JOE VAUGHN, OF VEMCO AND OSCO, DIES AT 99

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Joe Vaughn, of Grosse Pointe, Mich., one of the founders of Vemco Products and Osco, died Aug. 18, 2020, at age 99. He is recognized as one of the pioneers of the remote-control door operator industry.

After graduating from the University of Detroit as an electrical engineer, Vaughn served as a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy in World War II and was trained in radar technology at Bowdoin College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1946, he worked for Federal Industries, where he played a pivotal role in developing the radio-controlled garage door opener.

In 1955, he cofounded Vemco Products with Charles Engelhardt and Harold Miller, selling garage door and gate operators and barrier gates across North America. Vaughn was the "V," Engelhardt the "E," and Miller the "M" in Vemco.

After Stanley Works bought Vemco in 1973, Vaughn teamed up with Jerry Trupiano in 1978 to form Operator Specialty Co. (Osco) in Casnovia, Mich., which manufactured residential and commercial gate operators.

Known for his industry leadership and innovation, Vaughn was a founding member of the Door Operator & Remote Controls Manufacturers Association (DORCMA) in 1959, was voted Man of the Year by the Door and Operator Dealers Association (DODA) in 1977, and received DORCMA's Distinguished Service Award in 1995. For the DORCMA award, he was described as the man who had the vision to adapt the technology that created the industry.

He and his wife, Frances, who died in 2014, are survived by their six children, 22 grandchildren, and 41 great-grandchildren.

Who invented the remote-control residential opener?

In November 1986, Joe Vaughn was asked, "Who invented the automatic door opener?" He responded in a letter, which is provided below. Some elements have been edited for brevity and clarity.

Joe Vaughn: There was no one inventor of the automatic door opener. As so often happens, several companies and engineers all contributed to the development of this industry. To properly evaluate the original pioneers, you must separate the electro-mechanical operator from the "remote control."

Prior to World War II, there were three chain-driven operators available: HW Crane, Quincy Mfg. (Tiffin Operators), and Richards-Wilcox. These were push-button operators without remote control and were used on heavy industrial doors.

The real residential remote-control operator did not develop until the 1940s. The pioneers in this endeavor were Scientific Products (Gessell), HW Crane (H.W. Crane, engineer), Robot Industries (Harold Miller, engineer), and Quincy Mfg. (Zoller, engineer). However, all of those units used a mercury switch buried in the drive and a large magnetic coil mounted under the automobile. Results were not very satisfactory, but the operators themselves were quite good mechanically.

In 1946, Allen Parrish, who owned Federal Industries in Detroit, had the idea of a radio control consisting of a transmitter mounted under the hood of the automobile. As an electrical engineer at Federal Industries, it was my job to get someone in the electronics field to develop a radio control for use with our operator.

We finally accomplished this through a company called Multi Products and an electronics engineer by the name of Gus Undy. He designed a 6-volt transmitter for the automobile and a receiver for the garage. From this beginning, after many field problems and failure, the industry developed a portable hand transmitter and a competitively priced "over the counter" product.

In the 1950s and 60s, Harold Miller and I were instrumental in developing the product through our company Vemco Products. Genie, Sears, and Stanley were successful in marketing the remote-controlled residential opener to the public.

So, if we were awarding credits:

- Allen Parrish gets credit for the idea of the radio-controlled opener.
- Gus Undy gets credit for developing the radio control.
- Harold Miller gets credit for his mechanical designs at Robot and Vemco.
- Joe Vaughn gets credit for putting it all together. ■