

LARKIN SOAP CO. DURING WORLD WAR I

My apologies. This article was intended to be completed and published in November, with Veteran's Day in mind. But between other commitments and the volumes of material I reviewed for this article, I failed. Hopefully, someone noticed!

As the Larkin Soap Co. (LSC), established in 1875, swung contentedly into the Twentieth Century, it coasted on the happy breezes of national and international peace, and was confidant, as well, in its own financial success and its creation of what could be viewed as a happy, caring community.

Arthur Schlesinger introduced the gargantuan book, "Chronicle of the Twentieth Century," (*) which covered nearly day by day the period between 1900 and 1987. He described the first decade's peace, affluence and emergence of U.S. prestige internationally and confidence about years to come. Citing a painting by French artist, Jules-Alexander Goun depicting lavishly dressed Parisians "basking lavishly in the luxury of an art exhibition." He interpreted the scene as the pleasant ambience reflected in a carefree society, one devoid of burden and worry; an atmosphere marked by splendor and elegance. Schlesinger then warned that, paradoxically, grave problems lurked beneath the surface in that era, threatening the seemingly durable social structure.

So it was with innocence and optimism that LSC, and its subsidiary, Buffalo Pottery, founded in 1901, continued their growth in the early 1900's. As brows furled when Russia and Japan began fighting in 1904, followed by increasing worry as conflict developed between Bulgaria and Turkey in 1912 and England's failed attempt to negotiate peace between Germany and the rest of Europe, a full world-wide war erupted. By 1914 it came to be known as the World War. (It only came to be known as World War I after another World War began in the 1930's).

As the wars overseas progressed, there was great demand for American products both to replace products for Americans which had previously been imported, and to send to our friends in Europe. John Larkin, Sr.'s biographer, his grandson, Daniel Larkin.

wrote, “Sales through the war years remained steady, averaging close to \$20 million between 1912 and 1920.” (John D. Larkin: A Business Pioneer, p. 177). Daniel Larkin goes on to describe the continuing success of the business, attributing it to “its unique place in American business, reaching from coast to coast with its ‘Factory to Family’ method of bringing quality goods to the average household.” The business actually expanded and diversified, acquiring Buffalo Leather Goods in 1915. It went into the Larkin gasoline business and began manufacturing women’s and children’s clothing in 1917. Chain stores were opened in Buffalo and Peoria in 1918. (p 179) But the war still seemed remote, and though news of it was continuously reported, there was still a sense of unreality about it.

The attitude of unreality was shattered, however, for our country, but very much so for the Buffalo area and the Larkin family specifically, on May 12, 1915 when a German submarine torpedoed the cruise ship, Lusitania. Hundreds of people died that day off the coast of Ireland, including Elbert Hubbard and his second wife, Alice. Elbert was JDL’s brother-in-law, i.e., the brother of JDL’s wife, Frances. She was heartbroken over the loss of her beloved brother, whose body was never recovered. (Today a large boulder erected in East Aurora acts as a remembrance of him and Alice. It bears a bronze plaque which concludes, “They lived and died fearlessly.” (“The Fra,” Vol. XVII, Aug. 1916, p. 142.) PHOTO 1

The month before, Frances, with their children, Ruth and Walter, took a ride from their Ontario home, Glencairn, to Toronto. To her horror, Canadian soldiers were everywhere and there was a “subdued air that pervaded the streets and shops.” She quickly learned that 90 Canadian soldiers had been killed, wounded or gone missing in a battle with the Germans in France. When soon thereafter Frances saw Canadian soldiers on the Glencairn property, apparently watching for Germans who might try to land from the Niagara River below, She left Glencairn and moved to East Aurora where her (and Elbert’s) parents lived, and never returned to Glencairn to live. (Daniel Larkin, pp. 177-179) PHOTO 2

Even before the U.S. formally entered the war on April 6, 2017, JDL did not simply lean back and make profit off it. Dan Larkin reports that many of the LSC employees entered the armed services even before the U.S. entered the War. In June 1916 the LSC board passed a resolution that employees called into military service (were to) be retained on the payroll until Jan 1, 1917 and were assured that they could resume their positions at LSC upon their return. (Daniel Larkin, p. 177)

When Pres. Wilson did declare War on Germany in 1917 the LSC enthusiastically supported the effort, both its management and its employees. The company manufactured products for the military. In the Larkin Gallery on display is a small tin soap box containing an unused bar of soap. On one side is engraved, "Larkin"; on the other, "Army." Clearly it was made and manufactured so that soldiers could easily pack it in their gear. Another item in the Gallery is a bottle of Aromatic Spirit of Ammonia, manufactured by LSC for "the Medical Dept. of the U.S. Army. Undoubtedly, there were many more products made by Larkin for use in the war effort. PHOTO 3, 4

Similarly, Larkin subsidiary, Buffalo Pottery/China, made dishes for the U.S. military and hospitals. In fact, long time executive for that company, Lester Rickard, in a company timeline prepared by him in 2003, indicates that in 1917 and 1918, all Buffalo Pottery's production was for the U.S. government Army and their hospitals and for the American merchant marine involved in the war effort.

Violet and Seymour Altman, in their "Book of Buffalo Pottery" published in 1969, comment on the original purpose of the creation of the company to make china to be offered as premiums offered in catalogs to Larkin Soap Co. customers. In the 1918-1919 Fall/Winter Larkin catalog, note the Altmans, an explanation had been published as to why its products were being removed from the LSC catalogs: "For more than three years the Buffalo Pottery has been producing...china...offered as a Larkin product...80 American merchant ships are being equipped...From our entrance into the War, the Army and Navy have been making rapidly increasing demands for Buffalo Pottery china and the war demands of the U.S. Army, Navy and Hospital Service now call for china in unprecedented quantities...The elimination of semi-porcelain, formerly offered in our catalogs, at least for the term of the war, will expedite greatly the production of vitrified china for government use." (P.29) LSC noted it would attempt to fill all existing catalog orders as long as there was product left.

(As an aside, about 20 years ago I was with my uncle visiting a Navy base in Louisiana where we enjoyed a lunch in the Officers' dining room. Even back then I had a chronic habit of turning the plate over to see who made it. There it was: "Buffalo China." Probably made more recently, but I was still excited.)

Another contribution made by JDL and his company was his directing LSC Art Dept. Director, Alexander Levy, to design posters promoting the Red Cross and the purchase of war bonds to finance the war. A copy of one of those posters is on exhibit in the Gallery. PHOTO 5

In addition to manufacturing products for the military, however, the over 4000 employees of LSC volunteered their time and effort to support the troops. The LSC branch of the YWCA initially worked Tues. and Wed. evenings in two rooms provided by the LSC, one room in the manufacturing building (our building) in which 75 worked folding and packaging compresses and surgical dressings for the Am. Red Cross, the other located in the Administration Building had 235 women contributing their services. (See the employee newsletter, "Ourselves," 4/15/17.)

Typists from LSC were sent by the company to the Buffalo City Clerk's office to volunteer assistance in preparing lists of drafted men to be published in the city newspapers. When the City Clerk sent a 'thank you note', LSC executive, William Heath responded, "Whenever we are sent for, it is our opportunity to reflect the character of our institution and our own worthwhileness. That is what our young women did, and we are proud of them." {"Ourselves." 8/15/17)

By 9/17 the YWCA had more diversified endeavors. Compresses were still rolled, but some did volunteer office work, and knitted wash clothes, scarfs, sweaters and wristlets. ("Ourselves", 9/15/17) By May 15, 1918, according to that issue of "Ourselves," in a one year period, 42,475 compresses, 3553 bandage wipes, 656 surgical pads, 500 packets of gauze strips, 580 knitted sweaters, 252 pairs of socks, 152 scarfs and numerous other items had been made. "Surely this splendid record of what Larkin women have been able to do in the first year the U.S. has been at war is an auspicious promise of what their work is going to mean before the war is over."

LSC welcomed speakers from various organizations to bring messages to the employees. For instance, in early February, 1918, two Canadian officers visited LSC and promoted the Knights of Columbus War Fund while American officers did the same. Their messages were similar. They described the horror of the front, their experiences in the trenches. All of them had been injured, and wanted to convey to citizens the comfort and aid the women's efforts through the Red Cross had benefitted them. ("Ourselves," 2/15/18).

When Pres. Wilson gave a major speech to the nation on the first anniversary of U.S. entrance into the war, his focus was on the necessity of individuals creating War Garden plots to raise food for themselves and their families because so much of the commercial production was being sent overseas. The scope of that project and LSC's support of it is carefully described in a full page article of "Ourselves," 4/15/18. p. 13.

JDL decreed that the LSC would provide each of its over 4000 employees with a War Garden. "It remains for us as individuals, if we have not a garden available at our own home, to take advantage of this opportunity." A Director of War Gardens had been appointed to advise on seeds, cultivation and any other garden related questions an employee might have. But stunningly, LSC acquired land which would be parceled out to participating employees. Called the Larkin War Gardens, it was comprised of land bounded by the Buffalo River, So. Park Ave., Abbott Rd. and Kimmel Ave. "All of this is fine sandy loam, fertile, well drained and ideal for gardening." They also expected to have other land: the Fire House Field at So. Park and Seneca Street. The land would be plowed, with a low cost contract price divided up among the lot holders. Lime, manure, seeds, fertilizer and tools would also be available at very low cost. PHOTO 6

The purchase of Liberty bonds was an important way of supporting the War effort. In one of the many lectures held at LSC, a speaker from the national Food Conservation Committee, addressed a meeting at LSC. Thousands of people crowded into the Administration Building and "were a sight which we will not soon forget, and our welcome was one which Mr. Mitchell assured us he would never forget." By the end of the evening, 1,923 Larkin employees had purchased \$132,300 worth of bonds. "Ourselves," May 15, 1918.

A month later 185 Larkin women garbed in regulation Red Cross white aprons and caps and led by the Larkin fife and drum corps, marched through the factory departments (our building), around the outside of Larkin buildings and ending up in the Administration Building. The drive that day raised \$16,742! "Ourselves," 6/15/18. That same issue reported that two Larkin employees who had been drafted sent a letter to the Larkin Men's Club members thanking them for tobacco and used magazines the club had sent to them. (Hmmm. I'm just reporting the facts.) PHOTO 7

June 29, 1918 was Larkin Day in Lafayette Square. LSC executives, Mr. Wiers and Mr. Laughlin, spoke. Big Larkin trucks were drawn up around the platform, carrying machinery which stamped soap, made candy mint tablets (see food case in the Gallery), women's khaki industrial uniforms and American flags. These items were auctioned off while 80 Larkin women walked through the crowd selling Thrift stamps for which buyers were rewarded with a cake of soap, a jar of witch hazel cream or a tube of shaving cream. That effort resulted in about \$9000 in contributions and pledges. {"Ourselves," 7/15/18) PHOTO 8

At the beginning of U.S. involvement in the War, there was a naiveté about going into the military. One of the earliest to go was Darwin D. Martin. Quiet, scholarly, hard-working Darwin was drafted to Washington, D.C. to be a member of the Committee on Supplies of the Advisory Commission of the Council for National Defense. John A. O'Brien became a 1st Lt. in the Ordnance Dept, also in Washington, DC. Orville Kirby, also from the LSC Secretary Dept. was called to Boston, Mass to inspect textile war supplies. They never left the US to go to the warfront. "Ourselves." 8/15/17. PHOTO 9

Another man who had worked in Martin's Dept. at LSC was Frank Leslie Wither. That same issue of "Ourselves" spared him not a whit. It reported that he was found to be overweight by 30 lbs, "which he is manfully striving to eliminate by frequent games of golf." In obviously inserted print by a devious hand, it was added, "If this gentleman were now in as good physical trim as when the accompanying picture was taken, such vigorous exercise would be unnecessary."

Horton Heath was another early enlister. Hortons mother, Mary Heath, was a sister of JDL's wife, Frances. Her husband, William, was a Chicago attorney. JDL had lured them to Buffalo so that William could run the legal dept. Horton, his oldest son, born in 1889, had quite naturally been drawn into LSC, working as a manager. (See Frank Lloyd Wright's Scholarly Clients: William and Mary Heath, by Patrick Mahoney.) Despite the war in Europe, he was assigned to a unit on the Mexican border where he spent a lot of time grooming and riding horses. His letter to "Ourselves, 10/15/16," expresses a mix of boredom and appreciation of the relatively light duty. PHOTO 10

These early issues of "Ourselves," describe men being drafted or enlisted, and who spend considerable time in the U.S. at training camps. Many never left the country, spending their entire or a lot of enlistment prior to the US declaring war. The newsletter published cute little poems, for instance, in the 10/15/17 issue, a contest's results included this winner:

"Larkin Soap"

When your soldier boy goes to the front
The Kaiser to clean up
Please don't omit
To put in his hat
A bar of Larkin soap.

The soldiers' letters, often published in "Ourselves" in those early years were often upbeat, and mostly they had not seen battle. But as time went by, that changed. Bodies were coming home and reality set in. Often an article was published highlighting the character of the fallen employee. The February 15, 1919 is an example of this.

"The War Dept. tersely stated 'John Duggan: Died of wounds received in action' and added his name to the roll of those who had made the supreme sacrifice. But to us he is closer than that. He was one of us, one of the fortunate enough to wear the khaki for freedom. He died fighting a machine which, but for him and the thousands of others who thrust their bodies between it and the world, would have destroyed the great truths of Liberty and Equality. He has answered that sound of taps from which is no awakening, died as befitting a soldier. Duggan was a mild, quiet chap. He was a man who minded his own business, did not mix, lived quietly. "Slightly bashful" his foreman termed him. He was a small man physically, weighing barely 130 pounds, but it was a hundred pounds of pluck and determination. He fell working his machine gun somewhere in the black Argonne forest in the most hotly contested field of the war... Bashful he may have been, but brave he was...John was one of our packers, and was with us for about a year before going to camp. We are proud of him, and if it will ease his parents' pain just a little, we trust they will be advised that we are proud to have had him for a fellow-worker."

Leo A. Hyams: Some people touch our lives and pass on, leaving an impress of good will, optimism, and love that never dies. He was one of those, and it is with heartfelt sorrow that we record his death, while serving as a machine gunner...In 1906 Leo came to Larkin Co. as a 15 year old boy and became sample room messenger. He was one of those jolly, fun loving people who seemed to remain boys always, and then one day we look back astonished to find the boy has become a man. His cheerful and thorough application to his duties won him promotion....He had natural humor and an unbounded fund of cheerfulness and drollery, which made him universally well liked. He was always glad to do his part, and often much more...This is the side of him we came to know best...the rollicking friend whom death cannot take away from us..."

And there are more. The point is that the LSC was such a community to its employees, that every one working there was family. The two I cited were not "big shots." Yet it is clear that they, as were all the employees, were seen as real people with real attributes to be appreciated and respected – and loved. It suggests an attention to detail that permeated all of what LSC did, whether it be the manufacture of a product, the service to a customer, or the needs and qualities of its employees.

the payroll till Jan. 1, 1917, and assured of their position with the company on their return. (p. 177) It goes without saying, there was no statutory mandate at that time for the company to do this.