

## LARKIN SOAP CO. AND TOURISM

“Tourism?” you ask. “Aren’t you stretching the point on this one?” you accuse.” Not at all, I confidently respond.

I am not sure when it started, but by 1901 it had become huge, Tours of the factory likely had been done before then, but John Larkin went full steam ahead at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition. He put Darwin Martin in as lead participant on behalf of the Larkin Soap Co., and obviously with JDL’s blessings, the LSC became the only single industrial entity to have a building all to itself.

The pavilion was quite ornate with its crown-like dome hovering over four extending arms which housed exhibits of LCO products and premiums. In the center area were soap milling, pressing and packaging machines which fascinated the 8000 people a day who visited over a period of five months. Each left with a wrapped bar of soap and a pass to take a shuttle over to the manufacturing complex itself.



There they were welcomed by uniformed guides who took them on a tour of the factory which was in full production. Daniel Larkin, in his biography of his grandfather, cites the “Buffalo Courier” newspaper of October 6, 1901: “Uniformed guides, appointed solely for the entertainment of visitors, took the sightseers in hand and lead them step by step through the great plant... Everything about the building is as clean and wholesome as modern science can make it. Everything is placed under the closest scrutiny and its purity is instantly apparent.”

For sure the tours continued after the Pan-Am. Mention of experiences appear from time-to-time in the publication, “The Larkin Idea,” which was disseminated to Larkin Secretaries (the women who held get-togethers at their homes to solicit orders from the Larkin Catalogs for their guests. The September 1904 issue printed a letter from a visitor from England. She wrote, “I am surprised to see so large an institution for manufacturing soaps. In fact, I had little idea that America had such large industries. I have been in America for the past fortnight. The cleanliness of your factory is equal to that of any hostelry.”

The May 1906 issue, referring specifically to the factory buildings, says:

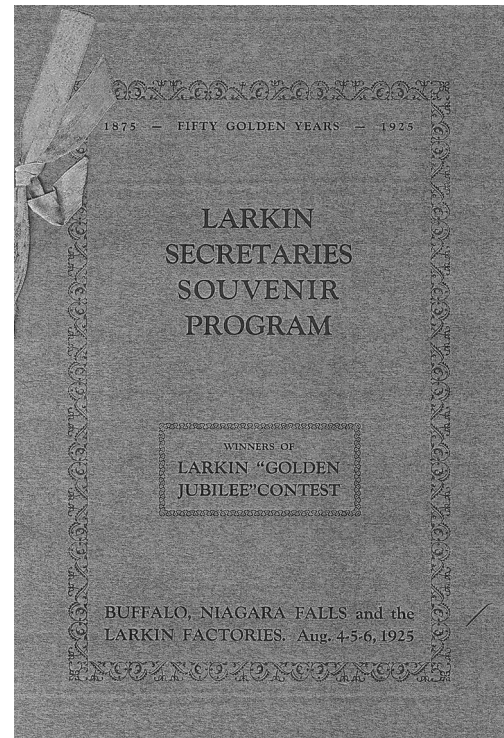
“Another great attraction for visitors to Buffalo is an inspection of the Larkin factories, the greatest of their kind in the world. Our factories are a revelation to every visitor. We have a unique way of things that is bound to interest. The trips take an hour. Bright and attentive guides accompany every party, and we are open to callers each working day. It is not unusual for visitors who have taken the trip through our factory to admit that they found it as interesting a commercial spectacle as Niagara itself is a natural wonder.”

The article went on to quote comments from some of their visitors:

From Puebla, Mexico: “Your factories are one of the greatest sights I have ever seen.”; from Bermuda Islands:

”The trip through your factories is more entertaining and instructive than people would think. There is nothing like it in our islands.” From Los Angeles: “It is worth coming from L.A. to see your factory. From 243 Oak St., Buffalo: “We enjoyed our trip immensely. The largeness of the plant and the variety of labor astonish me.” From Yorkshire, England, an educator in a

scientific school was most interested in LSC’s methods. He said, “I have been for the past four years studying the methods of all the large English factories and a great number of those in America. I find an attention to details and methods in your factories that is unsurpassed.”



The Larkin Administration Building was opened in 1906, while it, too was subject to visits by tourists, the factory continued to draw the most commentary. LSC also upped the sophistication of the tours by publishing a visitors’ guide. An undated guide of 36 pages was entitled “The Larkin Idea: Its Home, a Pictorial Presentation of Some of the Various Departments of the Larkin Factories and Administration Building, Together With Brief Descriptions and Its Triumph: Outlined in a Historical Sketch That Deals With the Dawn of the Idea and Its Fulfillment.”

By way of introduction, it begins by noting that “To visit Buffalo without seeing the Larkin factories, is to miss one of the most interesting industrial sights any city affords.” It goes on to boast that “Thousands of visitors every year enjoy trips through the world’s largest manufactory of soaps and toilet preparations.”

A guide is pictured in his uniform and cap. The book is a treasure of information and photos of the manufacturing processes of many of LCO’s 500 products. “The book also shows plainly a little of the care and cleanliness that are apparent everywhere to those making a tour of the factories.”



That introduction page adds, “Over 40,000 people visit the Home of the Larkin Idea annually. Everyone is invited. Guides and attendants are always in waiting to welcome visitors and conduct them through the Factories, explaining the most interesting features.” Pictured on that page is the “Showroom.” Guess what. That is where the Larkin Gallery is now, with the view extending down to Van Renssalaer Street including the area now occupied by Eckl’s restaurant.

The guidebook is a great read and very informative about the manufacturing

processes.

It was updated and republished in 1918 (perhaps there were earlier revisions as well, but I have not encountered them.) Printed on the inside of the copy the Gallery has is a book plate stating, “LARKIN CO. presents this souvenir booklet to Miss S. Van Middlesworth as a memento of a Trip through the Larkin Factories, dated August 26, 1918.” This booklet is entitled, “Your Trip Thru the Larkin Factories.” The style of this booklet is cast as a tour by Mr. and Mrs. Bright, who had been motivated by their reading through a Larkin catalog, but it also contains all the detailed information about production as the earlier publication. It also takes the visitors through the Administration Building before visiting the factory.

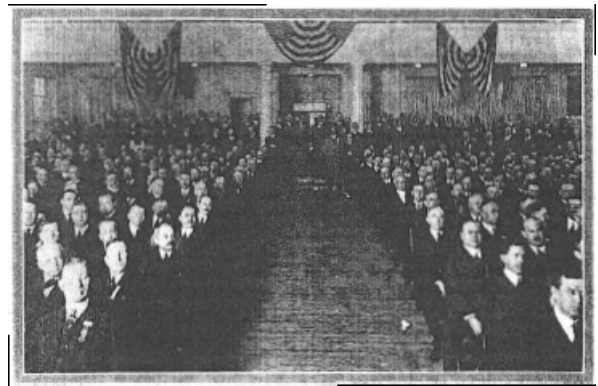


That booklet informs us that tours are up to 65,000 people per year comprised of people from all levels of society: distinguished foreigners, prominent women's guild, eminent lecturers, enthusiastic housewives, classes of school children, teachers and more. "During a single week," the booklet boasts, "we have had visitors from the following: Pratt Institute, University of Buffalo, Colgate University, Liman Seminary, Cornell University and Buffalo State Normal School."

The August, 1917 Larkin Idea, at page 17, noted, "We wish none to forget that our door of welcome is always open to any and all of our Larkin friends to come and see how Larkin products are made.. These visits are always enjoyed, and they always convince more strongly than ever that products could not be more carefully, more scientifically or more cleanly prepared than are Larkin products for their purity and excellence. Come and see us when you can."

In that same issue, a visitor effused: "I have been through many governmental buildings in Washington. D.C., but this is the most wonderful of all." (Sorry, Pres. Jefferson).

An educators' publication, "Buffalo Live Wire" in Sept. 1916 also referred to 60,000 visitors from Buffalo as well as from all over the country, coming to tour the company each year. It went on to tell of the recent construction of a new building, next door to the Administration Building, that included an auditorium capable of seating up to 750 people, 500 on the main floor and 250 in the balcony. It was being made available to community organizations for events. The Buffalo Ad Club, the Rotary Club and the Agricultural Publishers' Assn. were among the first organizations to use it. The Agricultural group had made its visit during a tour of eastern U.S. It was anticipated that many other groups on tour would utilize the facility.



The most famed tourist was King Albert, along with his Wife, Queen Elisabeth and their son, Prince Leopold, from Belgium. I have written about them previously. After Belgium had pretty much been destroyed by the German Army in World War I, King Albert decided that he would visit the U.S. to study modern manufacturing infrastructure and technics, in order to educate himself on the best way to restore his country. The U.S. government had determined his itinerary, but when the King saw it, he insisted that it be revised to allow him to come to Buffalo. There were two places he wanted to visit, the Pierce Arrow Company and LSC. His visit here was a joyful event. First, they went into the Administration Building and were awed by the architecture as well as the employees, all sitting at their desks quietly and respectfully. On a signal, all the employees stood and quietly waved a white handkerchief in salute to the royal family. King Albert immediately pulled his white handkerchief from his pocket and reciprocated the salute.

They next went across the street into the factory building ("our" building) where they visited several areas of the factory. What they were most fascinated with was not only the soap



making, but the making of macaroni (how do they make the holes in each piece?) and also the fabric cutting machines that could cut through up to 600 pieces of thicknesses.

By the time the royal party left, JDL and the King had become fast friends and Buffalo's mayor was having a stroke because they were so late for the reception they were supposed to be at already.

Another major source of tourists, however, were the Larkin Secretaries. In the 1920's and '30's, competitions were held resulting in awards for volumes of sales generated by them. Real high producers earned "Travel Parties" where the winners received all expense paid trips from their homes from any where in the U.S. to Buffalo.



John Larkin, Jr. was particularly fond of these events, enjoying being able to treat those who supported the company and getting to socialize with them. Generally, the trip was a three-day affair. They stayed at Hotel Statler and had a wonderful dinner there. Obviously they did a tour of the factory and Administration Building, but also other Buffalo sites as well as Niagara Falls. They attended a theater party and also went sailing on Lake Erie. These trips had been offered beginning in 1918 and by 1927 there were 175 winner's plus another 125 who could attend by paying \$150 in Larkin coupons. 1938 saw about 60 participants.

By then the company was failing and shutting down. Tourism involving Larkin came to an end. Or did it?

When James Cornell, Peter Krog and Gordon Reger purchased the manufacturing building we now know as the Larkin Center of Commerce, they immediately embraced the historic heritage of their acquisition. One of the first things they did was build the "ghost pier" out in the parking lot which is a salute to the only remaining piece of the Frank Lloyd Wright Administration Building, which had been torn down by the city in 1950.

The lobbies also were given features reminiscent of both Wright and the Larkin Co. Old photos were enlarged and "wallpapered" onto walls in various parts of the building.

In 2017 the Larkin Gallery was created to house and display Larkin products and premiums and also china from Buffalo Pottery which was a subsidiary to the Larkin Co. Almost immediately tours began coming to the Gallery. To name a few groups that have visited us: Graycliff volunteers; Martin House volunteers., Museum Educators Consortium of Buffalo, Know How Tours, Fox Run; The Frank Lloyd Wright and Buffalo School of Arts and Crafts International Conference, Explore Buffalo, Twentieth Century Club; Univ. of Buffalo School of Law Class of '79 reunion; Grand Island Golden Age Center; the Larkin Collector's Group, and many more. The Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy was going to visit us during its

national conference in September, but the conference is now cancelled due to the Corvid 19 virus epidemic. They plan on rescheduling in 2021.



Larkin family members, and the grandsons of Alexander Levy (Art Director for LCo many years) as well as Charles Rohrbach, (Levy's successor) have visited. The Guest Register includes a number of visitors who indicated that they had ancestors who worked for the Larkin Co. My favorite comment in the register is, "I, as an 11-year-old girl, think that this is amazing!"

So, tourism is still alive and well (well not so well since the epidemic shut us down for hopefully only a short time) here at the old manufacturing building.