

Darwin R. Martin: The Apple which **DID** Fall Far From the Tree

In past articles involving Darwin D. Martin (DDM), one of the officers and owners of the Larkin Soap Company (LSC), we gave witness to his amazing career beginning as a young teen till his death in 1935.

DDM had a stellar reputation as hard-working, intelligent and honest, traits recognized by John D. Larkin (JDL) when, in 1881, JDL promoted the then 16 year old to the position of Head Bookkeeper. DDM had been working as a soap slinger for the company since 1878 when he was only 13. PHOTO 1

DDM fell in love with Isabelle Reidpath around 1887. Marriage, in 1889, and fidelity followed. Their daughter, Dorothy, was born in 1896, followed by their son, Darwin R. (DRM) in 1900. Jack Quinan, internationally renowned scholar of Frank Lloyd Wright (FLW) and past Curator of the Darwin Martin House who resided for a time in the FLW-designed Barton House, wrote a book, "FLW's Martin House: Architecture as Portraiture," is the source of much of the biographical information contained in this article. The accompanying photo of the Martin family from around 1907 shows a scowling 7 year-old DRM standing in front of his grinning, proud father, DDM. Mother Isabelle sits between DRM and 11 year-old Dorothy. This photo is also from Quinan's book. PHOTO 2

DRM had nearly died as an infant, which likely caused his parents to dote on him. The difficult life DDM experienced with his own family and childhood likely added to DDM's commitment to work hard and give his wife and children the best lives that he could. DRM attended private schools in Buffalo and went on to graduate from Yale university.

Following in his father's footsteps, DRM cultivated a livelihood of purchasing property and investing in businesses.

From Quinan we know that by 1929 DDM had suffered a slight stroke and Isabelle's degenerative eye condition was worsening. She had recently fallen and injured herself in "the shadowy interior" of the FLW designed house built in the Olmstead designed neighborhood north of Delaware Park. In February of that year, DDM's brother-in law, George Barton, had died and it was expected that his wife, Delta (DDM's sister), would move out of the FLW house designed for them which was part of the Martin complex. DRM and his sister, Dorothy, had married and moved out of the home. In 1929 DDM wrote to FLW for advice re: what to do with the estate because he simply could not deal with all this property, as well as with their FLW-designed summer home in Derby known as Graycliff. PHOTO 3

DDM had been retired from the LSC since 1926. Though he had been very successful, the expense of the estate as well as Graycliff, was more than he could handle.

His letter requested Wright's ideas as to how he might be able to market the estate.

What he did not mention in his letter to FLW was that he had also heavily invested in a number of his son's business ventures, a disastrous reliance on his son's bravado about his skills in such matters.

In 1926 DRM had married Margaret Wende. Buffalo historian, Chuck Lachiusa, has written that by then, DRM had purchased the Stuyvesant Hotel on Elmwood Avenue. He and Margaret lived on the top floor. However, Patrick Mahoney, in his book, "FLW's Scholarly Clients, William and Mary Heath," indicates that Heath had invested heavily in the financially struggling hotel and apartment building which had been built and was owned by Peter Frank. Bankruptcy was declared and in an ensuing mortgage foreclosure, Heath was appointed Receiver in 1927. He had been designated Treasurer of the corporation in 1927 and by the next year, he was President. A creditor sued the corporation in 1930 and once again, Heath was appointed by a Judge to serve as Receiver. According to Mahoney, citing newspaper articles, DDM acquired Heath's interest in 1931 and DRM operated the hotel/apartment building until its foreclosure in 1967. However in my possession is a stock certificate dated 11/1/30, by which Heath as Secretary Treasurer and DDM as President conveyed 175 shares at \$100 per share par value to Isabelle, perhaps as a way of securing a loan made to the corporation by DDM. It appears that DRM, at least in the 1930's, was the Manager, but not the owner of the hotel. PHOTO 4

The hotel, at any rate, was nicely appointed, including a beautiful cabaret lounge with a hand made painted glass dance floor which survives to this day (though some of the pieces of glass are cracked).

At this point I will interject that the Larkin Gallery now has in its possession a treasure trove of documents of DRM's that had been disposed of many years ago and found quite by chance by Kevin Sheridan about twenty years ago. He generously donated them to the Larkin Gallery. I refer to them as "the Trove."

Apparently Stuyvesant Properties, Inc. was at some point renamed or conveyed to a new corporation, 245 Elmwood Avenue, Inc. According to Mahoney, DRM conceived the idea of adding a wing to the building, which is where the cabaret lounge, also known as the Peter Stuyvesant Room, was located.

Included in the "Trove" was a set of documents, "Special Reports," from a private investigator. DRM had hired him in 1954 apparently to ascertain if the employees working in the Peter Stuyvesant Room, were ripping off the hotel and the owner. The investigator performed his duties on 1/30-1/31 and 2/22-23/24. He faithfully and in detail, completed the investigation, identifying few concerns. His only "major" complaint seemed to be that the bellboy failed to carry out his luggage on the last day.

What is really interesting is what did not seem to concern him. DRM had appa-

rently told him to contact “Mr. Putnam” if he “wanted a girl.” Indeed, the investigator was able to identify Mr. Putnam, and approached him to say that friends had suggested he talk to him if he wanted “a girl.” Mr. Putnam had responded, “There are lots of girls around here – just ask one for a dance and spend a little money.” The investigator then witnessed a patron, after speaking to Mr. Putnam, approach a young girl to dance with him. The patron was then observed leaving with the girl a little later. On February 22, Mr. Putnam introduced the investigator to some girls. He danced with a few. One invited him to leave with her to go to another location. He claims he said he would catch up to her later but did not go. PHOTO 5

This revealed a significant moral flaw that would have appalled DDM. Interestingly, I had long ago, probably when I was in high school in the 1960’s, and first was learning about FLW and the Martin House (which I frequently passed as I walked to a babysitting job), had mentioned to my uncle, Alfred Anscombe, about seeing that strange, then empty house. He had told me that he knew DDM’s son, DRM, through business dealings with him. He also volunteered that he did not like him that he was a bad businessman and that he was a womanizer. We talked about him several times, including the fact that he was aware that DRM, after his father died and his mother moved out of the Martin House, leaving the house empty, had removed a lot of the furniture. He had removed most of the stained glass windows and other architectural elements, apparently selling them. By this time, DRM was wealthy, but obviously made no effort to pay the property taxes and cost of maintenance that might have made it possible for his mother to remain in the house.

Marjorie Quinlan (no relation to Jack!) writes of DRM’s rape of the Martin House after DDM died and Isabelle moved out. “Young Martin...stripped the house of all its doors, all of its lighting fixtures and wiring and many of the oak ceiling moldings, reusing them in the Stuyvesant Hotel and other properties. During an interview in 1976, DRM mentioned having several doors from his family home which he would gladly turn over if he could find someone to buy them for the house. If appraised, he could take them as a tax deduction.” She also noted that the heating and plumbing systems had been removed by DRM. (“FLW’s DDM House: Rescue of a Landmark.”)

I recently spoke to Darwin Reidpath Foster, (called by his nickname, Darry) DRM’s sister, Dorothy’s son, now 88 years old. He resides in Michigan and has an excellent memory about his family. He, too, had been very upset about DRM’s removing things including pipes from the Martin House, and he still expressed deep anger over some heartless financial dealings DRM had had with his family. He mentioned that his mother had even had to hire a well-respected attorney, Edward Kavinsky, to represent her over some of the misdealing’s she experienced at the hands of DRM. Darry also spoke of his uncle’s history of womanizing.

Perhaps the most well-known business venture was DRM’s building of the 11 storied apartment building known as 800 West Ferry in 1929.. It was built on a 1.5-acre site with 132 feet of frontage and 400 feet deep. The site was created by tearing down a mansion that had been the home of William Hengerer, of store fame, and later, of John

Albright, of art gallery fame. All that remained of the home was the wall and wrought iron fence and gate along the sidewalk and the driveway, which continue there today, as noted by Chuck Lachiusa. The beautiful garden behind the mansion was replaced by a parking lot for the tenants and their guests once the apartment building went up. PHOTO 6

DRM hired the architectural firm of Bley and Lyman. Lachiusa as having Art Deco, gothic and Tudor styles describe this behemoth of a building on the exterior, complete with a gargoyle having the face of DRM! PHOTO 7

The architectural schizophrenia continued into the interior that housed 21 apartments. Current residents, Mary Ann and Robert Kresse, provided me with a copy of the architects' prospectus for the building, a copy of which they had been given when they moved into their unit in 2003. Initially, the first of the tenants were able to select their favored style: early American, English, Italian or French décor. Each floor of this "X" shaped building allowed vistas from two directions. The first floor contained four small apartments referred to as "simplex." Floors 2-9 were comprised of a total of 16, 2-storied apartments, four on each floor.. The top luxurious two stories were for the owner's penthouse. 800 West Ferry was described as a building filled with mansions. PHOTO 8

By the time DRM moved in, he had divorced his first wife, Margaret. His second wife, Laura Brasnell, and her daughter, Patty (who DRM later adopted), joined him in the penthouse, according to Lachiusa. Together, they had a son, Alexander.

800 West Ferry was a glorious idea, but very poorly timed. The great depression of the 1930's served to frustrate the leasing of the apartments. DRM turned to DDM and to other family members including his sister, Dorothy, by then married to James Forsythe Foster. They helped him financially to support not only 800 West Ferry, but also his ever-increasing stable of businesses. Dorothy's son, Darry, told me that his parents were heavily impacted financially.

The Fosters had invested a lot in a house they built on St. Catherine's Court that had been designed by a British architect. Darry recalled the house well. He relates with devilish enjoyment his mother's story that one day FLW had come to Buffalo and wanted to visit Dorothy. Dorothy described his sweeping up the stairs with his cape flying behind him. However, he refused to come into the house, saying that "anyone who had resided in a FLW home should not be living in a home like this." Although the Fosters loved their home, they had invested so much with DRM that they could no longer afford to live there. In 1933 they moved into one of the two-story vacant apartments, Apt. 2D. They remained there until 1937. Darry has little recollection of the apartment but does have memories of playing in the garden.

DDM died in 1935; Isabelle lived on for a while in the Martin House, but it was difficult for her. Finally, in 1938, she moved into one of the first floor units at 800 W. Ferry, Unit 1C. I suspect that the long time companion to Isabelle who helped her run the

Martin House and Graycliff, "Aunt Polly," was with her at 800 W. Ferry, because after one year, she and Polly moved in with the Fosters at their rental house, 95 Highland.

Darry describes with palpable anger, how frustrated his parents were with DRM. One interesting document in the "Trove," is a letter written by Dorothy in 1932, apparently to attorneys for one of DRM's corporations, Martin and Co, Inc. which apparently engaged in stock trades for its clients. She asked that the account in her name be changed to DRM.'s name, stating that the cash balance of nearly \$12,000 and the market value of stock of about \$23,000 was DRM's and that she had no equity in it nor had she had any since 11/1/30. DRM signed the letter as being their agreement. One cannot say what motivated this action, but given the economic plight the Fosters exhibited at that time, one wonders if DRM had agreed to take over the account in exchange for allowing them to move into 88 W. Ferry a little while later.

Many stock certificates were among the documents in the "Trove." Some may have been related to investments in outside ventures, but a number of them were corporations owned by DRM. In 1934 DRM created the Buffalo Phenix Corporation, which was a holding company of several of his businesses. Shortly after his father's death in 1935, title to the FLW-designed Gardner's Cottage which was part of the Martin House estate, was deeded by Isabelle to Buffalo Phenix Corp. Soon DRM had mortgaged the property for \$17,000.

Buffalo Phenix Corp. also owned undeveloped land in Wichita, Kansas. In July, 1943 it sold the land, but retained the rights to a one-half interest in all the mineral rights for a period of 20 years and so long thereafter as gas or oil may be produced on the premises. Apparently no such minerals were ever discovered. Detailed surveys of the land were included in the "Trove." PHOTO 9

Another corporation was formed, likely by DRM since its name was spelled much like Buffalo Phenix (i.e., without the 'o'). Foster Phenix, Inc. The attorneys for this corporation, in 1956, sent a letter to shareholders advising them that the corporation had borrowed \$1,977,500, from which the sum of \$1,505,000 had been applied to other debts, leaving a balance of \$472,500 in debt.

All the stock certificates in the "Trove" have the usual blank form for assignment of the stock to another person or entity printed on the back. Fascinatingly, any of the stock held by DRM have nothing filled out on back, nor any signature. However, all of the stock certificates that are in the names of Isabelle or Dorothy, and some in the name of Dorothy's daughter, Margaret, are signed by them on back. The assignment itself is not filled in on any of the certificates. It is like signing a blank check! Since DRM maintained possession of the certificates, he could at any time effect a transfer unbeknownst to the shareholder. Was he doing that? Who knows, but it may be why the Foster family was so angry.

DRM owned 30,000 shares in Buttes Copper Co. in Arizona as of 9/29, and 900 shares in an Ontario, Canada company, Bidgood Kirkland Gold Mines as of 1936. At least for a time beginning in 1949, DRM, through what appears to have been a holding company, owned an interest in Bloor Building Ltd. That company apparently held a mortgage in the sum of \$200,000 for which DRM was responsible. A cover letter from a Canadian law firm dated 10/29/56 indicated that it enclosed a Certificate of Discharge re: that mortgage.

There was one other business about which I only recently learned and which really intrigued me. I had known from my cousin, Linda Anscombe, that my uncle, Alfred Anscombe, had had an interest in 800 West Ferry. An article in the Buffalo Evening News in 1961 referred to that interest when it published a report that Al was purchasing an apartment building at 849 Delaware. DRM had lost his ownership of 800 West Ferry sometime before Al's interest was acquired.

What I had not known before is that WKBW, the radio station, which had long been owned in part by Al, applied to the FCC on May 24, 1954 for approval to have a television station in Buffalo. The application, which was approved, listed the following as shareholders in the TV enterprise: Clinton Churchill, President and Director, 51% interest; Alfred Anscombe, Vice-president and Director as well as station manager, 5%; Edward Kavinsky, Esq., Treasurer and Secretary, 24% and DRM, 5%. In 1960 newspapers reported that Taft Broadcasting (which was acquiring TV stations around the country) was purchasing WKBW-TV. The deal closed in December, 1961 with my uncle and DRM each receiving \$30,000 for their shares.

Darry was rather shocked when I told him about Kavinsky being a part of WKBW-TV along with DRM since he had represented Dorothy Foster and her husband in attempts to recover money that they had loaned and/or invested with DRM or to recover profit, which DRM may have made using stock certificates without Dorothy's knowledge that had had blank assignments executed by Dorothy at DRM's request. The Fosters had considered Mr. Kavinsky to be their friend as well as attorney. There may have been nothing technically wrong with this, but it seemed odd.

I am aware that after DRM lost 800 West Ferry, he purchased a house at 110 Oakland, near North Street. From there, DRM usually walked to the Stuyvesant Hotel, which he still owned or managed, according to Darry. At some point he and Laura moved to San Francisco, California. His niece, Margaret Foster visited him there once in 1980. Margaret Quinlan quotes her as saying, 'Uncle Darwin was always a wheeler-dealer, a hard-drinking man and selfish.' He was no different after his move, she recalled.

Quinlan notes in her book that the relationship between DDM and his son had always been uneasy. A veteran himself, DDM criticized DRM for having an undemocratic abhorrence of the draft. DDM had tried in vain to dissuade DRM from building the apartment house on 800 W. Ferry. Though he tried to be supportive of his son, DDM was not always in agreement about DRM's attitudes and adventures, according to Quinlan.

In 1977 DRM made a trip to Florida from California, probably to visit his son, Alexander. His adopted daughter, Patty, had died in Florida a few years before. As DRM walked down the concourse of the airport to get on the plane to return to California, he suddenly dropped dead.

This would be the end of the story, but I am compelled to share one more document from the “Trove.” It is apparently a draft of a letter that DRM had written in response to a request from a creditor. Written on Stuyvesant Hotel stationery, I assume it was drafted prior to his move to California. In it, DRM “explains” the sad state of his financial affairs. One can only shake one’s head at the audacity of this tenacious wheeler-dealer! PHOTO 10

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Hotel Stuyvesant

BUFFALO

A House of Homes
WITH HOTEL SERVICE-PLUS

450 ROOMS - APARTMENTS 180
EACH WITH BATH

Dear ---

In reply to your request for a statement of my financial condition I submit the following information.

I am insolvent, with debts exceeding my liabilities by a very substantial figure. My readily realizable assets consist of marketable securities with a present market value of less than \$8000. which are all pledged to secure a note held by the Liberty Bank of Buffalo with an unpaid balance due thereon of \$15,314.39 together with approximately \$2000. of unpaid interest. I own a 1939 Buick touring coupe and have the usual personal effects of a person of my social position - I have no jewelry of any substantial value. I have, at this date, less than \$100. in cash in my bank accounts and possession. I have certain salary claims against Bloor Bldg. Ltd. of Toronto, Ont. but these are assigned to The Buffalo-Phenix Corp. to partially secure my indebtedness to that corporation which is in excess of a half million dollars. These claims do not aggregate any substantial amount and at the present time are uncollectable both because of the financial condition of ~~the corporation~~ Bloor Bldg. Ltd and because of the restrictions against removal of funds from Canada. I also have certain ~~my~~ salary claims against 245 Elmwood, Ave., Inc. which are similarly assigned and also uncollectable at the present time because of the financial condition of that corporation. I have collected no salary - as such - since June 1939. ~~I~~ owe the Niagara National Bank of Buffalo \$350. I am the endorser of a note to the Marine Trust Company of Buffalo in the sum of \$1250. made by Eight Hundred West Ferry Street, Corporation, ~~and~~ an insolvent company. I am one of three co-guarantors - all insolvent - of a note of The Inventory Corp. held by the Liberty Bank of Buffalo in the original sum of \$44,000. together with interest thereon from sometime in 1930 or earlier. The Marine Trust Company has named ~~me~~ as defendant in a suit to collect \$5500. from five co-signers of a note held by that bank for that amount with interest although I claim no liability in connection with this obligation. Notes payable to members of my immediate family aggregate more than \$300,000. together with interest for a number of years. My individual liability, as yet unpaid, to the former customers of Martin & Company, a brokerage firm in which I was the senior partner and which failed in 1932, amounted ~~to~~ to \$54,959.36 on Aug. 31, 1934, the date of the latest audit of my personal affairs, and has not changed substantially since that date except for the effect, if any, of the statute of limitations. There is a judgement on record against me in the sum of \$40,378.87, taken in 1933 or 1934 which has been acquired by Buffalo-Phenix Corp. and which I may purchase at that corporation's cost of approximately \$3600.

Insert at XX

title

I may have some ~~claim~~ to household furniture now claimed by my wife from whom I am at present estranged. An appraisal by a qualified auctioneer last May placed a then value on these chattles of approximately \$8750.

In addition to the above mentioned effects to the Buffalo-Phenix Corp. and Liberty Bank

I own 500 shares out of the 1000 issued common shares of the Buffalo-Phenix Corp. This stock is held by that corporation as security for my indebtedness to it and it is junior to an issue of approximately \$134,000. of preferred stock, ~~which~~ none of which is held by me. The Buffalo-Phenix Corporation assets consist almost wholly at the present time of real estate, practically all mortgaged and the value of the common stock is at best problematical. I have been - unsuccessfully, for the most part - interested in the oil and gas business during the past five years and have a part interest in some hundreds of acres ~~of~~ of oil and gas leases on unproven ground. These leases have no present value marketwise but might prove to be assets in the future if oil or gas is discovered in their immediate vicinity. I have claims for damages against an oil and gas operator, believed by me to be a dead-beat crook, who I ~~believe~~ think is now located in Michigan, but it is doubtful if these claims can be collected in any part as this man is known to be worthless at the present time.