

Larkin and the Sound of Music

Within the last year the Larkin Gallery has been the fortunate recipient of two antique radios that had been Larkin Co. premiums. The donor, Joe Pawell, lives in Pennsylvania and is a collector of antique radios. When he came across Jerry Puma's name on the internet, where Jerry's status as a Larkin collector is noted, this wonderful gentleman felt compelled to share. More about the radios later, but they got me thinking about Larkin involvement with music generally.



One of the traits that attracted Frances ("Frank") Hubbard to John D. Larkin when she first met him in Illinois in 1873 was his enjoyment singing hymns and playing the melodeon. Soon they were married and by April, 1875 they had left Chicago to return to John's birth city, Buffalo. They were accompanied by their new-born son, Charlie. John founded his soap making business while Frank set up their home on Eagle Street. (See Daniel Larkin's biography of his grandfather, John D. Larkin (JDL), Ch. 3)

By 1877, despite all the demand of a growing family (two children now), and a home to occupy Frank's time, and a rapidly growing business for JDL to tend, they quickly became active in two Baptist churches, faithfully attending services which undoubtedly involved music. They also attended church socials, charity concerts, art exhibitions and theater performances. "The family particularly enjoyed the theatre, and Buffalo's Academy of Music and several other theatres offered frequent opportunities to see the great stars of the era in everything from Gilbert and Sullivan to Shakespeare." (D. Larkin, p. 57) JDL was so impressed with the performance of famed Madame Helena Modjeska that he later named his most popular line of soap and cosmetics after her. (Check out some of the packages in the perfume and cosmetic cases in the Larkin Gallery.)



I have written previously about the extraordinary effort JDL made to provide a healthy work place for what grew to be 4000 employees. Cleanliness was a major issue, but also the emotional health of his employees. He encouraged the formation of clubs and activities that would enrich the lives of his staff, both physically and emotionally. Included in such activities were music-related groups. The Larkin Men's Club Drum Corp. boasted 20

different musical instruments and accompanied dances and other occasions, and participated in competitions with other area bands. "Images of America: The Larkin Company," Shane Stephenson, p. 104.

The Women's Drum Corps, organized in 1919, performed not only at the company, but throughout western NY and the rest of the state. In 1926 it travelled to Denver, Colorado to play at a Rotary International Convention. (Stephenson, p. 104). Other orchestral and musical groups as well as choral groups were created under the umbrella of the Larkin Co.

Recreation or public spaces in the plant also welcomed music. A piano was a frequent feature. Stephenson's book includes a



photo of a recreation room furnished with both a pool table and a piano. (p. 103) But the Larkin Administration Building, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, gets the gold medal for over the top musical features. In its main light court there was a Steinway grand piano as well as a console for a pipe organ, manufactured by the renowned M.P. Moller Co.



The organ, one of the largest in the country, was purchased by JDL as a Christmas present for his employees in 1925. The Larkin Co. was celebrating its 50th anniversary and JDL wanted to do something extraordinary for his employees. It had a 25 horse-power motor which was hidden in the basement of the Administration Building. Placed near the piano in the light court was a beautifully carved mahogany console. Majestically overseeing the light court from the fifth floor balcony was a wall of elegant gilded pipes, decorative ones in front, with a total of about 7700 out of sight behind them. The organ, all of its parts and the Steinway piano weighed a total of over 30 tons.

Painted on the fifth floor balcony wall was a beautiful mural featuring mythical musicians. Titled "The Spirit of Music;" it had been created by the talented company art director, Alexander O. Levy.

Only 3 people were authorized to play the organ (aside from guest organists from time to time).. But JDL's instruction was that if any employee or outside guest wanted to hear the organ being played, one of the 3 approved men was required to leave his work immediately to play as requested. One of those who was permitted to play was employee W.M. Isham, who was also a composer. In celebration of the 50th Anniversary, he had composed a song that was also recorded on a record bearing the Larkin Co. label.

The inauguration of the organ occurred on Christmas Eve. I have told this story before, but it bears repeating. As Christmas music was played on the organ to a crowd of employees, JDL was approached by one of the employees, Frances Frazee, who commented on how beautiful the music was. JDL's response was:

"Isn't it beautiful that we may all enjoy it together. I hope the day will come when it may be amplified throughout the entire plant so that men at work in the warehouse and power house and all through our buildings may enjoy it with us."

Frazee was touched that JDL's thoughts were with those in the plant who could not attend the concert. A year later, JDL having died in the mean time, Frazee was quoted in the Larkin employees' newsletter, "Ourselves",

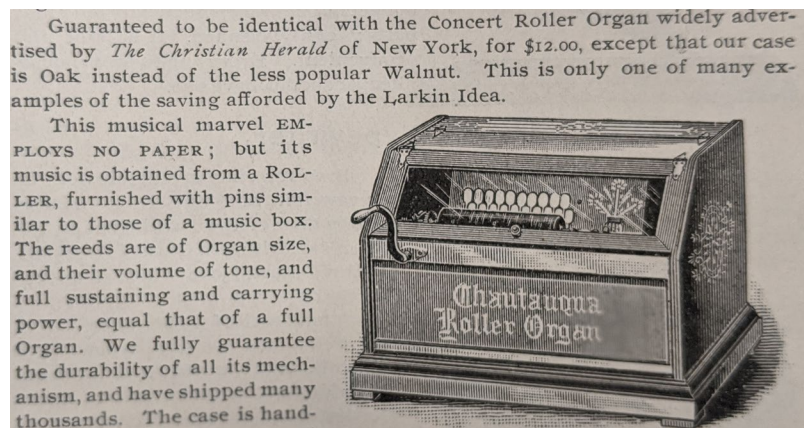
"...It is not too early to reckon its influence on us all. One cannot hear it played, as it is frequently during the day, without gratitude for all it brings to upbuild and feed the cultural side of our lives. Surely where music is sweet, concord reigns, and one goes about the daily task with that happy, cheery outlook, that free and buoyant spirit which is a guarantee of work well-performed.."

Another example of Larkin Co.'s use of music reflecting the company's recognition of it as a marketing tool, is described by Mildred Schlei's Master's Degree thesis of 1932, as well as by Dan Larkin in his biography of JDL. The company, in 1916, staged a musical pageant entitled "The New Vision." The cast and all of the support staff were employees, totaling more

than 500, including the musicians and dancers. Costumes were designed by the company Art Director, Alexander Levy.

It was performed in Delaware Park and was attended by thousands of people. The complex story line's message was that Industry was being destroyed by ignorance, but is ultimately saved by imagination and allied forces. It ends with a parade of actors dressed as Larkin products. The beauty of the music, the dancing, the costumes and the ultimate message was mesmerizing. The pageant was deemed a huge marketing success.

Music also played a role in Larkin Company's premiums. Customers were also to enjoy music! Though the Gallery lacks a complete set of Larkin catalogs of products and premiums, we have quite a few. Perusing them, I found that beginning in the early 1900's, a variety of instruments were offered in exchange for certificates that customers received based on the amount of their orders of products. The 1903 catalog, for instance, offered violins, banjos, mandolins and guitars. They even offered a Chautauqua roller organ and music rolls, the latter made by Royal. (In the late 1920's QRS was founded in Buffalo and became the supplier of music rolls for Larkin's pianos and organs.)



Charming little wind-up music boxes were also offered. The catalog boasted that winding the crank just a couple of times resulted in being able to listen to a dozen tunes without rewinding!

In the Gallery we have, on loan from my "partner," Jerry Puma, a record player in a nicely finished wooden cabinet, 'Symphonola Model D' First released, as far as I could tell from our catalogs, in 1915-1916, Jerry had also acquired the original invoice signed by the buyer, Jennie Ranow, on Nov. 23, 1918 and also uncovered a letter to her from the Company dated 1/25/19 advising her that it could not at that time furnish her a box of the Larkin Diamond Point phonograph needles because they were currently out of stock. This record player, using Larkin needles that Jerry was able to more recently procure, has a record on it with a waltz on one side and a fox trot on the other.

The record sports a Larkin label! In a nearby display case devoted to the 50th anniversary of the Larkin Co. is another such record which plays the song, "Fifty Golden Years," composed by Larkin employee, W.M. Isham (the organ player mentioned earlier). Next to the record in the

case is Isham's sheet music of the song. The Symphonola does, indeed, still work, though we turn it on sparingly because we have only one box of Larkin needles, and each needle only lasts for one record.

As mentioned earlier the Gallery has also been gifted by Joseph Pawell, the antique radio collector in Pa., two Larkin premium radios. The first, received almost two years ago, was in pretty rough shape. Named Larcophonic, it had laid upside down in a damp garage for years. Its top was warped and its legs were broken. It did not work, needless to say. But one of the vacuum tubes was particularly amazing. It bore, on its base, the Larkin name! Today it sits on the bottom shelf of the "Great Wall of China" awaiting me to find a suitable display case which will protect it.

Since acquiring the radio, Jerry refinished it, doing an awesome job of even restoring the warped top. Between Jerry and Jim in the Maintenance Dept., the legs got fixed. And I just happened to have a friend, a retired doctor, who lives down the street from me, who has as a hobby, restoring antique radios. Dear Jan Wieckowski spent many hours on it, and about a month ago delivered the restored innards. We were able to turn it on to a station, but we need to fuss more with creating an antenna that gets to an outside wall, past all the steel and concrete of which our building is made. On the day that John brought it to us, Joe's brother, John Pawell, who just happens to live about one mile from me, came to watch the inauguration of the restored radio while Joe observed and listened over John's cell phone.

A few weeks ago we were delighted to receive from Joe another Larkin premium radio, this one even older, we believe going back to 1925. It is called Larcodyne and came complete with a separate horn-like speaker (reminiscent of the RCA /dog speaker). It now sits on the map cabinet.. DO NOT TOUCH the speaker! It is very fragile!

The point is, while bursting with joy over the generosity of Joe Pawell and Jan Wieckowski (who was thrilled when I showed him the Larcodyne radio), that the Larkin's love of music was something that they felt was important to make available to their customers. But the Larkin love of and interest in music did not end there. John, Jr., of course, continued in his father's footsteps, but even after the company closed, it is clear that the love of music was in the family's blood. Along comes John Larkin III.





There no longer was the family business, but he opened up a company called the Larkin Electronic Supply Co., Inc. He became the ‘go-to-guy’ for sound systems for all kinds of events. Loudspeakers were provided to speakers, performers and musicians all over the Western New York area. His microphones were labeled in large print, “Larkin Sound.” As were his trucks and cars, often carrying megaphones on their roofs, broadcasting as they traversed the streets.

He provided the sound system for a band from Boston, Mass. to perform at the Garrett Club. In 1945 the company furnished the sound system outside the Albright-Knox Art Gallery for an annual dance/concert performed by the Buffalo Civic Orchestra. The Buffalo Courier Express reported on 7/12/45 that “The orchestra played well and the Larkin amplification system carried the music more beautifully than ever before over the far



stretches of the grounds and the lake...The familiar melodies of Kreisler, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Sousa, Strauss and Romberg were enjoyed thoroughly.“ Over and over, in a notebook kept by John III and found by Jerry in an estate sale box of miscellany, accolades are made to John III about how fine his sound system performed in a variety of locations, inside and out, for both speeches and musical performances.

Many times John III was thanked for his having provided his equipment and services gratis for charitable events.

The apple does not fall far from the tree!