

We rarely experience the thrill when a unique photographic "find" is brought to light. But thanks to George Dunbar's keen interest in the history of his home territory of Scarborough (Toronto East), we are privileged to witness the re-emergence of a Canadian photographic invention dating back to 1928 and recorded for us here.

The Phototeria – A Canadian Invention

by George Dunbar

THE TORONTO STAR WEEKLY, SATURDAY, APRIL 14, 1928 45

Five-a-Minute and a Million/By FREDERICK GRIFFIN

David A. McCowan, young Toronto inventor of self-service photography, who will win a fortune.

NEW MEN, before they reach thirty, can be reasonably sure of making a million dollars. David A. McCowan, small manufacturer of this St. in the east end of Toronto, is one of the few. He is only twenty-nine—no age at which Henry Ford was still an unknown mechanical tinkerer. Yet he is about to cash in to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars. In a few months, unless the signs miss badly, he will be a substantial manufacturer and a wealthy man.

If because he has invented a phototeria, a marvellously ingenious and perfect contraption which sets in motion electrically by a quarter dropped in the slot—takes your photograph on the back of a small pocket mirror and delivers it to you printed, developed, fixed, washed and dried within a minute.

You can sit in the cabinet, drop the coin, and in twenty-second intervals receive continuously developed pictures.

One of the photos taken by phototeria, somewhat enlarged. The back is a mirror.

A quarter in the slot and, within a minute, photo is delivered automatically at opening on right of cabinet.

But one thing needs to be emphasized. It had made a solid, if modest, success of many factories long before he struck the phototeria idea. Five years ago, when he was not yet twenty-five, he built his present substantial, if small, plant at 79 Main St. He has given employment to a considerable number of men.

"Nothing daunts Dave," said Mr. Martin, who confesses to a wholesale admiration for this young man of achievement. "You can't walk him. Difficulties, with him, are merely something to overcome."

"Take those tin mine and airplanes which he got Woodworth's to fix and sell. He had to plan them. He had to devise dies and tools for them. He had to find out how to paint them. He had to market them."

"That stammering he had was about as bad a handicap as a man could have—for selling anything. But he did not let that stand in his way. He sold his ideas and the things he made in them."

He had a first hand about them. He had a first hand about them.

Wife and family of David A. McCowan.

The Inventor's Biggest Thrill

LAST summer, when his wife and his two little girls were in a cottage up at Lake Simcoe. It was not unusual for him to get into his car after midnight and drive up there. He did that frequently when he reached an impasse, when there was some ticklish problem to solve. And as he drove along the deserted highway slowly, he thought—and thought—and solved it. Throughout all this travel David McCowan was always focused on the thought that he was going to make a machine to which he could consistently sell something. The mirror idea, patented, gives him a chance to manufacture endlessly to supply his machines.

"People thought I was a little off," declares Mr. McCowan laughing. "You know they always

I first met Bill McCowan when we both worked at IBM and I later met his son Bruce who has assembled an extensive history of the McCowan family. The McCowan name is well-known in Scarborough since pioneering members arrived from Scotland in 1833 to take up farming at the foot of what is now McCowan Road.

While perusing Bruce's family web site (see <http://www.beamccowan.com/mccowan.htm>) I was intrigued by a reference to a "Phototeria." Queries led to a 1928 newspaper article and then to an original photo booth that was stored in an old log barn north of Toronto.

Bill arranged to visit the farm of brother Jim McCowan (both distant cousins of the inventor) where the antique photo booth is located and then invited me to interview the inventor's son, Peter McCowan. Peter was most gracious in showing me his father's notebooks and some pieces of the original machine.

I'm indebted to these four McCowan family members for their kind assistance. It's been a joy to study and research this unique piece of Canadian history. — G.D.

Many of us are intrigued by the coin-operated photo booths that are a fixture in today's malls and arcades. They're particularly useful to youths on a first date. There are also mature photographers who use the booths to create a distinctive art form and collectors who value the images from these devices that were made over the last 80 or so years. Andy Warhol, for example, used photo-booth images in unique collages.

Today, photo booths are often rented for use at parties and wedding receptions. Their popularity seems not to have been diminished even by the widespread use of digital cameras. Some have suggested that the intimacy of the curtained booth still appeals to the adventurous nature in all of us.

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Jim McCowan's log barn north of Toronto.



The interior of log barn with *Phototeria* in center.



Easing the box from the barn after 75 years of storage.

As early as 1889, an American, Mathew Stiffens, had patented an automatic photography machine. At the same time a French machine was demonstrated by Monsieur Enjalbert at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. Unfortunately, those machines were unreliable and often failed. It wasn't until 1925 that a Siberian-American, Anatol Josepho, patented his "Photomaton," a booth that could produce "...a strip of 8 photographs of good quality in 8 minutes." In 1927, the New York Times reported the sale of Josepho's patent for \$1,000,000.

More interesting than the foreign history of the photo booth, I think, is the Canadian connection. A unique relic of Canadian photographic history was recently revealed when Jim McCowan opened his barn to expose a photo booth invented in Toronto in 1928 by distant cousin David A. McCowan. The McCowan "Phototeria" was a joy to behold as it was wheeled into the sunlight for the accompanying photographs. The 2.5 X 4 X 6 ft. wooden booth is in remarkably good condition, considering that it was manufactured circa 1928 and has been in storage for about 75 years!

David McCowan applied for a patent for his "automatic photographing machine" in 1928 - granted May 21, 1929 - (patent # 289763 can be found on the Internet at: <http://patents1.ic.gc.ca/>) and built an unknown number of the devices according to his son, Peter McCowan. Peter has seen three Phototerias but believes there must have been more machines since his father's records show that the Phototeria was simultaneously in use at arcades, exhibitions and amusement parks across Canada. Those records show that it was used in Vancouver, Victoria, Saskatoon, Regina, Ottawa, Oshawa and Crystal Beach, Ontario. McCowan's notes describe the attraction in Toronto at The Canadian National Exhibition (CNE) as well as at the amusement park at Sunnyside. It's also recorded that a machine was installed at Hanlan's Point, Centre Island and at the mysterious Toronto address of 209 Yonge St. (was this was a penny arcade in the early 1930s?).

The McCowan Manufacturing Company's owner, David A. McCowan (1898-1983), was a prolific inventor who had many patents concerning the company's main line of 'point-of-sales' displays. It's unknown when or why he developed an interest in a photo-booth invention, but son Peter said his father had commented that "many ideas came to him while sitting in church."

A study of the patent drawings for what would become known as a Phototeria, reveals a complex mechanism which automatically loaded photosensitive discs into place behind the lens and then moved them through a wet chemical process which finally produced a round photo mounted in a shiny, mirror-like, metal disk. The unexposed, photosensitive material was supplied in tubes, each containing a hundred disks. This is evident from the elaborately labeled and illustrated wooden boxes in which the "film" was delivered. Each box was inscribed: "6 tubes, 100 each, 600 mirror plates, to fit P61 magazine." A clear understanding of the internal workings of the Phototeria evades this observer since it's difficult to view the interior and some parts appear to be missing. But I'm sure there's a talented mechanic somewhere who will want to restore the Phototeria to working order. The current owner Jim McCowan intends to refinish the hardwood exterior.

It's not known if the Phototeria was in production before 1928 but by 1930-31 Mr. McCowan had sold his rights to the National Automatic Machine Company, a U.S. firm. Only three original machines were found in a barn when Peter set-



Bill and John McCowan (Jim's son) set unit upright.

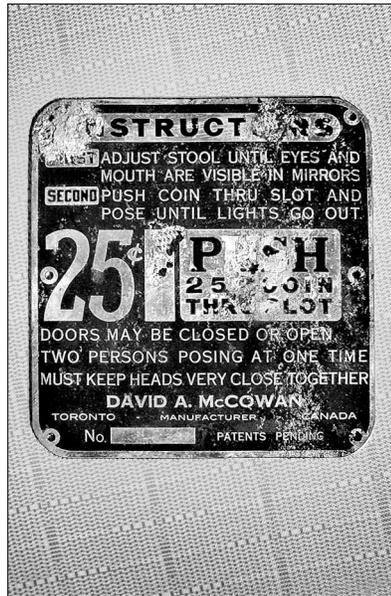


Plate with posing instructions.



COURTESY OF PETER McCOWAN

Inventor David A. McCowan & wife, Helen.



Custom box for 600 unexposed photo disks - mirror plates.

bled his father's estate in 1983. Peter McCowan tells the story of the time his father once took a Phototeria to a "Chicago Fair" and was suddenly summoned to a hotel room where he was surprised to find Al Capone and some of his henchmen. Capone exclaimed: "You don't bring coin-operated machines into MY territory!" No doubt, Mr. McCowan never returned to Chicago.

Valuable insights to the business are found in notebooks that accompany the collection. In one of the notebooks David McCowan recorded the daily income of each machine and, amusingly, also the number of "slugs" found in the cash boxes. The coin-operated Phototeria was designed to accept a 25 cent piece for each photo. The records for a six-day period at Sunnyside in Toronto show "gross takings" of \$366.75 and 368 "slugs!"

The remaining artifacts of this unique Canadian invention reveal a carefully designed mechanism and fine craftsmanship. The lenses, mounted in a Wollensak shutter assembly (BETAX No. 2), were custom made by Bausch & Lomb Optical Co. and are engraved with the identification, "McCOWAN PHOTOTERIA Toronto. Can. 75 mm ULTRA ANASTIGMAT."

The *Toronto Star Weekly* (April 14, 1928) ran a full page article featuring David McCowan and his invention titled, "Five-a-minute and a Million." The *Star* was aware of the 1927 New York Time's report on the sale of Anatol Josepho's patent for \$1,000,000 and must have concluded that this Canadian would reap similar benefits. The article stated: "Few men, before they reach thirty, can be reason-

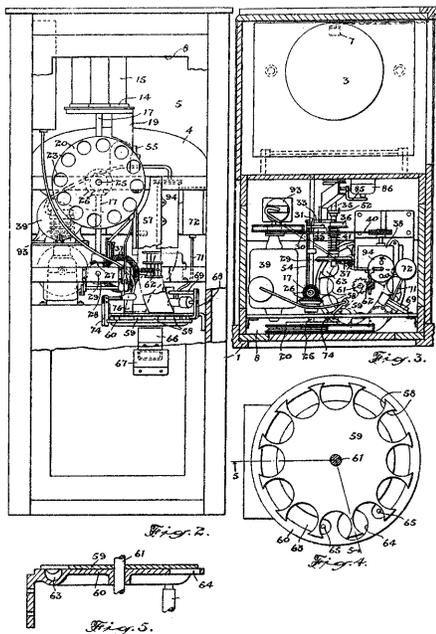
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ably sure of making a million dollars. David A. McCowan, small manufacturer of Main St. in the east end of Toronto is one of the few." The *Star* went on to explain that offers to buy rights to McCowan's Phototeria were coming from as far as Rio de Janeiro.

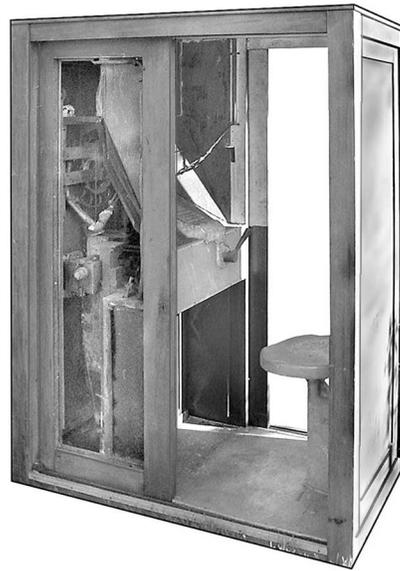
Many details of the business must have come directly from an interview with Mr. McCowan since the *Star* article (by Frederick Griffin) mentions a \$210,000 offer to buy Canadian rights; the American interests negotiating for the rights to manufacture and distribute in the United States (bringing an estimated \$2,000 weekly royalty) and McCowan's pleasure at being able to expand both his company and workforce to meet demand.

The *Star Weekly* account also presents this description of the Phototeria in action: "Here at first sight is a booth that is like a telephone booth. You enter and sit on a stool which you may adjust to your height. You focus your face with the aid of a couple of mirrors which give your eyes, nose and mouth the correct alignment. All the time you are looking pleasant, please, into a hollow white reflector designed with curves that will flood your face with light. Then you drop a quarter in the slot and watch for the dickey bird to come out. There is a whirl as the electrical mechanism starts. Powerful lights flash on that are like the Kleig lights of a moving-picture set. Eight seconds pass -- and the camera clicks. You are taken. Stroll out to the back of the booth and wait. Within a minute your mirror-photo drops out of a slot into a waiting cup."

Patent drawing from <http://patents1.ic.gc.ca/>



The 1929 Canadian patent offers six drawings.



Removed side panel reveals mechanism.



Opposite view, sliding door & delivery slot.



Bausch & Lomb 75mm lens.



Engraved retainer ring - McCowan Phototeria.



Cast-aluminum seat with moulded name.



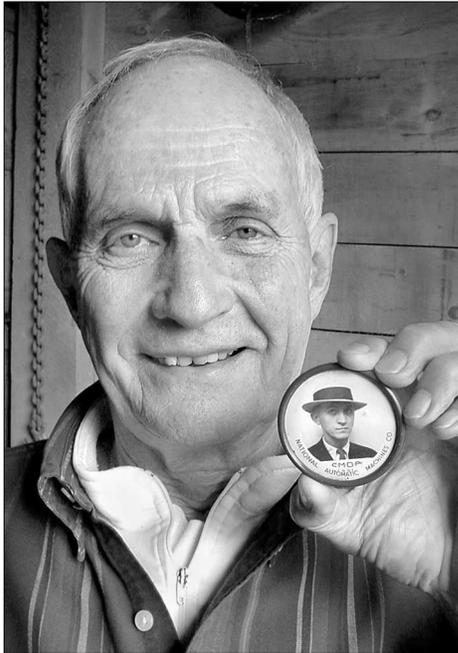
Lens location and wiring for lights.

Inventor David A. McCowan was raised on the family farm in Scarborough, Ontario (now Toronto). His father, Alexander McCowan, was prominent in the community serving as a member of the Ontario Legislature for East York and Sheriff for the County of York. David married Helen G. Trebilcock and they had three daughters and two sons. From an early age David was afflicted with a speech disorder. He could not read aloud in school. "Stuttering," as it's often called, is said to be a reason for his inward thinking and inventiveness. He withdrew within himself and an early job as a wireless operator on upper lakes shipping allowed him to listen – and think. Those were the days he planned his first vending machine – a machine for selling gum. Eventually, as an adult, David overcame his handicap.

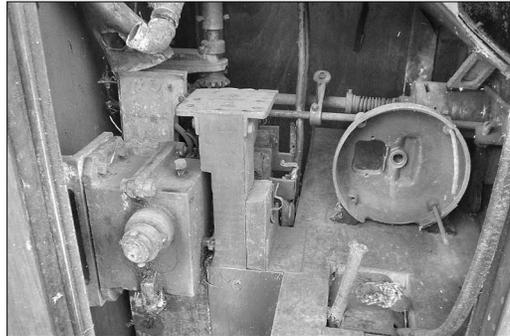
The digital generation is also showing interest in the Phototeria. Recently Bruce McCowan, another descendant of the McCowan clan, showed the photo booth to students at the W.A. Porter Collegiate Institute in Toronto. Bruce is a teacher of Technological Design at the school and used it as an example for the newest generation to appreciate the inventiveness involved in his relative's amazing device.

Let's hope this brief description of David A. McCowan's contribution to Canada's photographic history will lead to the discovery of other 'lost' Phototerias.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR GEORGE DUNBAR



Peter McCowan with image of his father.



Internal mechanism with some parts missing.



Plate mechanism to carry tubes of photo sensitive disks.



Bruce McCowan explains design details of the photo booth to students at W. A. Porter Collegiate Institute in Scarborough.

References:

–*Five-a-Minute and a Million*, article by Frederick Griffin, Toronto Star Weekly, April 14, 1928 – Metro Toronto Reference Library.

–Bill McCowan, Bruce McCowan, Jim McCowan, Peter McCowan – interviews October, November and December 2006.

Note:

American photo historian and photographer Nakki Goranin is producing a book *Photobooth Century*. It will include a piece on the Canadian Phototeria.

Author George Dunbar would be pleased to receive comments or additional information. Contact him at ggdunbar@sympatico.ca



Coin insert, instructions and start handle.



Cast-aluminum "Receiving Wicket" at back of booth.

GROSS TAKINGS AT SUNNYSIDE		
Date	Amount	Slugs
Monday, July 9th	38.50	49
Tuesday, July 10th	56.25	76
Wednesday, July 11th	64.25	89
Thursday, July 12th	80.00	73
Friday, July 13th	15.25	15
Saturday, July 14th	112.50	68
Total	\$366.75	368
33-1/3% paid to Mr. S. Selman-----		\$122.25
GROSS TAKINGS AT 209 YONGE ST.		

Sunnyside receipts noted income of \$366.75 and 368 slugs.



Sample disk after Phototeria was sold to American interests.