

Famous New Yorker David H. McConnell

The Avon lady selling cosmetics to neighbors and coworkers has become part of American folklore. As Avon's founder, David H. McConnell made it possible for generations of saleswomen to enhance their income and their sense of independence.

David Hall McConnell was born to an Irish immigrant family in Oswego on July 18, 1858. After graduating from district school he attended the Oswego State Normal School, a teachers' training college. While studying to become a math teacher he supported himself as a book salesman. Before telephones made telemarketing possible, salesmen like McConnell went door-to-door on foot trying to sell books and other products. McConnell liked selling better than school and went to work full time for the Union Publishing Company in 1880.

By 1883 McConnell was Union Publishing's southern sales manager. He had learned that he could boost book sales by offering free items along with the books. He noticed that many female customers were more interested in free perfume than in the books themselves. In 1886, he bought Union Publishing and began transforming it into a perfume company.

McConnell opened an office in New York City and later built a laboratory in Suffern, Rockland County, where his wife helped develop new fragrances. Without leaving New York, he renamed his business the California Perfume Company, on the assumption that people identified the Golden State with fragrant flowers.

California Perfume sold products the same way McConnell had sold books, through direct selling. One of his top book sellers, Persis Foster Albee, joined California Perfume and became the model for future saleswomen. Albee and her peers met women informally to promote California products, which now included shampoos, lip balms, and other hygiene items. At a time when women were still discouraged from taking jobs outside the home, direct selling let them earn money of their own without really crossing over into the male-dominated workplace.

Driven by McConnell's vision and Persis Albee's example, California Perfume became a major force in the cosmetics business. McConnell became one of Suffern's leading employers and public benefactors. His direct selling system helped the company withstand the Great Depression; sales actually increased in the years before McConnell's death on January 20, 1937.



Oswego is located on the southeastern shore of Lake Ontario at the mouth of the Oswego River, about 35 miles north of Syracuse.



Image source: avoncompany.com

In the 1920s, McConnell visited Great Britain. Impressed by the beauty of William Shakespeare's home town of Stratford-upon-Avon, he gave the "Avon" name to a new product line in 1929. California Perfume came to be known as Avon well before the company officially changed its name in 1939. Generations of "Avon ladies" have followed in Persis Albee's footsteps into the 21st century. Their iconic place in the history of American commerce is David H. McConnell's greatest legacy.

To learn more the history of Avon and its founder, David McConnell go to <http://www.avoncompany.com/aboutavon/history/mcconnell.html>. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA News Media Literacy/ NIE Program. All rights reserved 2018.

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