
INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

FRIDAY, JUNE 25, 1999

LEADERS & SUCCESS

Entrepreneur Jack Kent Cooke

By Michael Richman
INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

It was 1934, and Canadian Jack Kent Cooke felt the despair of the Great Depression.

Completely broke, Cooke and his wife didn't know where their next meal would come from. The pair slept in their car, which was stuck in the mud on the side of a road in Verigin, Manitoba.

But Cooke wasn't about to give up hope. Trying to make a sale, the 21-year-old-encyclopedia salesman stopped everyone he saw in Verigin, including the grain elevator operator, the local minister and a doctor. No luck. Then he spotted a school principal. Cooke gave him his pitch, but the principal wouldn't buy the books either. Determined to make a sale, Cooke followed him to his home and talked for 2 1/2 hours trying to close a deal. The principal's wife even gave Cooke dirty looks to get him to leave.

But his strategy paid off. The principal finally bought the encyclopedias for \$ 5, enough money for Cooke to buy two sandwiches and get his car out of the mud. Seeing how perseverance prevailed, Cooke vowed that he would never give up when chasing something he wanted.

Cooke (1912-97) was the epitome of hard work his whole life. His drive to

wardmeeting goals, along with optimism, a hunger for knowledge and a keen eye for people and opportunity, elevated the entrepreneur to the highest brackets of wealth.

He died at age 84 with estimated holdings of between \$ 700 million and \$ 1.2 billion. He amassed his fortune through interests in radio stations and cable television, daily newspapers, a thoroughbred racing stable and breeding farm in Kentucky and the Chrysler Building in New York City.

Cooke also owned the Los Angeles Lakers in the National Basketball Association, the Los Angeles Kings in the National Hockey League and the Washington Redskins in the National Football League.

He woke up every morning raring to put in a full day of hard work. Even as he neared 70, Cooke said, "I'm working as hard as ever. You must. You have to dream. Otherwise, go dig a hole 6 feet deep and climb in."

Indeed, Cooke worked until the last moment of his life. He collapsed and died from a heart attack while doing research in the library of his home in Washington, D.C.

Shortly after taking operating control of the Redskins in 1979, he hired Joe Gibbs as coach. The Redskins lost their first five games under Gibbs, who was then summoned to Cooke's house.

Gibbs thought his job was in jeopardy. But Cooke knew that Gibbs had the ability to produce a winning team. Instead of firing him, Cooke gave Gibbs a pep talk.

"You're the right man for the job," he told Gibbs.

The owner's patience proved fruitful; the Redskins won three Super Bowls in Gibbs' 11 seasons. "(Cooke) was always at his best when things were at their worst," Gibbs said.

Cooke was a self-made success. Growing up in Hamilton, Ontario, he became a talented clarinet and saxophone player. At age 15, he formed an orchestra with school friends.

Always looking for a way to make money, Cooke figured out that he could cash in on his musical ability.

He placed a quarter-page ad in his high school's literary magazine for "Jack Kent Cooke and His Band," offering "Special rates for parties, dinners, banquets and weddings." He performed at tea dances and played clarinet on cruise ships and a steamboat that sailed the Great Lakes.

"He was a hard-eyed little guy with guts that wouldn't turn his head when a train went past," said Ted Reeves, Cooke's high school football coach. "He could sell - boy, could he sell. He could sell stoves at a shipwreck."

Cooke always believed in himself. Once, his English teacher noticed that Cooke-

and some other boys in the room weren't paying attention. She then challenged them to teach the class. Cooke came to the front of the room, told his classmates to open their books to Page 84 and instructed them until the teachersat him back down.

But education wasn't Cooke's top priority. He dropped out of high school, got married and decided he would become a millionaire by age 30.

"That he had the nerve to believe this possible in 1934, when fear and a 'give-up' mood had struck most North Americans, and when 25% of all Canadians were unemployed, is a testament to the spirit of optimism he had always shown," Adrian Havill wrote in "The Last Mogul: The Unauthorized Biography of Jack Kent Cooke."

Cooke seized every opportunity presented to him. He saw how much people liked radio. So in 1944, he put together a deal to buy Toronto radio station CKEY. If he could get that one station, he figured, he could use it as a springboard to a media empire.

But buying it wasn't easy. He tried to raise \$ 500,000 through investors who would each pay \$25,000. With time running out, he was three investors short.

Cooke refused to give up his dream. He approached one of the richest men in Canada to put down \$ 25,000.

(Continued)

But he didn't just discuss the issue with the man - he hustled. "I talked about everything, even the height of the (station's) building," Cooke said. "I thought as long as I could keep him from saying no, I had a chance."

"Like a hungry dog with a bone, Jack Cooke wouldn't let go," Havill said. Other investors followed the influential millionaire, and the deal was set.

Cooke didn't just sell; he innovated. To make his radio station stand out, he turned CKEY into one of the first Canadian stations to do 24-hour-a-day programming.

He livened up the format with peppier music and enforced a "no dead music" policy. He also launched long-block programming, with consecu-

tive 15-minute slots for news, music and comedy.

He not only made policy, however; he lived it. Cooke worked at the station 24 hours a day and expected a similar commitment from his staff. For instance, he scheduled meetings at 12:30 p.m. or 5:30 p.m., so that his employees would miss their lunch or dinner break and keep working, Havill said.

The station had annual earnings of \$ 1.6 million in the 1950s.

"The harder I work, the luckier I get," Cooke once said.

Cooke always tried to learn something new. Despite his lack of education, he devoured newspapers, magazines, novels, poetry, biographies - even the Oxford English Dictionary. He absorbed so much that his vocabulary was regarded as exceptional.

He believed that precision in language revealed precision in thought. A U.S. senator once said to him, "We gave away 3.6 bil today, Jack. What do you think about that?"

Cooke's response: "I would think a lot more of it, senator, if you had said, 'The United States Senate, in all its professed wisdom, approved bills of appropriation for 3 billion, 600 million dollars.' "

He always tried to say exactly the right thing, and was often ready with a pithy quote to inspire or entertain.

Take the time Redskins quarterback Joe Theismann broke his leg in four places during a 1985 game. Cooke quoted English poet John Dryden: "I'm a little wounded, but I am not slain. I will lay down for to bleed a

while; then I'll rise to fight with you again."

Once Cooke set a goal, he did everything possible to achieve it.

For years, he lobbied for a state-of-the-art stadium for the Redskins. He negotiated for an entire decade with officials in Washington, Virginia and Maryland.

He used his optimism to pull him through the often-contentious negotiations. "This is the greatest day in the history of the world," he once said. "Even better than yesterday, though yesterday that seemed an impossibility."

After 10 years of negotiations, he and Maryland officials agreed on the stadium's size and location there.

But he never saw it. Just four months before Jack Kent Cooke Stadium opened in Raljohn, Md., its namesake died.