

LARKIN CO. AS A PLAYBOOK FOR GOVERNMENTAL LEGISLATION

This article will draw on some topics I have considered in past articles. However, as we approach a new federal administration in the United States, having just survived the last, it seemed like a good time to review the Larkin Co. (LCO) as the forerunner of industrial norms that became codified as the years passed. The hero of this story is, of course, John D. Larkin (JDL), who did not require the pressure of law to be guided in his business, manufacturing and employer responsibilities.

LCO was born in 1875 during the presidential administration of Ulysses S. Grant. Initially it operated from a small brick building located on Chicago St., that had previously also been used for soap manufacturing.

1876 was the year of the great Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. It had had a grand opening which had been reignited over by Pres. Grant and the Emperor of Brazil. JDL's wife, Frances, (known as "Frank" to family and friends) and her younger brother, Elbert Hubbard (who at the time also worked at LCO) had attended the industrial exhibition in Chicago a few years before when, they still lived in Illinois. They had had such a good time that they decided to check out the show in Philadelphia. JDL was too busy to get away, but on the return of Frank and Bert, who gushed with enthusiasm over especially 'Machinery Hall,' and its main exhibit of the giant Corliss Steam Engine which powered hundreds of the exhibits, ("John D. Larkin: A



Larkin Powerhouse

Business Pioneer," by Daniel Larkin, 1998; P. 54). JDL changed his mind and went to Philadelphia. Dan Larkin reports that JDL was awed by the engine which rose 40 feet above the platform, its cylinders were 44 feet in diameter; the flywheel weighed 56 tons and had a diameter of 30 feet. He, too, was awed by the number of manufacturing machines powered simultaneously by it. The experience planted in JDL a passion for growth. Was it that visit which led to the Larkin power house with its giant boilers and enormous chimney?

By 1877 JDL had purchased three lots on Seneca Street at Heacock St.:(now Larkin St.), hired more employees and operated 3 shifts each day.

Right from the start of LCO, there were city inspectors whose job it was to assure that the premises were safe for employees, including their treatment by the owner. Their reports were always favorable, satisfying the requirements of the city code. It does not appear that federal law governed the conditions in such factories during Ulysses Grant's tenure.

Rutherford B. Hayes' administration from 1877-1881 seems not to have enacted any legislation related to industry nor employees. In that time, LCO was growing in size, number of employees and market. Quite obviously there were no rules about age of children working in industry. It was in 1879 that a shy 13 year old named Darwin Martin came to work in the office of JDL.



martinhouse.org

The you-know-what began to hit the fan in the U.S. in 1881 during James Garfield's brief tenure (he was assassinated 6 months into his presidency) and on into the 1881-1885 administration of Chester Arthur. Though Upton Sinclair did not write his famed book, "The Jungle," till 1906, he was very much an activist about sanitary conditions in meat packing sites before then. He had lived for a time in a stockyard district in order to see for himself what the conditions were like. Sinclair had seen meat scraps being swept up from slaughterhouse floors that had been infested with rats and human spit, and then wrapped and sold for consumption. Sick hogs were rendered into lard, moldy meats were "dosed in borax and ground into sausage; spoiled hams were pumped with chemicals to mask the smell, Sinclair later wrote his novel, "The Jungle," which created an national uproar.

By 1881 NYS had enacted a statute dealing with the adulteration of products, it was largely ignored. The federal government did begin to show some concern that year by creating a committee to study the problem (Ah! A Committee! Thank heavens!) Its charge was to look into the concern that adulteration of food and medicine was a fraud on the consumer and injurious to health. After two years(!), in 1883 Arthur's Dept. of Agriculture created a Division of Chemistry, which was commonly referred to as "the Poison Squad."

Buffalo's own Grover Cleveland became President in 1885, serving through 1897 save for a brief interlude by Benjamin Harrison, who is best known for doing nothing anyone can remember. Cleveland tried to deal with the issue of adulteration of products, but a bill submitted by him in 1889 failed after being ridiculed by Congressmen. In 1891, he finally succeeded in getting a bill passed requiring a producer to disclose the true nature of the ingredients in products, but the bill was largely ignored... That is till the Spanish-American War in 1898.

During that terrible war, more soldiers died from food poisoning after eating such things as embalmed meat, than they did from their wounds.

One would have hoped that the actual publication in 1905, (about halfway through the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, 1901-1909) of Sinclair's novel, "The Jungle," would have inflamed T.R to deal with the issue of food adulteration, but it did not. Though the public was furious over such revelations as goat meat being sold as lamb, and sausages made with ground up rats that had been killed with poisoned bread, and of lard being sold containing remains of employees who had fallen into boiling vats, TR took the politically conservative position that it



The Jungle by Upton Sinclair

was not the duty of Congress to tell people what they should or should not eat and drink. He refused to sign a bill passed by Congress that would have afforded some protection, but did sign legislation funding a meat inspection

program. (Doris Kearns, "The Bully Pulpit.")

In 1907 the US Dept. of Agriculture's Bureau of Chemistry issued guidelines that would have led to a statute limiting the use of sulfuric acid in preparing dried fruits. T.R., however, ignored his administration's experts, suspended the law and appointed a group of five scientists to select a group of men to eat 28 pounds of dried fruit within a 30 day period. The study concluded that there was 'no problem' except for a few allergic reactions. The proposed remedy was that there should be disclosure on the labels of the presence of sulfuric acid in the dried fruit. (And I'll bet none of the participants were able to look at a fruit cake again!)

During William Taft's administration, in 1913, a statute was enacted that tightened product safety standards, but only after 36 people fell ill, of which 23 died after consuming canned food, contracting botulism there from.

Woodrow Wilson's administration, (1913-1921) was, understandably, much more concerned about World War I than it was in clean food. But rather than legislation, he used his

power of persuasion and emphasis on loyalty to persuade Americans to create “Liberty Gardens” in which they could raise their own fresh (and wholesome) vegetables and fruits for themselves and for the market.

In 1921, Warren Harding enacted a statute requiring the pasteurization of milk. The administrations of Calvin Coolidge (1923-1929) and Herbert Hoover (1929-1933) seem not to have done much with issues re: food and product safety, hopefully because existing law was doing its job with protecting the public.

But with the publication of Upton Sinclair’s book, “The Jungle,” and FDR’s meeting with Sinclair, the issues were revived. during Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s terms, 1933-1945.” FDR sent his own inspectors to inspect some meat packing companies. Appalled by what they saw, the inspectors easily persuaded FDR to take action. The Beveridge Bill was the result, which mandated inspections and a determination if the findings merited passing the conditions or condemning them. The meatpackers were furious and so vocal in their opposition that FDR, bless his heart, released a preliminary report which described some of the conditions and notified the meatpackers that if they did not retreat from pressuring Congress not to pass the bill, he would release the full report which graphically described the conditions and would have likely resulted in a public uproar against the meat industry. The Pure Food and Drug Act was quickly passed to avert the disclosure.

FDR took similar aggressive action against the patent medicine industry. One interesting discovery was that one of the large firms advertised that it had a kindly expert named Ms. Pinkham who would personally answer any letter and questions about the company’s medicines and products. After over two decades of her providing such service, one wary customer researched her and found that she had been dead for two decades. Further re-examination of these products found such mislabeling as an ointment marketed as a cure for cancer was actually a mixture of clay and glycerin. As a result, FDR was able to persuade Congress to pass laws dealing with these issues.

Doris Kearns summed up FDR’s successes: “Had Congress accomplished even one of the three major issues of railroad regulation, meat inspection or food and drug oversight... the first sessions of the 59th Congress would have been historic. Taken together, these three monumental measures marked the beginning of a new epoch in federal legislation – government regulations re: corporations and the invocation of police power, so to speak, to stop the hand of private greed and protect the general welfare.” (p. 466)



Larkin soaps with fine aromas.

So back to LSC and JDL. From the outset of the company in 1875, the company used only the very best ingredients in its soaps and other personal care products. Not only did they have lingering aromas, but also, if edible, great flavors. Come with me to the Larkin Gallery and I will unlock a case or two. You will be astonished by the fresh aromas of the soaps and also of the spices that the company was soon also was

grinding and selling. And they are over 100 years old!!

Inspectors were awestruck to find, that though legally permissible, no additives were mixed in with product. I have described previously that a salesman of grinders could not get over the fact that LSC did not add sawdust to its spices! Check out even today the spice and also ground cheese containers at the grocery stores. You are likely to find in the list of ingredients, cellulose. Guess what! That is sawdust!

Dan Larkin informs us that JDL had at times personally travelled to Europe and to areas where spices as well as coffee beans could be procured, to identify the healthiest and best for shipment. All such products were carefully inspected by trained staff, when they arrived at LCo, with only the best in terms of health, flavor and fragrance before being accepted into the plant.

In order to produce such fine products, a clean workplace was mandatory. But it was also mandatory for the safety and comfort of the up to 4000 employees. Not only must machines and work tables, but floors, walls and windows. Look at our building! The exterior walls are mostly windows. Not only did those windows emit light but also provided ventilation. Drinking fountains and washrooms were plentiful. JDL required that these structures be continuously sanitized.

At a time when employee benefits were not required and were a rarity, LSC provided its employees an amazing array of benefits. It had MD's and nurses in house to treat employees not only for injuries, but for sicknesses even though unrelated to their jobs. And, if they had no other option, they could have family members seen by the medical staff at LSC as well. I have previously described the availability of large houses owned by the LSC on the shore of Lake Erie which were available to employees for not only recreation, but as a get away for health or fatigue reasons.

Classes of all kinds, but especially for reading, were offered free to employees. The company made available a library for the use of employees; competitions were set up to encourage reading. The LSC published an employees' newsletter, "Ourselves," as well as a magazine about LSC and its products, "The Larkin Idea", which was sent to the Larkin "Secretaries" who sold Larkin products at parties in their homes all over the country. Athletics were encouraged including competitive sports with employees teaming up to out best each other.



Larkin spices.

I could go on and on, but the point I am trying to make is that without there being a statutory mandate re: the work conditions, employee benefits or quality of products, LSC was on top of it all from the beginning. And with hundreds of tourists coming every day to tour the company, LSC had to be on top of all aspects of its operation. It reminds me of that old saying, “He ain’t heavy; he’s my brother.” Though the company passed all inspections as the years passed, they were not the motivation for operating as they did. JDL’s character and commitment to do right by his employees and customers far exceeded what governmental requirements imposed.

When King Albert and Queen Elizabeth visited LSC in 1919 to observe post-war industry here to assist them in rebuilding Belgium which had been devastated during the War, LSC had not been put on the agenda by the US government. These leaders had learned of LSC from some other source (I would love to know the source). The officials marshalling them from place to place argued with them because the visit wasn’t planned for, but the king prevailed. And they loved what they found here, frustrating their handlers even more when they “overstayed” the schedule because there was so much to see here – especially intrigued by the macaroni making machine (how is that hole made?) and the soap wrapping machines. Once again LSC had shrugged off federal formality and had done its own thing; and once again it was extremely successful.

Though LSC complied with local, state and federal requirements, its bar was set much higher.