

FRANCIS B. FRAZEE: LCO'S POET LAUREATE – AND SO MUCH MORE

As I perused dozens of issues of the Larkin Company's (LCO) employee newsletter, "Ourselves," I have repeatedly come across the name, Francis B. Frazee (FBF). It was pretty clear that he was a writer for LCo, and I learned that, in fact, he was the Dir. of the Advertising Dept. For a time, he was Editor of "Ourselves" and had also been the Editor of the company periodical called "The Larkin Idea," sent to the Larkin Secretaries (the women throughout the country who conducted home parties to sell Larkin products from the company catalog. But there was scarce information about WHO he was. He was the one who did the writing, not the one being written about.

One thing that was reflected in the "Ourselves" was that he loved writing and reciting poetry, perhaps not challenging Carl Sandburg, but clearly satisfied himself by expressing emotions ranging from amusement to sorrow. He was the "go to" guy for articles about employee special events such as departures, weddings and death.

FBF described "Ourselves" as the company magazine "for all the employees and by all the employees." It was the "start we are making as an indication of the splendid teamwork within the organization. It's but a happy promise of a glorious fulfillment," he wrote in his editorial for the November, 1920 issue of "Ourselves." He noted that it was unique in that, instead of just writings, art work, engravings and printing were tasks all performed by employees. Among the contributors of talent was Alex Levy, the company's Art Director, who was to become a close collaborator as well as a close friend. PHOTO 1

For the short time of its publication, FBF had also been Editor of a company periodical entitled "Efficiency," which company Director (and brother-in-law to John Larkin), William Heath, described as being "designed to spread sales promotion propaganda, especially among our field representatives. See "Ourselves," July, 1920. PHOTO 2

FBF's editorial in the September, 1920 issue colorfully commented on Labor Day, noting that the holiday marked an annual readjustment of lives. "Everything thereafter seems to start off with a snap and a zest, just as though the whole world was reborn. It is just as though Father Time said, 'Come on folks, vacation is over; let's get down to work.'" He concluded with a poem, "Choosing a Vocation:"

When bedtime comes, my little lad
Climbs up upon my knee
And eagerly confides to Dad
What he is going to be.

Sometimes it is a big brass band
In which he is going to play!
With horn or drum make music grand
P'raps lead the band some day!

Ofttimes a railroad engineer,
Or conductor proud he'll be
And whispers, "Daddy don't you fear,
I'll let you come 'long free!"

But when he's most ambitious,
This self-same lad
Declares when he grows up, he'll be
A business man "like Dad."

It sort o' makes a feller
Get at his job with vim,
When there's a little boy at home
Who wants to be like him.

(Like I said, no Carl Sandburg, but good at expressing emotion.)

His editorial in the July, 1920 issue spoke of the LCo spirit throughout the family of workers. The article ended with FBF's poem entitled "Success."

No matter how important are
The jobs that others do.
Suppose you pause and think how far
Success depends on you

It matters not the task assigned
Until that task is through,
Just try to ever bear in mind
Success depends on you

The simple tasks will soon give way
To greater ones 'tis true
For faithful work makes other say
Success depends on you.

Yes, each success provides a rung
To reach successes new.
If for your eyes this motto's hung,
Success depends on you."

The year before, in June, 1919, the then editor of "Ourselves," Charles Weirs, praised FBF's effort in the Liberty Loan campaign in Buffalo to urge the purchasing of liberty bonds. Wiers reported that "every single bit of the newspaper copy came from FBF's pen and Buffalo 'saw it through' largely because the genius of the publicity brought home to the people that the buying of the bonds was a moral obligation – not a mere cold blooded investment...Chairman Cooke of the Committee called his copy, 'Literature,' and indeed it was." Buffalo went \$14,000,000 over its quota! One of FBF's writings was this poem, entitled, "From One Not Coming Back."

In every star a face I see.
The face of one who's dear to me.
Of one not coming back!
He smiles at me, my soldier bold;
He smiles from out the star of gold
Upon the field of black!

To you – My star is just a star
That glitters where the others are,
Upon the field of black
To me it is a glorious light,
That lives and loves – the spirit bright
Of one not coming back.

What means it in a mother's eye,
That golden star of sacrifice
Upon that field of black!
It is his earnest plea to you,
The plea, "For my sake – see it
Through
From one not coming back.

A year later the June, 1920 issue of "Ourselves," reported that Charles Weirs, after 17 years as Chief Correspondent of LCo, was leaving. Among others, FBF gave a speech entitled "Weirs in Public Life," praising his work with the American Red Cross in Washington.

A farewell dinner was given for a young, popular man, Ernie Hodges, of the Advertising Dept., who was leaving both for a new job and he was marrying. Sixty-seven men attended the dinner, where he was thoroughly roasted by Toastmaster, Frank Jewitt. Jewitt read messages, supposedly from other people. "Marie" sent a message: "Hold up the parson, call a halt ' this wedding must not be, For Ernie Hodges is the man who swore he'd marry me." On behalf of Buying Managers for LCo, Jewitt wrote,

" God made the sun and moon and stars
And Larkin goods as well,
But what these goods will cost next year
God knows and he won't tell."

FBF delivered to Ernie, on behalf of the Advertising Dept., a Hamilton Gold watch and a bouquet of American Beauty Roses for the bride-to-be. With humor, FBF referred to his poetic toast as a "benediction."

And now Ernie, my boy, the moment has come
To bid you farewell and adieu!
We've met you; we've known you; we've found you
A man, Ernie my boy, through and through.
May the years that run like a ribbon ahead
Be filled with sweetness and light;
May the sunlight of love illumine your way
And the skies with gladness be bright!
May the new friends that come be as loyal and true
As these old ones who claim as their right
The honor of praying God's blessing on you.
As we gather to toast you tonight!
These gifts that I hold and now hand to you
Bear the love and esteem of the men
Who have learned to love you for just what you are –
God bless you all over again!

FBF was particularly talented in writing tributes to deceased persons. Of particular note was his tribute to Harold Esty, JDL's son-in-law, who had been employed by LCo for 28 years as Advertising Manager, and then as Director. Published in the May 15, 1925 issue of "Ourselves," it began with a poem by FBF: PHOTO 3

"He is not idle in that higher sphere
His spirit lends itself to loving tasks
And strength to perfect what he dreamed of here
Is all the crown and glory that he asks."

Esty had died a slow death, but, said FBF, "with a spirit that ever expressed cheerfulness and sunshine when clouds were the darkest. His kindly smile, his responsive greeting was often times accorded when his soldier spirit was rising to its greatest height to meet the need of the hour." FBF completed the tribute with Oliver Wendell Holmes poem, entitled "The Chambered Nautilus."

With his demonstrated skill and grace in composing a tribute, it is not unexpected that he would be called upon to write a tribute upon the death of JDL, Sr., who died on Feb. 15, 1926. Published on that same day in "Ourselves," on page 8, he began it as follows: "Strong, yet so gentle; calm and quiet, yet so full of feeling; just, yet ever full of love and charity, JDL will ever stand in the memory of those who have touched his life as a bright, a happy memory -, Yea more than that, a glowing example of simplicity, temperance and humility in their truest, noblest sense. For JDL firmly believed, firmly trusted, that Providence guided the helm of those who embarked on life's seas with high intent, and the will to serve mankind well."

(Actually, I think his prose was better than his poetry!)

There had been a sweet closeness between JDL and FBF, I believe. Because of the paucity of information about FBF, I have hunted for clues in his writings. There were two encounters described by FBF that lead me to this conclusion.

For the 50th Anniversary of LCO in 1925, JDL had purchased from his personal (not corporate) funds a 7700 pipe, pipe organ, the pipes of which were installed on the fifth floor balcony of the Administration Building. It was to be

played for the pleasure of his employees, but, of course, there were many who did not work in that building. Its first performance was a Christmas concert on Christmas Eve. In the midst of the program, FBF noticed JDL standing by the entrance to his office which adjoined the central court. Approaching him, FBF commented on the beauty of the sound of the organ. JDL responded, "Isn't it beautiful that we all enjoy it together! I hope the day may come when it may be amplified throughout the entire plant so that the men who work in the warehouse and power house and all through all of our buildings may enjoy it with us."

The other conversation reflecting the trust in their relationship is described by FBF in his tribute to JDL. He writes, "How few understand the depth of emotion in the man of outwardly calm quiet interior. To one who had the privilege of talking to him at the time of the passing of his beloved wife, he said with a quiet, even voice that little betrayed his emotion: 'I used to think these great buildings, this vast business, meant something to me. It means nothing today. Mrs. Larkin is dying.'"

Another piece of evidence of their closeness was that FBF was one of the honorary pall bearers at JDL's funeral.

Besides "Ourselves," FBF was responsible for the publication aimed at the Larkin Secretaries (those women who formed Clubs of Ten, inviting friends to join and shop monthly from the most recent Larkin Catalog, much like Tupperware parties.). His articles were usually in story form, often with a family solving a problem with the purchase of some household item from the catalog. See, for ex., the March, 1934 issue of "The Larkin Idea."

"The Larkin Idea" encouraged women to create these clubs (there were 90,000 throughout the country at one point.) FBF put an altruistic spin on them in the "Larkin Idea" of July, 1932. He notes that a spirit of friendliness is the art of living outside of oneself. "By living outside of herself in service to others, she loses sight of her own personal problems. By solving the housekeeping problems of her neighbor, she discovers to her joy, that she has largely solved her own." (I admit, this is a little much!)

FBF wrote copy for other publicity endeavors as well. For instance, he wrote an article entitled "The Factory-to-Family Idea" for the book, "Buffalo: American Gateway to and from the Great Northwest" (1920) The book was a

yearbook describing Buffalo's industrial, commercial, financial, educational and civic features "written by the city's recognized authorities in each field of endeavor."

Desiring to learn more about this clearly talented employee, I began searching other sources. I found a treasure trove at the Buffalo History Museum where I began looking at microfiche of local newspaper articles, and in particular, for an obituary. What I got was jaw dropping! Dozens and dozens of articles about the activities of FBF outside of the work place. It turns out he was a very articulate and sought after speech maker on a number of subjects.

Of course, he was proficient regarding the advertising business. He belonged to such organizations as the Greater Buffalo Advertising Club (where he also became its President); the Advertising Council of Erie County, and the Buffalo Chamber of Commerce.

He was a frequent speaker on advertising at a number of organizations. On Nov. 12, 1919, FBF gave a speech entitled "Atmosphere" at a meeting of the Buffalo Display Men's Club, according to the "Buffalo Courier." FBF was quoted as saying that the creation of the proper atmosphere as a background for a display of merchandise was one of the essential points in successful window displays."

Along that same vein, FBF spoke to the Int'l. Ass'n. of Display Men on June 24, 1924. The "Buffalo Enquirer" reported that the speech, entitled "The Human Touch" stressed the necessity of reaching patrons in a human way. To demonstrate the effectiveness of good design, a group of orphans were invited to visit a display window exhibition so they "may feast their eyes on the huge papier mache dinosaur, a display of little mechanical men and other bright attractions."

On April 16, 1926 the "Buffalo Times" reported that FBF was the guest speaker at the Buffalo Club of Printing house Craftsmen. His speech, entitled "The Present Trend of Display Advertising." He advocated for brevity of copy and boldness of the design of the display. "Today," he had said, "the public absorbs an advertisement in a single gulp. If they like it they come back for more."

In a speech FBF made to the Buffalo Real Estate Board on March 19, 1925, according to the "Buffalo Courier," he eloquently argued that a successful

advertisement writer is “a painter on the canvas of a human mind. The picture which he paints establishes a relationship between the ideals, hopes and aspirations of the reader and the merchandise or commodity which he sells.” FBF added, “The advertisement writer of today is more than a painter; he is a master weaver.”

I could point to many more of these newspaper references to FBF’s speeches about advertising, but the point that becomes very clear is that FBF’s skill and professionalism surpassed his 9-5 job at LCo. He was a known expert in his field whose insight was sought after by other advertisers.

But I also learned from the newspaper articles that FBF’s expertise and interests went well beyond advertising. Many of his speeches were about boosting Buffalo’s image. A major speech reported by the “Buffalo Enquirer” on Feb. 18, 1921 was given by FBF to the League of Advertising Women. He urged a campaign to promote Buffalo by not just thinking about the present, but its future. Effort should be made to “awakening the Buffalo citizen to his and her duty as a citizen to take a deep political interest in the affairs of the city; to spread far and wide the name and fame of Buffalo and stand loyally by their city wherever they might be.” FBF ticked out some names of attributes that should be promoted: industrial opportunities, splendid public schools, her parkways and art museums. FBF urged the members to include in their ads a sense that they believe in the city.

A speech made by him in May, 1926 and repeated often was entitled “Building Faith in Buffalo.”

FBF was a philanthropist. In 1934, according to the “Sun” and “Erie County Independent newspapers, FBF was the county chair for a fund raising drive to benefit the Joint Charities and Community Funds. He was quoted as saying that charity can best be handled by a partnership of the government on one hand, and public generosity, on the other.

Newspaper articles also spoke of his role as a member of the Buffalo Boy Scouts Council. The “New York Times” headline on FBF’s obituary in 1941 was: “FBF: Advertising Man Who Was Leader in Boy Scouts in Buffalo,;

With a little help from a friend, I was able to find out some family history. FBF was born in 1883. His wife’s name was Catharine. I had found several

articles in the newspaper records mentioning training in advertising she had given some women's groups. It appears she was an ad professional, also. They had four children, one named FBF, Jr. In my pathetic search of the internet, I had found an FBF who had received many patents for inventions. He may well have been their son.

And my "go-to expert" on everything related to the Larkin Soap Co., Jerry Puma, of course came up with something amazing. I learned from him that after FRF's death in 1941 at age 58 (probably a heart attack after a full day's work), his family and friends, aware that FBF had yearned to retire and be able to write more, and publish a book of things and people he loved, accumulated poems he had written (including some from "The Larkin Idea"s) and published the book. FBF had referred to his post-retirement years as his "Afterglow" So that is what they named the book: "Afterglow: Friendly Fireside Poems." Only 500 were published. Jerry's is No. 156 and is signed by FBF's wife, Catharine. Proceeds from their sale of the book were to go for FBF's children's education.

The illustrations and lithographs in the book were by FBF's friend, Alex Levy, who also created a lithograph of FBH as a frontispiece.

J. Jay Fuller, another friend, wrote a tribute for the book, noting FBF's accomplishments and character. I was totally stunned. I had already decided on the title to this article. Indeed I had most of the article, including the title typed up, when Jerry e-mailed me copies of the cover and a few pages of the book.. Honest – to – God, I had no idea: Fuller says in his tribute, "I once introduced FBF to an ad audience as "the Poet Laureate of the Mail Order Business." I am increasingly convinced that the spirit of all these Larkin characters walk these halls and perhaps lounge in my office chairs while I am trying to write. PHOTO 4, 5