Seth Emerson Perkins & Seth Darwin Perkins

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Men with Vision

by Lori Hahn



As Seth Emerson Perkins lay dying in February 1945, a battle on two fronts was raging as the Soviets and the Allies pushed along the entire German border. Allied victory was only months away. Seth had lived a fruitful 86 years. He was born in Fairfax County, Virginia in 1858. He had outlived two wives, Anna, who had died in 1905, mother of his six children, and Gertrude, who died in 1938. Seth and family had lived in Kewanee and Cambridge, Illinois for about 30 years before moving to Waterloo, Iowa in 1908.

Seth was an inventor. He patented at least two inventions that were marketable and sold. The first was the Perkins Overhead Garage Door and the second, and more obscure, was the Perkins Curtain Carrier. Nothing is known about the details of the garage door, but the Perkins Curtain Carrier was used by theatres all over the world. The carrier allowed the heavy curtains to easily move back and forth across the stage.

His son, Seth Darwin Perkins, moved to Los Angeles when a young man. Born in 1889 in Illinois, the fifth of the six children. Seth had been managing director of theatres in the Los Angeles area for many years and later became an executive in the theatre equipment division of RCA.

It was a natural segue for him to latch onto the idea of Richard Hollingshead, who is credited with the patent of the modern drive-in theatre in New Jersey in 1933. In 1934, Seth was appointed president of the newly formed California Drive-In Theatres, Inc. The organization was granted a franchise for drive-ins in California, Arizona, Utah, and Nevada. Perkins' group built only in Southern California and refranchised to others for the other territories.

The first theatre was called "The Drive-In Theatre" but would later be called the Pico Drive-In in Los Angeles. California ended up with 220 drive-ins at the industry's peak. Seth died in 1951 in Los Angeles.

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