



A Personal Reflection

By Pierre Koudelka

NEWSPAPERS OF APD'S DEMISE IS HEARTBREAKING. To say I'm upset is an understatement. I think it's worth noting what APD meant to this industry. I came to know APD when I graduated from college and a headhunter told me to interview at this firm that had to do with street parking or something. Off-street parking then, as it is today, was somewhat misunderstood and maybe undervalued. Even so, I went anyway. Much to my surprise, Automatic Parking Devices was far more than I initially believed. I interviewed and got a job as regional manager for the Northeast. APD equipment was then primarily sold on a factory-direct basis.

I started in 1969 and recall my very first IMPC (now IPI) trade show. As a new kid on the block, I was in awe of the then-major players of the industry—players that included Carl Walker, Jim Hunnicutt, Larry Donoghue, Tommy Feagins, John Fujiwara, Mike Demitry, Norm Goldman, George Devlin, Howard May, and operators such as Monroe Carell and Myron Warshauer, and so many others. They walked the show aisles with their entourages behind them, shaking hands and such. As a young kid, I wondered what the future would bring and if I could possibly befriend and maybe contribute to the industry as these gentlemen had. I was fortunate; I got to know, work with, and become friends with all these individuals.

The History

APD was one of the firms that really started the industry as we know it today. As it was explained to me, Vemco, a Detroit manufacturing firm of door operators, had connections with George Devlin, a parking consultant of note at the time who worked with National Garages. George was a special friend. He invited me in his Porsche one day to test the efficiency of a garage he had just designed; his test was to speed up the ramps at breakneck speed. Good memories!

George and Joe Vaughn, the owner of Vemco, met for lunch one day and, as so many inventions start, drew plans on a napkin for a concept known today as self-park. The use of some kind of machine that might be able to dispense a time-dated ticket in conjunction with a barrier gate that might open after a ticket was pulled was the plan. It sounds simple enough today, but someone had to come up with the idea. Prior to that, parking in America and the rest of the world relied on valet parking, at least if an operator wanted to collect money.

Jerry Tropino, Vemco's engineer, designed the TD249 dispenser and G89 gate. That idea was patented in 1953 by a new startup firm called APD, then a subsidiary of Vemco. Shortly after, APD became an independent firm. So I can say with pride that mechanized parking started in Detroit, which seems apropos given that Detroit was the worldwide center for car production at that time.

APD had a long heritage of bringing to the forefront many parking innovations, such as card access for monthly parkers, anti-pass-back, programmable individualized access card systems, status scanners, the first fee computer (although back then—pre-microchip—it was always short by one cent). As time went on, the company introduced integrated detectors with anti-tailgating, an all-in-one gate controller that could be programmed by a distributor, one of the first central monitoring stations that used computers, barcode and magnetic ticket readers, and a host of other breakthroughs over the years. APD always promoted technology.

The Culture

I'm getting ahead of myself. When I joined APD, I immediately felt part of a family. It was privately owned, and almost everyone preceding me seemed to have been born into this business. They all lived and breathed parking. Many employees came to us right from high school or college and stayed. This provided the firm with a wealth of parking knowhow and experience, as those who came stayed for a long time.

My mentor was Don Zito, who ran engineering and sales, which I later took over. I was fortunate as I moved up the ladder, but I always tried to keep us current with the latest technology.

The first thing I did was hire a young computer engineer named Gary Ward. I credit much to him. We



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introduced something new and innovative every year during my 23 years with the company. Some of you may empathize with this story if you ever experienced it yourself. Back then, we sold direct from the factory, and because I was still relatively new with ideas, one day I went to see Charley Englehart, the owner. I suggested we go to a distributor network instead of selling directly. My argument was, “Charley, in the short term we’ll make less, but trust me, in the long term we’ll make more.”

It sounds like baloney today, but for some reason, he bought into it, and we grew from there. Back then, we had seven or so competitors that were, for the most part, American manufacturers. Competition was fierce. Unfortunately, most of those companies fell to the wayside over time. European firms seem to have replaced them. This was simply a prelude of American manufacturing, I guess. A lot of our U.S. manufacturing has disappeared.

Charley was getting on in years. His son wanted to get more into access control, and so he asked me to find buyers one day. Federal Signal had a small parking division of their own and became interested; the company ultimately purchased APD, which became Federal APD. Having a large corporation backing us was a godsend. As long as we were left to our own devices, there were no more worries about payroll and suppliers, and we were free to concentrate on innovations and growing the business. And grow it we did.



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More Changes

Very few know this, but even before my time, APD brought Cincinnati Time into the parking business. APD wanted the retail clock technology that Cincinnati had, and in exchange for the use of that concept, APD allowed Cincinnati to bypass the patent and get into the parking business, making its own dispenser and gate. Cincinnati became our biggest competitor. Latham time made the clock for us, and it became part of the TD 249, “the ticket dispenser that never stopped working,” as it

was called by operators across the country. The same was said of the G89 gate that is still installed all over the country. Cincinnati Time later became Amano, which is another story unto itself, one I’ll leave for another day. Hamilton made our coin units for many years and later got into parking as well. For a brief time, we private-labeled S&B products.

In 1999–2000, management differences with Federal Signal corporate caused the management team of Federal APD—myself included—to leave. At that time, we distributed worldwide. We were very profitable and had a majority share of the U.S. market, with representation around the world. APD was well-respected by consultants everywhere.

I can’t speak for what went on after 1999. What I will say is that in this niche business of parking, you need people who live and dream parking to succeed. Large corporations often underestimate the experience and complexity needed for this type of business to succeed. Sometimes big business practice can’t easily be applied to an industry that doesn’t conform to mass production-line techniques. Success is a delicate balance, oftentimes undefinable. But it’s a balance of product, services, and teamwork. One can’t always know why the team works so well—there is a magic to it in that everyone has to mesh their contradictions as well as their particular talents and expertise into a unified and cohesive action. When outsiders tinker with a good team and its actions, that fine balance gets disrupted and the consequences are seldom good. Countless stories have been written of what a simple change in the team can do to a company. I could write a book, but I won’t.

It suffices to say that this company contributed a great deal to our industry and it will be missed. I had the honor and pleasure of working with 155 of some of the greatest folks at APD and distributors alike all the way up to 1999. I’m sorry APD will be closing. It shouldn’t have happened, but it has. I’m confident some good will come from this.

Either way, the industry that started in Detroit is flourishing worldwide, and the basic concept established in 1953 is used in every country, city, and hamlet worldwide today thanks to APD. I guess it’s appropriate that I will be retiring in 2015 as well. Although you never know... **P**