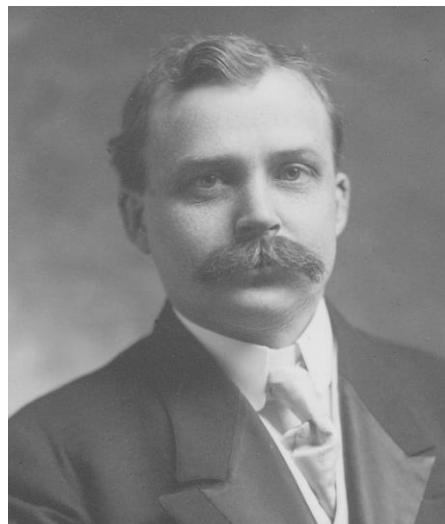
It was in 1885 that D.D.M. met and began wooing 15 year old Isabelle Reidpath whose family owned a store on Seneca Street. He sustained the family emotionally as Mr. Reidpath became ill and eventually died. He proposed to Isabelle in 1887 and they married in 1889, moving into a Queen Anne style house they had built on Summit Avenue in the Parkside area. D.D.M. disliked the house, but he and Isabelle entertained family and friends there often. Their two children, Dorothy (1896) and Darwin R. (1900) were born there. But D.D.M. had a dream of bringing together his siblings to live near him. For a time, his father, at D.D.M.'s invitation, had lived in Buffalo and then moved into the Summit Avenue house, but he eventually moved back to the Midwest in 1891. Brothers Frank and then Alta also came to Buffalo for a short time in 1895, Frank, Alta and sister, Delta (with her husband, George Barton) all lived in Buffalo. Only the Bartons stayed.

In the meantime, LSC continued to grow. D.D.M.'s staff grew to 26 in 1888. Bert demanded that he be bought out of his stock in LSC and resigned as an officer so he could carry on his affair with a school teacher. His wife, Bertha, was J.D.L.'s sister, so emotions were deep. D.D.M. had been very close to him and their friendship was to survive though not with the same volume of contact.

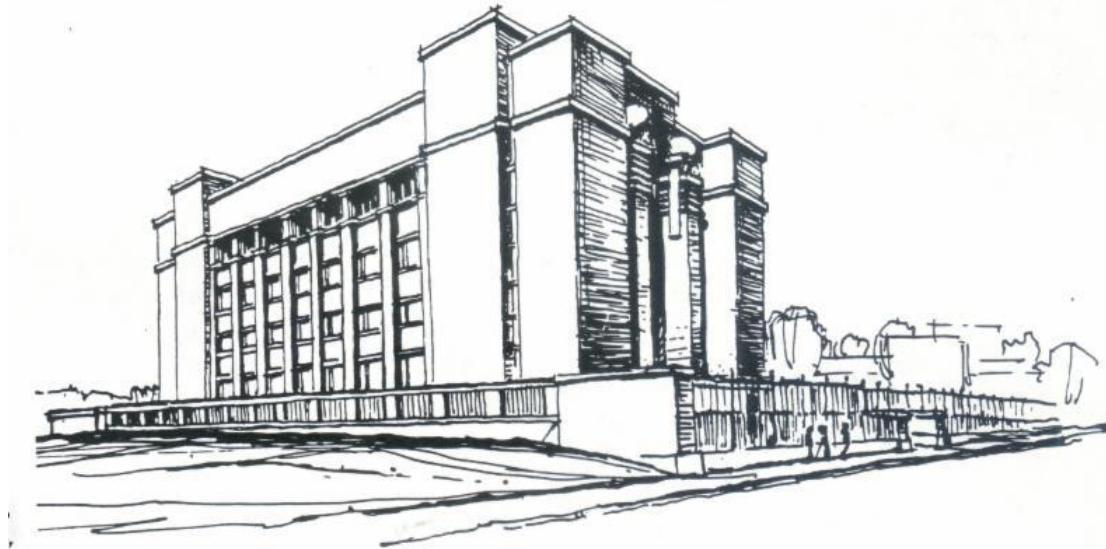
In 1894 D.D.M. had a serious nervous breakdown. With J.D.L.'s empathy and support, he took eight weeks off to rest at a spa in Virginia. On his return his earnings continued to increase and his assets reached over two million dollars by 1907.

LSC needed to expand and creating an Administration Building separate from manufacturing functions, was determined to be the best way to expand. In 1902 brother William, in Chicago, was communicating with D.D.M. about helping him build a house in Chicago. On September 13, 1902 the two brothers met with Frank Lloyd Wright in Oak Park. The attraction of FLW and D.D.M. to each other was immediate. (And, of course, FLW, like D.D.M. and J.D.L., had lost his mother as a child and had had a rather unhappy childhood).

It took a year before a contract for the



Administration Building was signed, mostly because D.D.M. wanted to see how FLW would do with designing a house for sister, Delta Barton and her husband, George. He and J.D.L. were very pleased with the Barton house, so proceeded with the Administration project.



The Administration Building and the Martin House went up simultaneously. Mostly completed in 1906, the Martins moved in to the house in November. It took several more months for the punch list of finishing details were accomplished, but they were largely happy with it. Isabelle did a lot of entertaining there.

D.D.M. enjoyed the visual connection of the house with the Barton House around the corner and loved having his sister near him. A Gardner's Cottage designed by Wright was completed a few years later and continues to be a little jewel on the estate. The pergola and Carriage House, were stunning.



Because Isabelle had vision problems, she complained about the darkness in the main house created by the deep overhangs and stained glass windows, and because she loved staying at waterfront places, the Martins had Graycliff designed by FLW as a summer home on the cliff looking over Lake Erie in Derby. It was made clear to FLW that Isabelle was to be the client, not D.D.M. The brightness of the house as well as the water feature on the driveway side of the house were quite consciously designed with Isabella in mind.

D.D.M.'s relationship with FLW was legendary. More than 200 letters were exchanged by these two men during the design and construction of the Administration Building and the Martin House complex. Many more followed regarding Graycliff. Wright was thrilled with the opportunities to have a house design where money was not a big issue, and the Administration Building job which afforded him entry into major commercial projects. FLW needed D.D.M. as a friend to borrow money from and to turn to for solace after FLW's lover and her children and some apprentices were murdered at FLW's Wisconsin home - Taliesin - while FLW was in Chicago. D.D.M., who presented often as reserved and unsure of himself, and rather repressed in lifestyle, was likely drawn to the outrageously confident and talented architect and his flagrant hedonistic lifestyle.

Aside from his services to LSC, D.D.M. was on the boards of the Buffalo City Planning Association, Buffalo Museum of Science, Buffalo Historical Society, Buffalo Assn. for the Blind and Buffalo Symphony Society. His granddaughter, Margaret Foster told the late architectural historian, Majorie Quinlan, that D.D.M. was always putting one or two boys through college. He had, in consort with Booker T. Washington established scholarships for the Tuskegee National and Industrial Institute and made donations for construction and maintenance of faculty housing there.

He retired from LSC in 1925. He had lost a lot of money in the stock market crash of 1929 and in 1931. When he died from strokes in 1935 at the age of 70, he was impoverished.

In 1927 D.D.M. had commissioned FLW to design a mausoleum to be built at Forest Lawn Cemetery for him and his family. It would have been an expensive project because its design would encompass several burial sites, which also would have to be purchased. The plans were completed, but the market crash occurred before the plans received final approval from D.D.M. D.D.M. was buried in a grave site at Forest Lawn that he had purchased years before. The family could not even afford a gravestone.

But in October 21, 2004, FLW's mausoleum for the Martin family was unveiled with ceremony. Though D.D.M. remains in his original grave, his life is honored by the erection of this monument, the cost of which was largely funded by the Oshei Foundation. Furthermore, an engraved a monument to the Martin family has at last been erected near the site of D.D.M.'s grave.

~From the Desk of Sharon Osgood