

Donation of the Month

View-Master

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Donor: Forrest Bland Estate



This View-Master model used a C-battery to create its own internal light, c. 1958 & a disk of scenic images of New York.

Traveling around the world isn't something everyone can afford to do, but everyone wants to know about the people and places beyond their front door. Those who do get to travel across the country or across the ocean want to remember the places they visit. This is where the souvenir postcard comes in; these great and cheap images can be picked up anywhere and mailed home or kept as reminders of the trip. Unfortunately, these images are flat unlike the stereoviews that became popular in the 1830s.

Stereoviews are created by taking two photographic images with a camera on a tripod. Each image is slightly different, creating the illusion, when viewed together using a stereoscope, of a 3D image. In reality you are viewing the photographic image as you would an item standing

before you. Most stereoviews were images of faraway places and contained information on the back, allowing the viewer an educational exotic escape.

By the 1930s two men working independently and then together introduced a new way to view stereoviews. Harold Graves and Wilhelm Gruber, using two Kodak Bantam Specials on a tripod and Kodachrome 16mm color film, began taking and marketing stereoviews of Carlsbad Caverns and the Grand Canyon through Sawyers Photo Services. These scenic views were much like the original stereoviews, for education as well as for travel memories. However, they were unlike the original stereoviews, being placed on a wheel that fitted into a specific viewer called a ViewMaster.

Introduced at the 1939 New York World's Fair as an alternative to postcards, the production and sale of the wheels and the ViewMaster out sold every other line of photographic service at Sawyers. By 1951 the ViewMaster had bought out its only rival Tru-View and gained the licensing rights to Walt Disney images. With a new line of images of Disneyland and children themed stereoviews, the popularity of the product continued to grow.

However, by the end of the 1960s its popularity was falling and Sawyer was purchased by General Aniline & Film, who created more stereoviews of children's images, turning the ViewMaster into more of a toy than an educational tool. It was again sold in 1989 to Tyco Toy Inc. and placed in a subsidiary line of Fisher-Price, which reinforced its dwindling popularity and its use as a toy.

Today, the ViewMaster is still part of the Fisher-Price line, but they have lost out to portable dvd players and other devices that keep kids occupied. The ease, not necessarily the cost, of travel has allowed families to see more places than those who originally viewed the images of Carlsbad Cavern and the Grand Canyon. These two changes have brought about a new generation of children who did not grow up with the ViewMaster, which is too bad because it was a great invention that allowed the viewer to be transported to exotic places without leaving the couch.