‘It Pays’: John H. Patterson and Industrial Recreation at the National Cash Register Company

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During the latter period of the nineteenth century, developing industrial corporations attempted to bring order to their operations. These rapidly expanding companies, such as Pullman Palace Car, H.J. Heinz, Westinghouse, and Sherwin-Williams, saw the need to organize production, sales, and service in the competitive market place. They also showed some initial concern about employees’ discontent with working conditions, such as was seen at Homestead and Pullman. At the same time, businessmen recognized the need to attract and keep skilled and semi-skilled workers.

Companies adopted various measures affecting the workers’ welfare as a means of increasing productivity. Improvements were made in safety and sanitary conditions, and managers acquired improved machinery and instituted more efficient production techniques. Among social programs, sport and recreation emerged as an important part of the companies’ efforts.

A major figure in the use of this latter method was John H. Patterson, selected by B.C. Forbes in 1917 as one of the fifty “builders of America.” In 1894, at the age of forty, Patterson and his brother, Frank, on a hunch and with only a self-taught business background, purchased the assets of James Ritty’s cash register company in Dayton, Ohio. In the early years the National Cash Register, as Patterson named it, was not much different from the other factories of the time. Patterson’s initial efforts within the factory were to clean the premises and make business practices more orderly. Sales received the most attention. The company competed in the rough-and-tumble style typical of the period. Its proclamation, “We ask no quarter: we give no quarter” and its glee over smashing a rival brought notice in each company publication.

By the early 1890s, N.C.R. had developed a fine European trade along with its domestic efforts, and business boomed. In 1894, a rapid decline set in and

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over $40,000 worth of machines were returned for faulty workmanship. Then, as B.C. Forbes said, “John H. Patterson woke-up.” He realized that skilled workers were needed to build cash registers, but men of this calibre were reluctant to live in the run-down factory area. Forbes continued, “John H. Patterson was partly to blame for this unsatisfactory state of affairs. He was not a model employer. He was neither better nor worse than other factory owners. His interest in his employees was confined to what he could get out of them. And they repaid him in kind.” The capacity of the work force in these poor conditions had been exhausted.

At this time, according to Forbes, “Patterson now experienced not only a change of viewpoint, but a change of heart. Adversity had taught him humanity. Why should workers treat him with more consideration than he was treating them? He would adopt a new policy.” In his new spirit he installed his own desk in the center of the factory floor to examine the conditions there. In addition, he travelled to observe his sales corps and was disappointed in their performance. He attributed their failure to shabbiness and poor health habits. After observations in the N.C.R. factory, Patterson initiated several programs affecting the welfare of his employees. He provided each shift with clean water for washing, lockers for the employees, and daily coffee. During this period, numerous articles concerning health practices appeared in the company publications. The articles instructed employees how to improve their digestion, care for their teeth, and exercise. Jay Seaver and W. G. Anderson, noted physical educators of the time, were among the authors of these articles. Patterson advocated exercise, fresh air, and clean living for others—“but in the early years he applied none of these rules to himself.” It should be noted that N.C.R. at the same time upgraded its business practices with improved productivity, service of the finished product, and special emphasis on sales techniques. With these initial improvements Patterson discovered that kindness paid in dollars as well as in disposition. The output of the workers increased and better craftsmanship brought in more business and hence more profit.

Patterson now directed his energy to factory construction. When expansion was needed, Patterson solicited designs from several architects for a building that would let in large amounts of light and that could be easily ventilated in the summer. The outer walls of the new N.C.R. building consisted of eighty percent glass. It became the model for future factories. These new facilities offered plenty of natural light and fresh air and were even equipped with vacuum machines to remove dust from the air. Patterson ordered the plant grounds cleaned up and flowers and grass planted. In the late 1890s, he brought John C. Olmsted to N.C.R. John Olmsted was a member of the firm of landscape architects founded by his well-known brother, Frederick. The firm had designed New York City’s Central Park, the Boston Fenway district,
and the Niagara Falls area. John Olmstead studied N.C.R.’s grounds and landscaped them. This was one of the first examples of industrial landscaping. Over the next fifteen years, Olmsted’s influence permeated the physical plant of N.C.R. Patterson’s factory landscaping influenced the surrounding residential area, South Park, where he lived, and through his encouragement, which included monetary prizes, the neighborhood was upgraded.

Physical fitness and health programs became a part of the N.C.R. workers’ lives in the late nineties. At this time “the tense, lively, driving life that Patterson led, broke down his digestion and he began to realize that if he were going to be a machine he would have to take care of himself.”7 His travels in the United States and Europe brought him into contact with Horace Fletcher, health faddist, Henry Bowditch, Harvard physiologist, John Kellogg of Battle Creek, and the strongman-physical culturist Eugene Sandow. They presented their reflections, ideas, and programs in the N.C.R. publications with much ballyhoo, or they were invited to lecture at the factory to the workforce.

Along with lectures on health, physical culture activities were developed. By 1894, calisthenics were introduced for the office staff. The purpose of the ten minute exercise breaks at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. was to improve the employees’ health and their efficiency. The women’s workforce was also included for the same reasons and the calisthenics became routine. Beginning in the mid-nineties a series of self-styled experts passed through N.C.R., setting up their physical culture programs. Patterson was also influenced, at least in part, by what he experienced in his European trips. On his travels to London in 1897, he came into contact with the work of Dr. Johanson, “a famous masseur and professor of Swedish movements.”8 Patterson introduced the Swedish movements he had learned from Dr. Johanson, and these soon became a basic N.C.R. program.

In 1902, Professor W. Earl Flynn of Detroit, a Y.M.C.A. gymnasium instructor for fourteen years, brought his “Vital Center Physical Culture Course” to N.C.R. to start an employee program under his direction. Although never thoroughly explained in company literature, his system did involve the improvement of fitness and digestion by properly exercising the muscles around the solar plexus. Over four hundred men and women employees enrolled in this program.

In 1903, Theodore Melander joined the list of physical culturists who came to the factory. Melander came

. . . highly recommended by the Stockholm Fire Brigade in which he was instructor for four years. He was two years instructor in the Military Institute of Stockholm. Mr. Melander will conduct classes in gymnastics, massage, fencing, boxing, and wrestling which he studied in the Zander Institute of New York. A temporary gymnasium has been opened in Building No. 8.9
During a visit to the East Coast in early 1904, Patterson observed Miss M. T. Dwight, a dance teacher, and her “straight foot movement” (practices where the foot never turned outward). She came to N.C.R. for several weeks to develop proper working posture and hold dancing classes. Lamenting that gymnasium teachers had not accepted her methods, she hoped for better results at N.C.R.

Another individual to come to N.C.R. was Charles Palmer, a “health expert” whom Patterson secured while on a trip to London, England. They travelled through Europe together before coming to Dayton. Just before Patterson introduced Palmer’s calisthenic program, he called several hundred of the work force together, both office and middle management, and gave an outline for the work of the Department of Physical Culture. Following this, he and Palmer gave an exhibition of the exercises that Patterson took twice daily “... and the N.C.R. men cheered and applauded enthusiastically whenever Mr. Patterson accomplished a particularly difficult feat.” It was with Palmer that the Hygiene Pyramid was developed. The Pyramid was a graphic presentation of the various ways in which good health procedures and company practices interacted. This was similar to Patterson’s Sales Pyramid and Promotion Pyramid diagrams.

The facilities and programs expanded throughout Patterson’s direction of the company. In 1905, Mrs. Minnie D. Rouland, with a background in physical culture and dance, gave a two week course to twenty calisthenic leaders in the women’s departments.

In addition to the exercise taken at recess time the women go to the assembly Hall at noon and take light exercise and dance for ten minutes before lunch. This is to arouse the circulation and stimulate the digestive organs. As the majority of the girls are sitting all morning at their work, their circulation is apt to be sluggish, and it is hoped that these exercises will be beneficial. The leaders meet every Thursday afternoon at 3:10 in the assembly Hall for a fifteen minute discussion of the work and to report the progress made in their various departments.

Patterson continually added to the exercise apparatus, which was similar to the health spas of the present time.

The exercising room on the fourth floor of the office building has been fitted with an equipment of new electrically operated exercising machines which are proving very popular. A horse operated by electricity gallops along as naturally as though it ate corn and oats.

All the exercise of camel riding is furnished by another machine. A vibrating machine, electric bath and rowing machine are also included in the new equipment. ...and those whose work does not bring their muscles into play should take advantage of these new machines and other benefits of exercising classes.

The above statements and the following advertisement for the evening girls’ gymnasium class show Patterson’s interest in the employees’ attitudes toward the activity programs.
The subject of physical training is attracting more general attention. . . . men and women are beginning to see that through it not only is the power for work increased, sickness avoided and life lengthened, but that physical development and strength are to be desired for their own sakes.  

The company “stood out” in the field of recreation. The annual outing, begun in the early 1890s, was the company’s first major effort in recreation. For the first excursions, N.C.R. hired trains and the employees travelled to southern Ohio or Indiana for camping and outdoor activities. These trips coincided with the plant’s summer vacation, and by the 1905 trip, 1,700 employees journeyed to Port Huron, Michigan on these excursion trains. The Welfare League at the plant organized the enterprise, which the company heavily subsidized.

The company moved to “active” recreation with the formation in 1897 of an athletic club and a bicycle club, which were quickly followed by other interest groups. The development in 1905 of a company baseball team was immensely popular among both players and spectators. Made up of factory and office employees, the team was also good for company publicity. Field days for the factory workers became a popular activity as well.

John Patterson himself also changed during this period; his travels, his readings, and his experiences led him into a more active life. Beginning in the early 1900s, he camped and travelled in the Adirondacks and went on other expeditions to Glacier Park and in Europe. His experiences were covered extensively in the company publications, presumably to provide the workforce with a model of the hardy life. Even employees’ pictures of their outdoor vacations gained prominence in The N.C.R.

About 1903, men’s and women’s Welfare Leagues were founded. One of the concerns of these groups was the planning of new recreational activities. A committee was appointed to take an eastern trip through factories, colleges, and agencies to study the programs that existed and to make recommendations for plans for N.C.R. As a result, a large athletic field opened next to the factory in 1904 for baseball, tennis, and other sports. The shooting grounds of the N.C.R. Gun Club were also within close proximity. Patterson then made a real departure from the image of the selfish industrial baron of the period by . . . .throwing open to his employees and their families the woods and beautiful grounds surrounding this summer home at Far Hills [near the factory] just south of the city. Here the family groups may picnic at their will, while often during the season the president will have a general picnic of the entire organization. On such occasions there is always band music, dancing and other recreations, and outdoor exercises and fresh air—the great natural tonics.

Expansion of recreation was rapid for two reasons: these programs were used and enjoyed by the employees and they helped to attract and retain skilled
personnel at N.C.R. In addition to the grounds at the factory and at his home, a 325 acre facility on Patterson land approximately four miles south of the city was begun in 1911 for employees and their families. What came to be called Hills and Dales Park had baseball diamonds, tennis courts, a dance area and a twenty-seven hole golf course. Hiking, bridle paths, and camping sites were also part of the multitude of facilities there. By 1915, as part of Patterson’s desire to improve the lot of the community in general, the park, conveniently located at the end of the street car line, opened to the public for a $1.00 per year membership—‘just enough so that the Club will be self-supporting.’ 18 And when Patterson gave the complex to the city of Dayton in 1918, it attracted over 40,000 persons each season.

The company was never modest about its work in recreation. When the country club at Hills and Dales opened, the headlines in the N.C.R. Weekly stated “N.C.R. Country Club, A World’s Object Lesson.” 19 And when the neighborhood children’s wading pool opened near the factory the editor extolled the improvement:

Without wasting words we think that the neighborhood wading pool, provided by our company for children is one of the biggest, noblest, most generous things our company has ever done. We know who [Patterson] has always considered our health, our safety, our welfare of prime importance. And now that another feature has added to the numerous benefits received by Dayton’s children, we are at a loss to express our appreciation. 20

Patterson’s speech at the Dayton Centennial Banquet in 1896 illustrated his expanded outlook and beliefs about what Dayton needed to distinguish itself. Along with his views about government, commerce, and education, Patterson presented his ideas on recreation. He envisioned a unified park system surrounding the city, a playground in every vacant lot, and a public park at the fairgrounds, located about one mile from downtown Dayton. Patterson also advocated the use of school grounds for vacation playgrounds. He called for attractive facilities, apparatus for games and physical culture, and in particular, a swimming pool for each school.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Patterson worked hard for civic improvements. In public recreation he again brought the famed Olmsted brothers’ firm to Dayton to plan a coordinated, aesthetic, functional parkway system. Their report in 1911 recommended immediate and long term development, including a system of parks around the perimeter of the city linked by parkways, neighborhood parks, and usage of the riverways running through the central area of the city. Olmsted’s plan included ballfields and playgrounds, as well as boulevards and wooded areas. Through the years a number of these ideas came to fruition particularly the neighborhood parks and the river corridor. The latter was pushed forward after the disastrous flood of 1913 encouraged redevelopment of the river area.
John Patterson’s legacy to the city in recreation is still evident in Dayton today at Hills and Dales Park, the company park at Old River and the river corridor. Equally important, however, was Patterson’s broadening view of recreation and his belief in its importance for the masses. N.C.R. workers and the community at large benefitted from programs and facilities not otherwise available to them during that period. In Dayton, as in many other cities, workers who had gone to public school had very little physical education or recreation experience, and what they did have was of a gymnastic nature. Thus, through N.C.R., workers were exposed to an approach to recreation that suggested an active and fulfilling period of leisure, a concept not widespread at that time.

One other factor should be examined concerning Patterson’s involvement in recreation and employee welfare, that of motivation. Why recreation in the industrial sector? Why care for the employee? Most assuredly Patterson meant business. “There is no charity in anything we do. Isn’t it just good business to lose three cents on a girl’s lunch and get back five cents’ worth of work?” Thus, his motto, “It Pays,” which appeared constantly in company publications, his presentations, and innumerable places in the factory, captures the essence of his business practices. Whether applied to earning money, exercising, or recreation, Patterson’s motto emphasized the benefits to the individual and to the company.

Yet there appeared to be other influences acting upon him to move N.C.R. into welfare work. Such was Patterson’s marriage to Katherine Beck of Brookline, Massachusetts, a woman “who was fond of riding and outdoor sports.” Frederick Beck, Katherine’s father, was a friend or acquaintance of Emerson, Thoreau, Higginson, Holmes, and Bronson Alcott. At the Beck home the thoughts of these men were discussed. Upon her marriage, Katherine Beck went west and found herself in a new industrial center, where money helped ideas and ideas gave new life to moneymaking. As Charlotte R. Conover states, “A biographer may have theories which cannot be verified and one of these is that the new fashion of humanitarianism developed at the National Cash Register had its inception in the heart of the wife of its president.”

How much each dimension of his life—the drive for business profits, his wife’s background and ideas, his European and domestic travels observing welfare programs, and the general social change of the era—contributed to his immense interest and involvement in recreation is hard to assess. The task is made more difficult by the fact that few personal papers have come to light.

Patterson’s contributions are even harder to analyze. Crowther states, perhaps as adequately as anyone:

It must be remembered that Mr. Patterson was an almost uncannily skilled adaptor rather than originator; the line between adapting and originating is hard to draw for he got suggestions from
quarters where no other human being would have found them and then turned them in such a fashion that no one would have recognized the suggestion. But the results were seen and can still be seen in the National Cash Register Company and in Dayton, Ohio.

An extensive list of actual programs, practices and facilities accompanied each of the five headings in these two pyramids. For example: EDUCATION—Illustrated lectures; IMPROVED SHOP CONDITIONS—Exhausts for fumes, gases, dust; PERSONAL SANITATION—Baths for all employees of the factory; MEDICAL CARE—Factory physician; NATURE STUDY—Camp life; AIR—Open space between buildings; LIGHT—Scientific tests of new lighting systems; WATER—Sanitary drinking fountains in factory; FOOD—Modern cold storage plant; EXERCISE—Gymnasium
Notes

2. The N.C.R., April 12, 1890, p. 1.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
8. The N.C.R., January 15, 1898, p. 46.
10. The N.C.R., May 1904, p. 1
11. The N.C.R., August-September 1905, pp. 219-220.
12. The N.C.R., January 1907, p. 78. See Figure 1.
16. Daniel Nelson, Managers and Workers (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), p. 110. Patterson’s ability in the area of welfare is shown by his position as an officer of the Welfare Department of the National Civic Federation. This department was made up of many prominent employers, such as Edward A. Felene and Cyrus McCormick, Jr.
18. The N.C.R. Weekly, June 5, 1911, p. 3.
22. The N.C.R., April 12, 1890, p. 118.