

FRANCES HUBBARD LARKIN: EVERYONE CALLED HER 'FRANK'

His hand trembling and heart pounding, the handsome, slender young man wrote a note to the young lady he scarcely knew but who had overpowered his ability to concentrate on any thing other than HER. Having visited with her but a few times and always in the company of her family members, this day, Nov. 5, 1873 he was summoning all his courage to invite her, not to some night club or dance hall, but to a prayer meeting. He addressed the note to "Miss Audacious Stunner" and signed it "Your Obedient Servant Adolphus GreenPickle." She accepted! PHOTO 1, 2

With all the courage he could summon, John D. Larkin, then age 28 – and probably having fervently prayed throughout the church service – proposed marriage to Frances (known by all as 'Frank') the next day. When Frank apparently responded with giggles and avoided committing herself, John wrote the first of a series of letters to Frank apologizing for his awkwardness, for being perhaps too businessman-like, too matter-of-fact. He confessed that he knew he must have sounded too unromantic and practical. Reminding Frank of the their spending time together the previous summer at her family's home a few hours away from John's home which he shared with Frank's cousin, Justus Weller, and his family in Chicago, he wrote, "I found that there was a oneness of Feeling and Thought that I had never experienced before with anyone."

Frank returned home within a day or two. Her parting words were that "maybe we could live Happy together," the first hint to John that she might be interested in marriage. Perhaps feeling confused by Frank's seeming reluctance to seize the opportunity to marry him, John urged her not to make a final decision till after she had returned home.

More letters were exchanged through the fall and winter; Frank told her mother of their engagement, and with the matter decided, John relaxed. His letters took on an aura of "playful intimacy." By the end of March 1874, a wedding day of May 10 was set. PHOTO 3

How do we know these intimate details? Frank kept all their love letters tied in bundles with ribbon. Several generations later, they fell into the hands of John's and Frank's grandson, Daniel Larkin, whose biography of John, "John D, Larkin: A Business Pioneer," and his genealogy of the Larkin family were sources of much of the information in this article. Dan's affection and respect for John and Frank permeate every page of these writings.

By way of background, John's sister, Mary, had married Justus several years before. John, at age 16, had gone to work for Justus at the soap company he owned, down

Seneca Street just over the railroad tracks in what we now call the Seneca-Babcock neighborhood. When Justus decided to move his company to Chicago in 1870, he made his young brother-in-law a partner and John moved with him and his sister, Mary.

Frank's mother, Juliana Frances Reed, as a teenager, actually had held newborn John in her arms in Sept. 1845. Both Juliana (then a teenager) and John's mother, Mary Ann Durrant Larkin, attended the Cottage Baptist Church (located on the site of what is now Kleinhan's Music Hall). When the teenage girls of the church heard of the birth of this child, they visited Mary Ann for the fun of holding her baby.

Juliana had moved to Buffalo as a young girl with her parents. Probably in her teens she had begun to teach at the Seneca Indian Reservation. There she met a young physician, Silas Hubbard, who provided medical care to the Senecas at the reservation. He began inviting Julianna to ride in his buggy which led to his wooing her and marriage. Frank, born in 1853, was their second child. Two years later the Hubbards moved to Hudson, Ill., 100 miles from Chicago.

So when Justus moved to Chicago in 1869, he was anxious to spend time with his uncle, Silas Hubbard. On one of those visits he brought his partner, John. Frank's sister, Mary (who later went on to marry a Chicago attorney, William Heath) described her first impression of John on the first occasion that she and Frank visited Jus in Chicago: "As we stood on the balcony, a small, handsome, dark-eyed young man, with brown side whiskers, and a very firm, white chin, came running lightly up the stairs." Mary later reported, after several visits with Frank to Chicago, that Frank enjoyed the sights and excitement of the great city with its opportunities for shopping, and going to fine theaters and parks. "Above all, there is every reason to believe that Frank was strongly attracted to the handsome young man with the whiskers who was her cousin's business partner." (Here Dan Larkin cites Mary Hubbard Heath's book, "The Elbert Hubbard I Knew.") Mary recalled John's many visits, attending church activities, singing hymns, going to parties, picnics and "many outdoor frolics." In the winter, John skated gracefully and dexterously on ponds "to the delight of the villagers, but best I remember him sitting with Frank under the sweet-briar rose bush, engaged in long and earnest conversations."

Finally, with ever mounting of the exquisite tension that used to precede the wedding, Frank and John were married in a beautiful ceremony in the Hubbard's home. Her brother, Elbert ("Bert"), who Frank adored, was John's best man.

The week of the wedding, Frank cried a lot, her younger sisters perplexed because they "knew nothing of the emotional turmoil that Frank had experienced in reaching the decision to marry John, to leave home and to commit herself to life in an unfamiliar world with a relative stranger." But she got through it and I am sure she never looked back.

The next few months were tumultuous, with Frank shopping for household items with which to set up an apartment, settling in, becoming pregnant with their first child, Charlie, born March 4, 1875; John and Jus breaking up their partnership and the move to Buffalo where John quickly began his own soap making business in a leased building on

Chicago Street. Bert, at the age of 19, came along with them. He worked for John on the road “slinging soap”, but when in Buffalo, he stayed with them.

Once again, Frank was busy setting up a household at 213 Eagle Street (a rental property). She also attended church and she and John entertained John’s old friends. But her lifelong history of having periods of “blues” became more apparent to John in her new community.

Soon Frank was again pregnant, with Frances Elberta, who was born on 9/9/1876, and with house hunting for the first home she and John would own. Whoops! Did I say “she and John?” Actually they purchased 218 Swan St. in Frank’s name only, my guess being, as folks do even today, protecting their home from claims of the business’ creditors should the company fail. Fascinatingly, the Mortgage (not a Deed as Dan mentions) was signed on 4/18/1876 by Frank in the presence of a Notary Public who swore, in writing, that “the said Francis (sic) H. Larkin in a private examination by me apart from her husband acknowledged that she executed the same freely and without fear of her Husband.”

Dan points out that four of seven of John and Frank’s children were born while they resided in the Swan St. house. While she was 6 months pregnant with child no. 2 (Frances Elberta but always known as Daisy), Frank, along with baby Charlie, accompanied brother Bert on a sales trip to Philadelphia. While Dan speculates that she may have wanted “a change from John’s serious absorption” in his business, the draw may have been the opportunity to visit the great Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. The weekend that John had proposed to her, they had also visited the Chicago World Exposition. Her interest may have been piqued enough in such overwhelming events, that perhaps she was the source of inspiration that led to John’s having a pavilion dedicated solely to his company at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901. No other individual business had its own pavilion. I would love to know for sure.

Dan notes that Frank, who had graduated from Normal College in Illinois, exhibited intellectual curiosity and had a love for history and art. She would have been attracted to the Centennial Exhibition’s art gallery as well as the United States Building filled with rich historical exhibits.

But Dan is quick to point out that John was very pleased with the home life. Frank “was a wonder at managing the establishment.” Even when they could not afford much help, Frank capably shopped for the house, paid all the bills and cared for the children with great devotion. John was quick to express his appreciation; by the summer of 1877 she was pregnant again, this time with John, Jr., born on 10 28/1877. To his credit, throughout his career, John left his office every day at 5:00 to be home with his wife and children. Dan says, “John valued every minute that he could spare from the ‘Works’ to be with his family.”

He loved taking the family out in his horse and carriage, often taking the family for picnics at Delaware Park. He and Frank had pews at several churches and attended

Sunday services as well as church socials. They attended many charity events, festivals, art exhibits and theatrical performances. They both were active in the Buffalo Public Library.

Baby Harry was born in 1881. Though John was very busy growing the company, Dan says that "Frank could always count on his being home at dinner time, bringing little presents for the children, joining in their games, planning excursions into the country and picnics in the park." 1884 saw the family again moving into a larger home built to their specifications at 125 Hodge Street. It was in a great neighborhood near Delaware Park as well as near Elmwood, which even then had lots of shops as well as a grocery store that had -- a phone!! With joy and optimism, they prepared for and moved into what really was **their** home. Life was good as they began 1885.

In a previous article I related the details of the horrible event on 8/16/1885 when seven-year-old Edith caught fire and died from her burns at the family's camp on Lake Erie. This was a tragedy that plunged Frank into deep depression; she was never able to return to the camp. John and her brother, Elbert, were undoubtedly a comfort to her, but the pain must have been exquisite. Dan does not detail the aftermath, though he had access to both Frank and John's diaries and letters. PHOTO 4

Two years later, in 1887 baby Hubbard was born only to die two months later, further depressing Frank. Nevertheless in 1891 she delivered baby Ruth.

She also sought solace in keeping very busy, and perhaps John had a hand in keeping her involved with outside activities. She did some writing of advertising copy for Larkin Co. products. Dan mentions that one product was "Clover Pink Sachet powder that was to become one of the company's best selling products." She served as a model for several of the company's marketing brochures. In one from 1895, she is drawn reclining in a "Chautauqua Reclining Chair." The brochure is 18 pages long, advertising 10 premiums and is entitled, "Can We Break the Crust?" Dan's note about it says, "The only copy of this booklet I have seen is in the private collection of Jerome P. Puma, who graciously supplied me with a copy." That booklet is now, thanks to Jerry's generosity, on the top shelf of the case to the immediate right as one walks into our Larkin Gallery. PHOTO 5

It appears Frank did pretty well until Nov., 1892 when brother Bert blindsided the family, not only Frank and John, but also his elderly parents who had relocated in East Aurora and his wife, Bertha, and their children. He initially announced to John that he was leaving the company, supposedly to go to Harvard and become a writer. He demanded that John immediately have the company evaluated and that John buy out his interest. (He had been made a partner a number of years before.) The amount he demanded was much more than John could pay without liquidating company assets. They finally agreed on a payment plan. John made the first payment, but then the devastating Panic of 1893 occurred in the spring. John was unable to make the next payment. Bert was insistent that the payment be made, and when John could not comply, Bert sued his brother-in-law. John ended up liquidating some of his personal assets, but

in the course of reviewing Bert's work at the company, John discovered troubling irregularities. It appears he did not pursue Bert about this, perhaps because of all the distress it was causing Frank, who still loved her brother. Even when they learned he was not a student at Harvard, but was in fact having an affair with a woman he had moved to Massachusetts to keep the affair a secret, though agonizing to Frank, John still honored the deal.

Bert came back to his wife, Bertha, who, by the way, he had impregnated during what turned out to be his double life, and seemed to be settling down with her. Frank felt relief, as did the elder Hubbards. PHOTO 6, 7

The late 1890's also became a time that the Larkins discovered the joys of travel. Frank kept diaries of the trips, taken usually with John. The first big trip was to England, accompanied by friends, Mr. and Mrs. Spencer Kellogg, and a nurse, Miss Berry. Reflecting the fact that Frank indeed adored – and forgave – her brother, a high point on the trip came when she received a letter from Bert. Many more trips followed; it seemed that such trips were a panacea for the “blues,” which continued to plague her.

Dan notes that “it was a great satisfaction of John to see his beloved Frank so delighted with England. She might never be strong, but she will always thrive on travel, and his greatest delight was to provide everything to make this possible.”

Travel intensified Frank's appreciation of John ever more. On one such trip to Paris with John, who was meeting “essential oil people” re: the purchase of fragrances for the company, Frank met Cornelius Vanderbilt, head of the NY Central Railroad, and also Richard Croker, a powerful Tammany boss who ruled his political associates with a hand of iron, finding them to be in sharp contrast to the character of her unassuming, considerate and loving husband who was himself rapidly becoming a ‘Captain of Industry’. In her diary about this trip, she describes an incident that exemplified his quiet love of fun. When they both returned home, waiting for her was a post card sent from the Eiffel Tower from John. It said, “Having a few minutes time here, I take pleasure in wishing you a Bon Voyage and safe return to your home.”

Dan also points to the social and civic activities in which Frank immersed herself in those years. “Her involvement in the social and intellectual life of the city meant a great deal to Frank.” Along with her travels, “she found peace of mind and release from ‘the blues.’” Because of her intelligence and creativity, despite her bouts of ill health, she was never one to be idle while there was life to be tried.”

Dan lists a number of her activities: leading member of a literary club, presenting papers on various subjects; member of DAR for which she researched, wrote, and presented a paper entitled “Central Asia in the Past and Prospectively, a Study of the History of the Region with an Emphasis on Russian Expansion”; and a member, along with John, of the Buffalo Country Club. She was a friend of artists and founder of the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy; and a friend of Frances Folsom, wife of Grover Cleveland. She joined the Twentieth Century Club in 1903 and continued as a member till her death

in 1922, per the records of that Club. Its archives reflect her participating in a number of club committees and events. She and her daughter-in-law, Edna Crate Larkin (married to John, Jr.), who she had sponsored as a member, contributed furnishings and decorative items to the Club from time to time. Frank and John attended a DAR ball there on New Years Eve, 1901.

John, also, had impressed the community with “his quiet but firm integrity, his deliberate good judgment, together with his positive attitude and his consideration of others (which earned) him the respect and affection of his fellow businessmen.” As an example, when John Albright ran out of money to complete the building of the Albright Art Gallery, John loaned him the money he needed.

The 1900's started out good for the family. The U.S. economy was growing, the company was doing well. The Pan-American Exposition brought lots of attention and excitement. The oldest children, Charlie and Frances had married; John, Jr. and Harry were working for the company. Little Ruth, age 9, was lively and beautiful, helping to fill the void created by Edith's death in 1885. Frank was particularly pleased that her parents, Silas and Juliana Hubbard, moved back to East Aurora after many years in Illinois.

Frank took visiting relatives to see the Pan-American Expo, attending concerts at the Temple of Music and enjoying tea at the Women's Pavilion. There can be no doubt she was very proud of the beautiful Larkin Pavilion where hundreds of visitors from all over the country, many of them Larkin Secretaries (who sold Larkin products from their homes) and customers lined up for hours to see the exhibits, receive a wrapped bar of soap and then take a shuttle to the manufacturing complex (i.e. our building) for a docent led tour. On October 6, 2001 The “Buffalo Courier” newspaper referred to the latter as one of the wonders of the city. PHOTO 8

Two major real estate acquisitions were made in these exciting first years of the decade. John purchased an even larger home than the Hodge Street House, this at 237 North St., which he felt was more suitable for a family of their status. We do know what Frank thought of it; she hated it. John promised to make changes to it but at about the same time, John bought property in Queenston, Canada, located on the edge of the gorge overlooking the Niagara River opposite Lewiston. There was a very large but neglected house dating back to 1830 facing the gorge, which she and John hastened to restore into a beautiful residence. They named the property “Glencairn.”

Totally in love with the property, Frank went to work creating beautiful flower gardens. Also she had a Japanese teahouse built by which she planted an awe-inspiring Japanese garden. To her delight, Frank Lloyd Wright and his wife, who had just returned from a trip to Japan, visited. Frank entered into her diary, referred to as the “Glencairn Log,” that Wright deemed the garden “a great success.” PHOTO 9

Glencairn was further honored by being the inspiration for what became a best-selling book, "A Garden in Pink" by Blanche Elizabeth Wade. It included many photos of the house and gardens.

Needless to say, family members were a constant part of the landscape. Eventually their children, Charlie, John, Jr., Harry and Frances Larkin Esty, built homes for themselves nearby. Sister, Mary and brother-in-law, William Heath and parents Silas and Julianna Hubbard, visited frequently.

Dan Larkin's: "Genealogy of the Descendants of John D. Larkin," answers the question of, what was John doing through all of this? In addition to continuing to run his business and continuing to leave work at 5:00 to be home with his family, in the months they spent each year at Glencairn, from April to October, he drove to Lewiston and either crossed at the suspension bridge or rented a rowboat to be taken across the river to beneath Glencairn, from whence he climbed up the cliff on dirt steps. There he was met not only by Frank but a bevy of grandchildren eager to engage him in games and sports, as his children had done when they were young.

But that is not all he did. Dan, in the Genealogy, says that John was unable to suppress his love for building. Over the next few years, a string of poured concrete barns, out-buildings, and workers' cottages were constructed... to house the herds of imported Southdown sheep and Aberdeen Angus cattle and all the machinery and personnel required to serve hundreds of acres of apple and peach orchards."

In the midst of all these major changes in Frank's life – the international travel, the moves from house to house and setting up Glencairn, a major catastrophe occurred. She had loved and forgiven her brother, Bert Hubbard for his past transgressions, once he appeared to have reconciled with his wife, Bertha. John tolerated him from Frank's sake, Bert on occasion, visited them at Glencairn.

On September 27, 1901, the charade that all was well between Bert and his wife dramatically ceased with the publication by the Buffalo newspapers that Bert's paramour, Alice Moore had, with the help of her attorney brother, sued Bert for child support arrears of \$3500, for Bert's child, Miriam. That would be a large sum even today, but in 1901, that represented major noncompliance with whatever had been agreed to or ordered. Not only that, the scandal had now been made public. Frank and Bert's parents came down immediately to stay with Frank at Glencairn. Frank's diary entry that day said, "Ma's grief is pitiful. There is nothing to say, we will have to resort to the Power of Silence. It is harder for her and Bertha than for anyone else." On Oct. 1st she wrote, I'm tired out soul and body and am a wreck physically, mentally and spiritually. To think that our good name should be dragged down like this." The elders of the Baptist Church where she worshipped asked her to disassociate from her brother or leave the congregation. She chose the latter, but one can imagine the humiliation she felt.

The situation was worsened, when with psychopathic audacity (my words), Bert ran off to Massachusetts to be with Alice and Miriam (who apparently moved back there

after the scandal broke), taking his young son from his marriage to Bertha, young Bert, to get acquainted with Alice and Miriam. That was the last straw for Bertha who then filed for divorce. Bert's response was to give an interview to the Buffalo Courier newspaper in which he claimed that "his mother, father and children approved of his course of conduct towards his wife." Three days later the Buffalo Courier, based on interviews with his sisters, Frances (Frank) Larkin and Mary Heath, reported that they "denounce this statement as a total misrepresentation, and authorize the publication of a statement refuting the allegations made by Mr. Hubbard." Nevertheless, Frank was still torn between love of her brother and abhorrence for his behavior. Her depression became a greater burden for her. But she at least had Glencairn as a refuge.

The commencement of World War I, totally ruined Frank's passion for Glencairn, however. Where the war had seemed so distant, and Glencairn so safe a refuge physically and emotionally, suddenly it seemed that it was at her feet literally. John had on May 5, 1915, consented to the Canadian military using the property as a border guard post. Soldiers were stationed there to watch for espionage activity across the river. Seeing soldiers there at Glencairn was the last straw for Frank, who immediately bought property in East Aurora adjoining her parents' farm. But before the move was made, on May 7, 1915, the Lusitania was sunk by a German torpedo. Bert and Alice were aboard, despite warnings of risk of such an attack. Their bodies were never recovered. This shocking loss added to Frank's need to "hide" emotionally in the embrace of her parents who shared with her the combined emotions of anger, disappointment, love and loss occasioned by Bert's behaviors.

In 1909 both John and Frank fell in love with the area known as Rumsey Woods. Located between Delaware Park Lake, Forest Avenue and Olmsted's Lincoln Parkway, it was beautifully situated at what was then considered "north of the city." It had enough space for them to build a compound of houses so that their children could live there as well. The main house was completed in 1912 – a large colonial style mansion, followed by four smaller (but not at all small) houses for children Frances, Harry, John, Jr., and Charlie. They called this project "Larkland." Famously, it drew scorn from Frank Lloyd Wright who had designed the Larkin Administration Building and homes for Larkin Company officials, Darwin Martin (2 houses), William Heath, and Walter Davidson. In Wright's "Autobiography," he says, "In architecture they (the Larkins) were still pallbearers for the remains of Thomas Jefferson and subsequently all built colonial houses for themselves in Buffalo." PHOTO 10

The War curtailed Frank's travels, but she did get one more nice trip in during the winter of 1915. It included a boat trip through the Panama Canal, about which she remarked that it was the most wonderful achievement of modern times.

By 1920 Frank's health went into steady decline. She died on April 15, 1922. Dan sums up her life: "In spite of ups and downs, Frank had lived a full and active life. Although she and John had often been apart because of business and travel, theirs had been a very close relationship. Very different in temperament, they complemented each

other. Frank filled her life with the excitement and wonder of art, literature and romance. John provided the serenity and security that she needed to fulfill herself.”

And what of John? Their daughter, Ruth Robb and her husband and children moved into the main house with John. John being the inimitable, though quiet, fun guy, played with the Robb children and taught them how to play cards. He continued to go to work every day. Frequently he would walk up to Soldier’s Circle where Frank’s sister and brother-in-law, Mary and William Heath, lived along with their mother, Juliana Hubbard, now a widow. “Often he would sit with Juliana without communicating except in that unspoken way two people have who have known and loved and lost much that they both treasured.”

Note: My enormous gratitude to Dan Larkin whose love is reflected not just in his words, but in the overwhelming research he did regarding his grandparents. I have met Dan but at the time did not appreciate how much his work would come to mean to me. I really covet his archives!!!

Sources: Larkin, Daniel I., “John D. Larkin: A Business Pioneer,” 1998
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