

Christmastime at Larkin

It is Christmastime at Larkin and the publishing department is in high gear. It is early in the 1900's; spirits are very gay. The Larkin Family – owners, employees, Larkin Secretaries and customers – love this time of year. Larkin Company publications add to the excitement of holiday festivities.

Stoking the flames is a publication entitled "The Larkin Idea." This monthly magazine, initiated in 1901, was designed primarily for Larkin Secretaries. These are the women throughout the country who hosted clubs in their homes that met monthly (usually ten members each) to review the most recent Larkin semi-annual catalog from which they selected products from the approximately 900 manufactured by Larkin Soap Company, i.e. LSC. The combined Order resulted in the purchase of a large volume of products, leading to the reward of greater numbers of certificates which could then be exchanged for all kinds of household items. Each month one of the club members would receive that month's certificates, thus enabling one person to have enough to trade in for "more expensive" items such as china, furniture or appliances. PHOTO 1

The object of this manner of marketing was to eliminate all the middlemen so that products could be purchased more inexpensively than they would cost from a retail store or other sales agent. It led to the motto, "The Larkin Idea: Save all Cost which adds no Value."

The magazine, published monthly, kept the Secretaries informed of new products and current events at the company, as well as recognized exemplary Secretaries and sharing their ideas for better sales and activities. It was also a device to suggest ways for Secretaries to solicit even more Secretaries.

In this very first issue of the Larkin Idea, the Buffalo Pottery Co. was introduced. It was being built down Seneca Street near Bailey. Owned by the same men as owned LSC, including John D. Larkin, Sr. (JDL) and Darwin Martin (DDM), it was explained, "The new plant is being built by the LSC for the manufacture of general ware (i.e., pottery) such as that concerns offers as prizes (i.e., premiums) with its soap."

The main issue to be dealt with by this new company, the article explained, was the disappointment some patrons experience if a shipment, the contents of which were intended to be Christmas gifts, arrives too late. The author attributed the problem to freight companies becoming overwhelmed before Christmas. However, by having its own pottery company and other facilities for making premiums, as well as LSC having its own large "Freight-Traffic Dept. working actively in the interests of Larkin patrons, we are promptly filling all Orders and are able to get the goods to their destination with less delay than any other house in the country." The article added, "On every package we

ship from Nov. 20th to Dec. 20th, we offer a label like this: **“Rush! Christmas goods from Larkin Soap Co., Buffalo, N.Y.”**

A full-page advertisement in that volume featured a Chautauqua desk which could be a “free” Christmas present. PHOTO 2

The December, 1903 issue bore a beautiful Christmas cover and inside, a child’s letter to Santa admitting to not always being good (she tells of a spanking – 3 whacks – from her mother, a discipline which she chose rather than have her mother tell Santa that she had been bad! She goes on to ask for a box of Larkin soap for her mother and a “Kinley chair” (presumably a rocking chair premium) so her mother can sit and rock. The little girl adds that “Daddy says it is certain sure that she (mother) is Larkin crazy...and I don’t know what that means, but then it doesn’t really matter. It can’t be serious because he is always laughing at her.” PHOTO 3

Another article in that issue acknowledges the gift from God that created Christmas that has led to a celebration around the world. “Its observance exalts one of the highest qualities of the human heart – the giving unto others of the best of soul and substance. Then comes the moral of the story: “The Larkin Idea, though commercial in spirit, is a constant distribution of substantial benefits to tens of thousands of customers...about the cheer that it imports to their lives. The policy of the Larkin Idea is to deal with each customer with unequaled liberality. The satisfaction this greater value affords the customers promotes a cheerfulness that sheds its rays on those around them. Houses are made more pleasant and comfortable, hearts happier, sunnier, by the advent of Larkin premiums.”

Aah! Those were the days that advertisers really knew how to win the hearts of customers!

The Christmas issues are filed with Christmas poems and stories of families opening their gifts – all from LSC. As little boys speed down the hill on their Larkin Dunkin Hill sleds, blades waxed with Larkin soap, they sing out, “Hurrah for Larkin! Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah.” Recipes include holiday cookies, cakes and candies. The 1912 December issue advertises packaged foods for Christmas dinner, including canned pumpkin, plum pudding and minced meat; boxes of raisins and nuts and a jar of olives. PHOTO 4

The 1904 Christmas edition begins with a Christmas greeting to customers:

‘Present again is the season when hearts abound in cheer, and lips give expression to the peace and goodwill that dwell within.

To all Larkin customers we send our hearty Christmas greeting. May joy and gladness manifest themselves in every deed. May every duty be attended by a cheerfulness that will overflow to those around you! May the peace and joy that obtain through kind and thoughtful acts inspire all to give freely unto others the best of their

hearts' fullness, and may the glow of Christmas-tide be quickened into a living fire that will endure throughout the year!"

An article in the 1906 issue reassures the readers of the company's fine reputation, noting that postmasters throughout the country know where LSC is located. The company had just received a letter from Kalamazoo, Mich. addressed simply to: Larkin" with no address. Another envelope, pictured in the article, had been sent from Lowell, Mass. bearing an address that read, "The Larkin Idea: Furnishes Homes Without Cost." Again, no address appeared on the envelope. PHOTO 5

Perhaps my favorite article was published in the 1907 Christmas edition, entitled "The Santa Clause Idea." It tells of an exhausted Santa Clause (SC) arriving home at the North Pole after delivering all the gifts. He is just dozing off before an open fire of Christmas pine when his phone rings. It is a man who inquires if he makes his own gifts. We can only hear SC's side of the conversation. SC responds, "Yes, you are right. I manufacture my own goods...What's that? So do you?.... Yes, I dispense with the sales agent... Actually cut out the expenses and profits of the retailer, have you?...Give the people the best quality at a single manufacturer's profit, eh?...The people appreciate it? Why of course they do."

SC goes on to say that the caller is answering a question that had long been worrying him. "On my rounds tonight I noticed thousands of homes in which were tables, desks, chairs, which I didn't give them. And a hundred and one...What's that? Nearly 12 hundred different, eh? Why my own variety isn't much larger than that." SC then asks the caller for his name. "Larkin" is the response. "Hold on – What's that? – "The Larkin Idea – From Factory to Family – Save all cost – which adds no value – That's right! That's the idea!"

In 1914, interestingly, SC did not have enough gifts to go around. A clever poem reads: "Eh, What's that you say? - You can show me today – A firm who my needs can supply? – Then do take me there; - I've no time to spare – Here's my airship all ready to fly. – "Is that Larkin I see? – Why how stupid of me. – Not to think of this place long ago: - What fine games and toys – for girls and for boys. – There's enough for each stocking I know. "Why, they've clothing to sell, and linen as well. – Fine glassware and china I see: - And furniture, too. – I know what we'll do. – We'll give every family a tree. - They've gifts for Mamas, and some for Papas, - While some for grandparents will do; - I'm sure that this year they'll all give a cheer – for Larkin and Santa Claus too." PHOTO 6

Several Christmas editions tell stories of people in remote locations, lonely and miserable. One such person, a sheep herder in the southwest desert, enters a tavern on Christmas Eve where he encounters "a half dozen faded, painted travesties of womanhood" dancing on a long, pine table. He is about to go to his miserable, lonely room when a merchant who had espied him from across the road handed him a package that had been sent to him from home. A letter from his mother says that money had been

scarce, "but I saved the certificates from my Larkin Club of Ten for a long while and at last I am sending you the camera that you wanted." Larkin comes through again!!!

Also in that issue was an article describing the effort of a couple on the day before Christmas to purchase a gift in an extremely crowded department store downtown. Everyone sought "bargains." They were finally able to get to a counter where they selected a lamp but got nowhere in quibbling about its price. They finally agreed to buy it but they had to wait many minutes for the transaction to be completed. As they tried to leave the store, they were jostled by the crowd and the cloth lampshade was squashed. Finally home, tired and discouraged, the wife went to put the lamp away while the husband picked up the mail. Included was a new catalog from a company with which he was unfamiliar. Leafing through it, he was amazed to find the very lamp they had just purchased except with a fine glass shade. It cost about half of what they had just paid. So as not to further aggravate his wife, he put the catalog away, resolving that next year they would shop only from the Larkin catalog.

The 1917 issue dealt a lot with wartime issues, commending the military for increasingly purchasing supplies directly from manufacturers rather than through middlemen. Larkin secretaries were urged to recruit new ladies to join their ranks in marketing Larkin products. A number of Secretaries reported on holiday parties they held. PHOTO 7

A story about a little boy who wanted a certain blue sweater with pockets and a collar is recited in the 1921 issue. He writes to SC, but shows the letter to his mother. After conferring with her husband, they found the very sweater their son wanted in the Larkin catalog ("a regular book of reference in that household.") They complete the Order form and Father adds a note, "Please hurry this Order...There is a little fellow who will be mightily disappointed if the sweater isn't under the tree on Christmas." PHOTO 8

The article continues, "Now, SC has a big corps of helpers at Larkin Company, all imbued with the Christmas spirit." They happily hasten the order along. Photos accompany the article showing the Larkin mail clerks putting Billy's sweater in just the right mailbag. Another photo shows a truck pulling away from our building with a crowd of workers watching from the loading dock. The caption reads, "The sweater starts on its final journey to gladden a boy's heart."

This is but a sampling of Christmas issues of the Larkin Idea and their content, but the theme is clear. The Larkin Secretaries and all Larkin customers are very much a part of the Larkin Family. But coupled with that concept is the commercial purpose which is ever at the fore.

Christmas spirit at LSC is also evident in another set of company-related publications, "Ourselves." This newsletter, published on the 15th of every month, was also published by the company's Advertising Department. Articles were written by and for LSC employees, with officers sometimes contributing as well. Other branch offices additionally contributed. It has become very difficult to find copies of them. My partial

collection is from a small collection at the New York Public Library and from the Buffalo Historical Museum. I have copies of only two of the Dec. 15th Christmas issues.

The 1918 issue's first page includes articles by three of the LSC owners and officers, William R. Heath (WRH), Darwin D. Martin (DDM) and JDL's son, Charles H. Larkin (CHL). PHOTO 9

WRH's article, "The Essence of It," is not a holiday-themed piece, but rather a commentary on the war in Europe. WRH likens it to the boys' game of "Cock on the Walk," where a boy who is "the cock" mounts a protuberance of some sort and declares himself to be the "Cock on the Walk." Half the boys protect him while the other half try to pull the "Cock" off. When opponents do pull him off, the "chief" of that group mounts the protuberance and announces himself as the "Cock of the Walk." WRH then opines that Democracy cannot play that game since it is not a political opinion but rather is a religious faith. "Faith in and respect for our fellow men." He then directs the reader to look up to the north in the court of the Administration Building. There in letters of gold is the following inscription:

"Adversity," that we may understand fully.
"Refinement," that we may see clearly.
"Sympathy," that we may do generously.
"Altruism," that we may love all.
"Sacrifice," that we may give all.
"All things ye would that men do to you, do ye even as to them."
This is democracy!

DDM's article looks joyfully at the Christmas of 1918 now that "organized savagery has ceased attacking peaceful civilization" after four years of War. He urges the LSC readers to "keep Christmas in a manner worthy of the degree we feel gratitude to God for the lifting of the pall that did so long ensnare us. Liberty, Civilization, Enlightenment, have gained Freedom at an awful price. Let us include in our mutual wishes for Christmas that a keen remembrance be ours that chiefly celebrates the Gift of gifts, the bestowal on man of the Truth that makes Free indeed."

CHL evinced similar relief over the end of the war. He recites Ruskin and Zoroastrian philosophy, urging the reader to go out into the world of Nature around you, look at the trees and at the birds and at the flowers in the fields and the meadows; listen to the waves, look at the clouds and sunsets, and the starry heavens at night..." He concludes, "I wish to each one of you the best of Christmases and a happy and prosperous New Year."

The Larkin branch of the YWCA posted in its monthly column a poem, "A Christmas Carmen," by Whittier, which also celebrated the end of the war, each stanza concluding with "The dark night is ending and dawn has begun: rise, hope of the ages, arise like the sun; all speech flow to music, all hearts beat as one."

The Larkin Men's Club's page wished all a Merry Christmas and a New Year of Health, Happiness and Universal Peace." The body of the article, which dealt with the club's activities for the members, ex. swimming, bowling, basketball, etc, also described the Nov. 11th Peace parade at which 1800 LSC employees accompanied by the Larkin band and drum corps, marched down Seneca Street to Main and to Lafayette Square. They were led by fire trucks from the station across the street.

The Dir. of the Advertising Dept., Francis Frazee, offered a touching essay about celebrating Christmas at his home. He clearly was troubled about celebrating after the horrors of the War. But his obviously sensitive wife surprised him with a beautiful, fully decorated tree. Unlike the year's before which bore no tinsel, "There it stood – the tree all ablaze with light gleaming from the twinkling candles whose dancing flame was caught up and reflected by Stars, *stars, STARS!*" Frazee quotes his Wife as saying, "In this Christmas of Christmases all things are made new. Even the silver and the gold of the tinsel has been refined till the stars shine with a new luster and a new glory!" They represented the soldiers who gave their lives in that awful conflict. The Frazee's then agreed that their children should be told that the "stars" represented the fallen soldiers. "The children shall be told. Liberty and a world fit to live in – the gift you can read in the Stars."

I was quite moved and excited to find that the LSC also reached out to the families in the neighborhood around the plant. Employee Strichland Gillilan 's article entitled "Christmas and Children: Merry Christmas at LSC." She says, "Christmas isn't Christmas without kiddies and certainly there is no dearth of them in the neighborhood of the Larkin plant. For many years our little friends have besieged our doors the noon before Christmas and have always found SC waiting for them."

In 1918 LSC expanded the party to include more neighborhood kids, inviting them to the auditorium (next door to the Administration Building). School kids under the age of 12 were invited to the beautifully decorated auditorium where they were received by the Larkin Brass Band. The LSC arranged for a Santa to actually come down the real chimney into the real fireplace with a huge sack filled with toys for every kid. Two hours of games, singing and a program would ensue. "Every little youngster in the neighborhood will go home happy that they came, and glad that they live near "Larkins."

Gillilan then describes the party for the LSC employees, traditionally scheduled for the 24th at noon. The first half of the party was to take place in the factory restaurant (in our building), featuring the Boys' Choir from Trinity Church. The Larkin band then played dance music. At 1:00 p.m. the party moved to the Administration Building where the full Trinity Church Choir performed. Then all the employees gathered on the balconies and in the first floor court to sing Christmas, patriotic and heart songs.

The 1919 issue of "Ourselves" begins with an article about Christmas in California, written by a church pastor who had recently relocated there from Buffalo. He compared the climate and environs of California with that of Jerusalem. But more of a Christmas spirit was expressed in a poem by Frazee. Its lines were about a child's

anxiety that if he did something wrong, SC would pass him by. He fretted and worried till Christmas morning when, "Oh, Boy! Out of bed I'd fly; I'd fairly bubble o'er with joy that Santa hadn't passed me by."

"Christmas in Many Homes" appears to have been written by an author from the International Institute. It speaks of all the orphaned European children adopted in the U.S. as well as other immigrants who came here after the war. The author, Julia Seary Leahcraft, speaks of what has been learned of Christmas celebrations in each of the many countries and was now becoming appreciated in the U.S.

The President of the National American Women Suffrage Association, Carrie Chapman Catt, sent a Christmas greeting that drew attention to the fact that by Dec. 1919 the Federal Suffrage Amendment had been ratified by 20 states. It was likely, she said, that by the next Presidential election, the Amendment would have become fully ratified and she urged women readers of "Ourselves" to take advantage of that right. She cautioned against blindly voting along party lines without further considering the merits of the particular candidate. She urged them to not abstain from voting out of a belief that politicians are corrupt or that politics are controlled by men. "Or are you going to be one of those who help swell America's army of voters who put conscience and thought onto the scales with party politics and party candidates?" Catt describes the work of the National League of Women Voters. Interestingly, Catt notes that political issues are not resolved by "lynching's, compelling the kissing of the American flag or deportation." Such force should be replaced by educated voters at the polls. (Some issues never seem to go away!!) PHOTO 10

As had occurred in years before, the LSC neighbors (this time the children and their mothers) were invited to a party at LSC, this time hosted by the Larkin Men's Club and the Larkin YWCA. The Larkin Girls' Fife and Drum Corp. was to open the program. Neighborhood boys who owned drums were invited to challenge the girls in a competition on their drums. Afterwards a Christmas story was to be performed followed by a presentation by trained animals. As usual, SC would arrive with gifts for both kids and mothers. "It will be a merry Christmas for all because Larkin men and women will work together to pass on Christmas cheer."

As usual, Christmas poems add to the festive ambience of the newsletter.

The glaring messages from these two sets of Larkin publications is that the LSC cared about its employees, was horrified by the war and senseless loss of life on both sides; cared about the community around the LSC (especially children), urged informed participation in voting and social issues and promoted cultural experiences for all.

Despite being rigid about being to work on time and not talking on the job, as we saw in last month's article, the unselfish, generous milieu of the LSC was amazing.

From the Desk of Sharon Osgood