

SCHOOL DAYS AT LARKIN CO.

It's August, and no matter how old we are; no matter how long it has been since we last attended school, we still get those twinges of anxiety, regret, anticipation. So it is with the return of those feelings that my thoughts turned to the Larkin Co. and its commitment to promoting education for its employees.

I have, in a past article, referred to the subject of education as one of many Larkin employee benefits. This month it is my intent to focus on education as a major commitment of LCo to its employees. John Larkin, Sr.. (JDL) was deeply dedicated to the concept of education, together with reading, as being very important to everybody, but inaccessible often to those who would benefit from those activities the most.

A Canisius College professor, Howard Stanger, published a research paper in 2003 entitled "Ourselves: Welfare Capitalism in the Larkin Co., 1905-1939" which he presented at proceedings of the Industrial Research Assn. He probably found, as I do, that records of the employees, payrolls, cost of benefits and other such detail, have largely disappeared, probably into dumpsters. What few records exist are accessible in the archives of both the Buffalo History Museum and the Buffalo Public Library.

Stanger described in his paper, the workforce at LCo as of March, 1907. At that time, LCo employed 980 office workers and 1242 factory workers. By 1919 those numbers had grown to about 1275 office workers and 2225 factory employees. He states that 64% of the total work force were young and single women. They were, Stanger says, citing LCo executive, Darwin Martin as a source, the target of many of the benefits offered.

Between 1906 and 1920, JDL became increasingly concerned about the growing income and life style gap between executives and employees. In these years a benefit structure was developed to address JDL's concerns, specifically by providing financial enhancements and the creation of health, leisure and education programs and services. There were, says Stanger, two main themes through all of these programs, i.e. an "ethos of self-help and the spirit of cooperation."

That LCo was successful early on in its employee-friendly, respectful approach towards its employees was noted very early in the history of the company. In a 1901 edition of the "Larkin Idea," a publication provided to the Larkin Secretaries (i.e., the women all over the country who held parties in their

homes where guests would select product from Larkin catalogs to purchase and thereby become entitled to the certificates which could be exchanged for premiums). In that issue of the “Larkin Idea”, Darwin Martin reported that the N.Y.S. Labor Bureau’s factory inspector had recently toured LCo and “pronounced the plant ‘magnificent’ and expressed great pleasure at the satisfied manner and appearance of the employees.” See, also, Daniel Larkin’s biography of his grandfather, “JDL, A Business Pioneer, (1998, p. 114)

The first major effort re: education occurred in 1905, says Stanger, with the creation on the premises of a YWCA. In addition to its recreation and leisure time activities, its very important role was in providing a number of educational opportunities. This was followed in 1907 by LCo creating an Education Dept. which expanded the course offerings and made them available to male employees as well as female. Stanger adds that in 1915, LCo established classes for job training and new employee orientation. PHOTO 1

Announcements and news about these classes were published in the employee’s newsletter, known as “Ourselves.” While I lacked early issues, by 1916 information about the classes was regularly published in the newsletter. That year the YWCA English class had so many enrollees, it had to be divided, with one class preparing for the Regents certificate, and the other, aimed more at immigrants, was designed to ‘brush up’ on English. (See Vol. 10, No. 2, 10/15/1916).

The YWCA educational offerings included performance activities, for instance, a choral club. Its Drama Club, that year, began preparing a performance of ‘Jean of Arc,’ which was declared upon its production in April, 1917, to be great and of the caliber one would expect of a major theater. (See “Ourselves,” Vol. 10, No. 2; 10/15/1916 and Vol. 10, No. 8, 4/15/1917. PHOTO 2

Later that year, the 10/15/1917 issue of “Ourselves,” (Vol. 10, No. 14), reported on the success of an employees’ poetry writing contest on the theme of work-related humor. One of the winners included:

“Overtime is clovertime
My envelope is fat.
The pay clerk’s page is full of rage.
Now what do you think of that?”

Clearly the effort was to be fun, but at the same time introduced employees to the art and structure of poetry. I would have enjoyed seeing the result of the next month’s theme, “My Boss”!

That same issue of “Ourselves” also announced the scheduling of the “usual classes of sewing and cooking,” but added that the YWCA expected to add classes in French, first aid, Business English and Current Events. PHOTO 3

During World War I, employees were active in volunteer work related to the war effort, but the numbers of attendees in night school was nevertheless very great, "especially in Advanced English, Auto Mechanics, French and Cooking. They anticipated soon adding a course on Political Issues." ("Ourselves," Vol. 11, No. 1, 10/15/1918)

The Spring, 1919 courses included First Aid, English, Oral English, Cooking, Current Events, Problems of Reconstruction, Millinery and French, In 1920, the Larkin YWCA offered Business English, Dressmaking, Violin, Basketry, Penmanship, Dramatics, Current Events and Fife and Drum Corps Training. ("Ourselves," Vol. 11, No 21; Oct. 1920).

Employees were also encouraged to attend evening classes given by the Buffalo School System. The offerings of the school system were heartily embraced by LCo and, in time, classes were held at LCo as well as in schools throughout the city.

Calvert K. Miller, Principal at Lafayette High School, in an article he wrote for the 9/1/1919, Vol. 11, No. 9 issue of "Ourselves", welcomed LCo workers, saying, "The evening schools of the City of Buffalo offer unusual opportunities for the office or factory worker, and it is gratifying to note the large number of young men and women who, year after year, avail themselves of these opportunities. The courses in these schools are most flexible as they include academic, technical and business studies." He noted that many successful men and women credit the courses and their influence. PHOTO 4

Courses were aimed to assist attendees to acquire more knowledge, improve their minds, finish high school, help to become more proficient in their jobs and advance to higher job responsibility, according to Miller.

Courses offered by the Public School evening program included not only elementary subjects of reading, writing, spelling and language, but more advanced and technical subjects. A major offering was English for foreigners, taught at every school throughout the city. Skills taught included reading, writing and conversing in English and preparation for qualifying for citizenship, along with enabling students to participate in debate and advanced English skills. PHOTO 5

Other languages were also taught including French, Spanish and Latin. Night students could also take Math, Sciences, Music and Art, as well as Business classes in advertising, bookkeeping, correspondence, stenography and filing. Domestic arts such as sewing, embroidery, basketry, cooking, catering and dietetics, were popular.

The City school night courses did not overlook job skills. One could take bench woodworking, cabinet making, machine shop practice, auto mechanics, blue print reading, carpentry, photography, electrical work, welding. Technical

courses also were available in commercial design, drafting, engineering, plumbing and sign lettering.

The Public evening school was described in a pamphlet dated 9/1/1923 entitled "Adult Education in Buffalo: The Evening Public Schools." Acknowledging the inability of the day schools to meet all educational needs, its aim was to present adequate training to avoid failure and frustration. Though not limited to immigrants, the night school system was aimed primarily at the "millions of foreign born immigrants in the U.S. who cannot speak, read or write English. They should be provided with a definite source of knowledge relating to our government, its machinery, history, traditions and ideals."

The pamphlet mentioned that classes were being held seven days a week at places convenient to the students including hotels, missions, hospitals and factories. To prove its point, the pamphlet included a photo of a shop class being held in the Larkin plant!

JDL was extremely concerned that the immigrants working in his company, succeed in this country. A survey performed by LCo revealed that there were 164 men working in the factory who could not read nor write English. "The necessity for caring for this branch of the family was imminent," wrote employee, E.E. Schaefer in an article entitled "The Binding Ties of Larkin Americanization," for the March, 1920 issue of "Ourselves, Vol 11, No. 15. LCo considered whether it was best to urge these men to attend Public School evening classes in local schools or to hold the classes at LCo.

"Because the latter course saves time for the employees, because of the closer cooperation between teacher and foreman obtained and maintained and by reason of the fact that it is not necessary for the employee to 'dress up,' which leads to self-consciousness and is an obstacle to the progress of the student, it was adopted." By one week later, three classrooms had been set up with blackboards, chairs and tables (covered by books, paper and pencils). Separate classes were set up for the illiterate or for those who could speak a little English or for those who had some prior reading ability. A local school principal taught each class.

The classes met twice a week. At times the classes combined to do something like tour the plant to learn the meaning of such signs as 'exit,' 'elevator,' 'shut the door,' 'safety first,' and 'danger.' Schaefer noted that this instruction eventually must lead to "better citizens, fewer accidents, better jobs, more prosperity and bigger AMERICAN LARKINITES!" He ends by admonishing foremen and department heads to encourage attendance and reinforce the teaching during the work day.

Another component of the LCo education program was to hold lectures to which the employees were invited. Both Darwin Martin and William Heath gave lectures. Always the 'Company Man,' Martin was quoted in the 2/15/1919 issue

of "Ourselves," Vol. 11, No. 4, as trying to persuade employees that "Only half of your compensation comes in your pay envelope. The other half comes from the pleasure you get from your work." He and Heath frequently gave employees tours of the plant so they could better appreciate its history and the extent of the products manufactured there.

An Ohio State professor gave two courses of five lectures each on public speaking. The lectures were attended by a large number of attendees, leading to "Ourselves" Editor, Francis Frazee claiming that there were now a large number of employees capable of giving speeches. (See Vol. 11, No.21, Oct. 1929)

Over 500 employees showed up for a lecture by a Juvenile Judge from Denver who spoke about how his court was helping to 'solve the problem of the Bad Boy.' ("Ourselves, Vol. 10, No 17, 2/15/1918)

In 1907 LCo established a policy that further widened the opportunity of employees to engage in educational programs. The LCo. Employee handbook, "You and Larkin Co.," provided an 'educational offer.' For any employee of at least 6 months' service, who desired to take up a course of public education, the company was willing to reward that effort by reimbursing the costs of text books, supplies and carfare. The employee had to meet certain minimum requirements of attendance and grades. Later, a 9/1/1919 article in "Ourselves" defined the conditions for reimbursement to specify 90% attendance and 75% grade. It also added tuition to the list of reimbursable expenses.

Because most LCo financial records have been lost or destroyed over the years, I find no data on how many employees utilized the program, nor how much the company paid in reimbursement. My suspicion is that it was a lot, considering the volume of employees taking advantage of the free programs of the YWCA, the LCo education program and the Public School night classes. It seems that employees at that time were eager for those kinds of opportunities (pre-TV, don't you know!)

The Buffalo History Museum does have a folder of what appears to be a bookkeepers ledger of income and expenses that had been prepared probably to be given to the income tax preparer for the 1921 return. Entries are not explained. Under expenses the record shows the Larkin YWCA receiving \$14,256 (but did this include all costs of activities of the YWCA, or just education?) The School Dept. (presumably the separate one LCo had created that included men) had the sum of \$33,087 of expense attributed to it.. These numbers are in contrast to \$927 for the Boy's Club and \$2451 for "Health". Charitable donations totaled \$15,734. Gift certificates to employees totaled \$14,685! Without further documentation to interpret these numbers, I still feel safe in saying that LCo's investment in education of employees was significant.

Another related area of LCo's commitment to education was its encouragement of reading. It long had a company library, probably going back to the late 1800's. The employee's manual, "You and Larkin," describes it as being a collection of books on business and technical subjects which books could be borrowed for a "reasonable period of time" or read in the library located on our second floor.

The books contained in the library were donated. Donors' names were published in "Ourselves." (see, for example, the April 1, 1919 issue, Vol. 11, No. 5). We have in the Larkin Gallery a collection of ten novels donated to the Gallery by Marie Carney, who told us that they had been the property of her great Grandmother, Georgia Gladys Kinsler. Inside the cover of each in the same handwriting is Mrs. Kinsler's name, then "Larkin Co." and a date in 1920 or 1921. It appears they were in the Larkin Library, but were perhaps returned to her at some point.

The Larkin YWCA supported the Larkin Library. For instance, in the 2/15/1918 issue of "Ourselves" (Vol. 10, No 17), the YWCA boasted that "Our bookcase in the show room contains some of the very finest books, so make the best of your opportunities and read, read, read." The article went on to admonish employees not to read trash.

A second library was started at about the same time as the company library when what is now the Buffalo Public Library created a "travelling library" at LCo. According to Daniel Larkin's biography of JDL, both JDL and his wife, Frank, were big supporters of the public library, and though not on the executive board that I can tell, were apparently quite active in other ways. The Buffalo Public Library has no records of financial contributions going back that far, and little more about the early years of the current public library which was the result of a merger in 1897 except for annual reports from that date forward. Those reports do not show monetary gifts.

But given the fondness of the Larkins for the central library, it is not surprising that, given the opportunity to have a branch of it at LCo, they seized the opportunity. A review of the annual Board's reports shows the first record of it having a branch at LCo was in 1899. There is no record of what or how many books might have been placed there at that time. However, by 1900 the annual reports began detailing the numbers of books in circulation at each of its "travelling libraries" or branch. By 1900 LCo's branch was populated by 29 magazines and 339 books. Each year after (except 1910) more books were added. By 1914 books were being placed at two locations at the LCo, the original one in the factory (our building) and others at the Administration Building.

The library's annual board report for 1915 mentions that the head Librarian "called attention to the growing demand for books from those engaged in Buffalo's industries and to the cooperation between the manufacturers and the

Public Library to meet this need.” (What a surprising audience for books! – my comment) By that time here were just over 1000 books in the LCo branch libraries. After 1917 the annual reports ceased showing the numbers of books in circulation at individual factories, just the total books in all branch libraries located in factories. The last report I looked at was 1929, and speaks of travelling libraries at churches, clubs, charitable institutions and fire houses, but does not mention industry nor factories. It is unclear when LCo ceased to have a public Library branch.

We do know that on March 20, 1901, Darwin Martin posted a memo at LCo saying, “This office is in disgrace at the Buffalo Public Library because on returning books to the Library it was found that there were 34 volumes short.” That memo is located in the scrapbook of Larkin memos from 1898-1903 on display in the Larkin Gallery. Were the books ever returned? Since the relationship with the Buffalo Public Library continued till the 1920’s, it must be that one way or another, the problem was resolved.

Not only did the Public Library place books at LCo, according to the employee’s manual, “You and Larkin Co.”, but any employee with a Central Public Library card could order books to be brought from the main library. The branch at LCo could also receive from and forward to the main library applications for new or renewal cards.

The YWCA at Larkin promoted a reading competition wherein a participant was required to read a book twice then write a small synopsis of it. A list of recommended books was provided. Fiction was acceptable, but readers were again admonished to make the book a worthwhile one, “something you would be glad to have 10 or 20 years from now or something that you would be proud to lend friends and anxious to have your children read.” The 6/15/1918 issue of “Ourselves” (Vol. 10, No. 21) reported that in the first quarter of that year, 189 books had been read and synopsized.

LCo also urged visits to the Albright Art Gallery, where classes were held on drawing and design. (JDL had actually loaned money to John Albright to complete the building of the Gallery in 1901). Employees were also encouraged to attend musical concerts such as those performed by the Buffalo Community Chorus or performances at the Elmwood Music Hall. Then, of course, there were always the concerts put on by the Larkin YWCA’s Women’s Fife and Drum Corp.

Clearly LCo’s vision – indeed, JDL’s vision – for the LCo employees was to create in them not only reliable and capable workers, but well-rounded people whose education and talents were nurtured far beyond those needed for their jobs. They left their employ, not only well-paid, but intellectually and culturally stimulated. And as we shall see in a future article, healthy, both physically and emotionally.

My appreciation to the staffs of the Buffalo History Museum and the Buffalo Public Library for making available to me their archival material.