

Inventor of wireless remote control remembered.

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OBITUARY

Inventor created first wireless remote control

By CARLA K. JOHNSON
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Chicago — Couch potatoes everywhere can pause and thank Eugene Polley for hours of feet-up channel surfing. His invention, the first wireless TV remote, began as

a luxury, but with the introduction of hundreds of channels and viewing technologies, it has become a necessity.

Just ask anyone who's lost a remote.

Polley died of natural causes Sunday at a suburban Chicago hospital, Zenith Electronics spokesman John Taylor said. The former Zenith engineer was 96.

In 1955, if you wanted to switch TV channels from "Arthur Godfrey" to "Father Knows Best," you got up from your chair, walked across the room and turned a knob. Clunk. Clunk. Clunk.

Or you could buy a new Zenith television with Flash-Matic tuning. The TV came with a green ray-gun-shaped contraption with a red trigger. The advertising promised "TV miracles." The "flash tuner" was "Absolutely harmless to humans!" Most intriguing of all: "You can even shut off annoying commercials while the picture remains on the screen."

Polley was proud of his invention even late in life, Taylor said. He showed visitors at his assisted-living apartment his original Flash-Matic and how it had evolved into the technology of today. "He was a proud owner of a flat-screen TV and modern remote," Taylor said. "He al-



Polley



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As a 1955 ad shows, Eugene Polley's Flash-Matic worked by shooting light at photo cells in the corners of the TV screen.

ways kept his original remote control with him."

Polley's Flash-Matic pointed a beam of light at photo cells in the corners of the television screen. Each corner activated a different function, turning the picture and sound off and on, and changing the channels.

Chicago native Polley and fellow Zenith engineer Robert Adler were honored in 1997 with an Emmy for their work in pioneering TV remotes. In 2009, he received the Masaru Ibuka Consumer Electronics Award from the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers.

Beyond keeping TV viewers pinned to their chairs,

Polley's invention unchained technology from mechanical knobs and levers, opening vast possibilities,



Eugene Polley invented the Flash-Matic, the first wireless TV remote, in 1955.

said Richard Doherty, CEO of suburban New York-based technology assessment and market research company Envisioneering Group.

"Without his idea you might not have gotten to the Internet," Doherty said. "It allowed you to go beyond the physical dial. It set the pace for dozens of follow-on inventions that go beyond the physical."

During his 47-year career as an engineer, Polley earned 18 U.S. patents. At Zenith, he worked his way up from the stockroom, according to a biography from Lincolnshire, Ill.-based LG Electronics, which owns Zenith. Polley also worked on radar advances for the U.S. Department of Defense during World War II. He helped develop the push-button radio for automobiles and the video disk, a forerunner of today's DVD.

Polley's invention made life easier — perhaps too easy — for a generation of children.

"In my house, the remote control was named Rick," Doherty said. "'Rick, change it to Channel 7. Rick, change it to Channel 2. Rick, go back to the ball game.' It kept me fitter as a kid."