

Operators Piano Co., Chicago

- Manufacturer of the **Reproduco** Coin-Operated Phonograph -

The Operators Piano Co. was founded in 1909 by Louis Martin Severson, who came to Iowa from Norway with his parents in 1883 still an infant born on the 30th June 1881. The young Louis, only about 22 years old, started making repairs on pianos in 1904 and established himself with a small repair shop on Lake Street in Chicago. Then in July 1909 Louis M. Severson founded and incorporated Operators Piano Co. with Charles Ralph Dibble (1870-1921) of the Butte Piano Co. and German born Alfred Livingston (1879-1949) of The Star Music Co., and the official address was 628 Reaper Block. The company was built up through the co-operation of regular piano dealers, and soon many dealers also handled the coin-operated instruments as a profitable part of their business. This was certainly also the case for the co-founder Charles R. Dibble's firm Butte Piano Co. in Montana, and in this way the creative and inventive Louis Martin Severson became aware of the market possibilities for coin-op pianos. It is believed that the first coin-op piano produced in series by the company, now located at better facilities on the corner of Franklin Street and Huron Street, was called Victor Coin. Some parts of the mechanism and possibly also the coin accumulators were obtained at first from the Marquette Piano Co., but soon the Operators Piano Co. introduced the Coinola brand name and also made its own mechanisms. The company was very successful with the coin-operated pianos, and competed well against the J. P. Seeburg company, and in 1913 the company had to build a new impressive five-story factory on Clybourn Avenue to get enough space to manufacture the Coinola Style A and other coin-operated A-roll pianos and orchestrions. In 1915 the company introduced the Reproduco brand name used for non coin-op, self-playing piano-pipe organs, and in 1916 the company made its first Coinola Midget for coin-operation to compete mainly against the Seeburg K and KT coin-operated cabinet style orchestrions.

THE
COINOLA
OPERATORS PIANO CO.



Coinola Midget

In 1918 the company was again relocated from the corner of Clybourn Avenue and Osgood Street to get better, more modern facilities, and this time it was moved to South Peoria Street with nearly double the previous floor space, and the company stayed at this location until 1924. The growth of the company was indeed remarkable and based on initiative and correct management and business methods, and of course the inventiveness of the founder Louis M. Severson. In the autumn 1923 a building permit was obtained for a new plant at North Kedzie Avenue based on plans by the architect Harold Edwin Gallup of the firm Ingram & Gallup. The new factory was fully equipped and operational by May 1924, and it seems the company was reconstructed in 1926 to raise more capital. The original company of 1909 had a capital stock placed at \$8,000, but in 1926 the company was registered with a capital stock placed at \$60,000. Louis M. Severson continued to exercise his invention talents in the following years, and in 1929 he established a new department, The Reproduco Radio Co., within the plant on North Kedzie Avenue, and the radio receiving sets the new department manufactured were of high quality and quite popular. This new department within the plant was renamed The Reproduco Phonograph Co. and so responsible for the production of the coin-operated Reproduco automatic phonograph a few years later. The Reproduco phonograph shows indeed its coin-op piano ancestry with suction pump and bellows to operate the slide and flip-over record changer. The changer of the Reproduco is a non-select type much like the mechanism used in for example the Capehart Amperion of the same period.



Operators Piano Co, North Kedzie Avenue, 1924

It seems that Louis Martin Severson and David Colin Rockola knew each other for many years, and Rockola admired Severson's initiatives and business methods. Many of the Reproduco phonographs were operated by the Rock-Ola company and it seems that these inspired David C. Rockola to enter the coin-op phonograph business for real in 1935 with models in his company's name. The Rock-Ola factory was situated only a few blocks up the road on North Kedzie Avenue. It is a fact that David C. Rockola purchased about 50 cabinet-style A-roll pianos from the Operators Piano Co. on a

contract basis in the mid-twenties. The pianos were fitted with gambling devices in the top section and sold under the name Rock-Ola Profit-Sharing Player Piano. Usually the gambling device was a simple but reliable three-reel slot machine.



Louis M. Severson, 1917



Louis M. Severson (left) on tour, 1917

The Operators Piano Co. ceased production in 1931-1932 due to the hard times after the financial crisis in 1929, but about one year earlier Louis M. Severson retired from all activity in the business selling out his part of the company. It seems David Colin Rockola bought him out of the company, but Alfred Livingston stayed with the company at least one or two more years. Alfred Livingston, the sales manager of the Operators Piano Co. for many years, was a long-time friend and co-inventor of Louis M. Severson, and back in 1907 before he co-founded the Operators Piano Co. he was co-founder of another firm, The Star Music Co., in Chicago. After selling out his part of the piano company Severson lived on his farm with wife Jennie near St. Charles in Kane County, breeding racehorses. Louis Martin Severson passed away 69 years of age on the 12th December 1950, and he was interred at Elmwood Cemetery and Mausoleum, River Grove in Cook County, Illinois.

Gert Almind, 09-25-2010

Revised 03-25

REPRODUCO



Coin-Op Phonograph (ca.1931)



Louis Martin Severson
30/6 1881 – 12/12 1950

