

Elmer F. Pierson  
Founder of the Vendo Company  
1896-1982

by Daniel Coleman

As a young man, Elmer Pierson dreamed of adventure, and eventually, the products he manufactured were distributed globally. While this afforded him opportunities to travel extensively as an adult, Pierson's civic involvement and philanthropy remained largely focused in the Kansas City area and led to his being revered not only as one of his home town's most versatile businessmen, but also as one of its most generous benefactors.

Elmer F. Pierson, son of John G. and Anna L. Pierson, was born in Kansas City on August 27, 1896. Pierson's father, a native of Sweden who had performed with that country's Royal Opera before immigrating to the United States, was the proprietor of several neighborhood grocery stores. Elmer's first employment came making deliveries for the family business, and while attending Lowell School and Manual High School, he idolized the worldly traveling salesmen who visited his father's 28th and Jarboe store. Succumbing to wanderlust after high school, Pierson covered a territory consisting of Kansas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma for the Ridenour-Baker Wholesale Grocery Company. He saw more adventures during his World War I service with a U.S. Army machine gun unit.

Pierson returned to Kansas City after the war with a new interest in obtaining a college education. He attended night classes at the Kansas City School of Law and was admitted to the bar. However, when an opportunity presented itself, he jumped into the real estate business. Although his first venture was unsuccessful, Pierson's sales experience soon led to healthy profits and the establishment of his own firm. He also dabbled in insurance and mortgage lending and was elected president of the Kansas City Real Estate Board in 1932, becoming the youngest man ever to win the post.

In 1937, Pierson and his brother founded the Vendo Company to experiment with a merchandising concept yet to hit its stride: the vending machine. At the time of their entry into the business, most vending machines dispensed bottled soft drinks to outdoor consumers, rendering them unprofitable during winter months in cold climates and were generally considered to be unreliable. Pierson's company strove to produce reliable machines for use indoors and developed a sound wave detection technology by which the machines could discern worthless metal "slugs" from true nickels.

During World War II, Pierson's company won a contract to apply this same principle in the quality control of artillery shells for the U.S. military. Vendo also became the largest producer of radar antennas used in U.S. aircraft, and its payroll soared from 5 to 1,650. After the war, the company returned to manufacturing vending machines, and by the 1960s, Vendo products dispensed soft drinks and other items to consumers in 60 countries. The immaculately dressed, blue-eyed "Mr. E. F.," as Pierson was known to his employees, provided them with generous benefits, yearly bonuses, and annuities for the

education of their children. Pierson and his wife, Marie Kahmann, were now parents of two children of their own, daughters Marilyn and Martha Ann.

While he enjoyed astronomical success as a proponent of the “vending age” (one admirer mused in 1952 that Pierson’s machines might soon allow consumers to buy “strawberries, cabbage, underwear or a necktie by dropping a coin into a slot” at any hour), historians remember Pierson as much for his civic and philanthropic activities. In addition to serving on the boards of the University of Missouri-Kansas City, the Kansas City Art Institute, the Kansas City Philharmonic, and the Swedish-American Savings and Loan Association, he completed terms as president of the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce and vice president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. In 1960, UMKC received from Pierson the largest gift in its history to that date, and he generously supported the activities of Kansas City area Boy Scouts from whom he received the Silver Beaver award. A Pierson gift to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art created a sculpture garden, and another to Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas, endowed a music professorship. At the time of his death at age 85 on February 15, 1982, Pierson was praised for having been “one of the first business executives in Kansas City to express that there should be an interconnection between the corporate world and the art world.”

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