

John H. Patterson: Founder of the National Cash Register Company and Pioneer in Industrial Hygiene and Recreation

by
John R. Schleppe
University of Dayton

John H. Patterson founded the National Cash Register Company in 1884 and by 1910 controlled nearly ninety percent of the market in that field. Mr. Patterson's involvement, attitudes, and contributions to improved hygiene and recreational opportunities for factory employees were investigated as an example of industrial welfare which was developing at the turn of the century.

Company publications of the period, newspapers, related periodicals, books and materials commenting upon the company were used in the study. Patterson's welfare motivation began in the early 1890's when he saw many cash registers returned because of poor workmanship. Upon observing the low morale, the lack of incentive, and the poor health practices of his employees, he started a factory clean-up.

Advancements included constructing factory buildings of which four-fifths of the surface were windows for light and ventilation, providing baths which could be used during working hours, opening a first aid center with medical personnel, developing exercise programs (especially Swedish gymnastic types) and hiring a trained instructor for men and women for exercise breaks, building a non-profit employee park, sending huge segments of the work force on educational and recreational trips, and landscaping the factory and homes near the industry. He extended his welfare work into the community for civic, school, and recreational improvements as much as any industrialist of the period. Some of his improvements were innovations, others were copies, but collectively they made the company very progressive even in a period of many industrial reforms.

Patterson's motivation in business and particularly in welfare work was "It pays." Men understood this, whether in money or in a practice (such as calisthenics or bathing) and it was Patterson's constant guideline. His continued interest in welfare work was influenced by his observations of other factories and institutions, "impulsive" decisions made while observing hygienic, recreational and welfare practices during his many foreign and domestic business trips, and the subtle influence of his physically active wife. J. H. Patterson stands as a particular industrialist of the early twentieth century.