Isaac M. Singer Biography

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Biography

Isaac Singer developed the first practical home sewing machine and brought it into general use. Born in Pittstown, New York, to German-Jewish immigrants, Singer left home at age twelve and roamed the Northeast for many years, working variously in carnivals, as an actor, and a mechanic. In 1839 he patented an excavator, and in the 1840s, a metal and wood-carving machine.

In 1850 Singer was working in a Boston, Massachusetts, machine shop when he was asked to analyze a Blodgett & Lerow sewing machine that had been brought in for repair. Singer developed a new design based on that machine, patented it in 1851, and along with Edward Clark, cofounded the I.M. Singer Company to market the machine.

Although Singer's machine was a great improvement over existing models, partly because of its continuous-feed feature, he was successfully sued three years later for patent infringement by Elias Howe, who had registered his own sewing machine design in 1846. However, the advent of patent pooling and licensing agreements in 1856 allowed the manufacture of Singer machines to continue with constant improvements. By 1860 the Singer Manufacturing Company had become the world's largest maker of sewing machines, and by 1863 Singer had received twenty patents for the machines.

Singer earned millions of dollars from his company and lived flamboyantly, enjoying rides through New York City's Central Park in his yellow coach with his mistresses--not a proper image for a company trying to sell sewing machines to middle-class housewives. Singer retired from the business in 1863, traveling throughout Europe before settling in Torquay, England, where he built a mansion and encouraged his twenty-four children (legitimate and illegitimate) to visit. Upon his death Singer left behind an estate of $13 million.