

Biography

Roger Milliken, the 20th Century's Greatest Leader in American Textiles, Dies



Roger Milliken, who led Milliken & Company for 71 years, during which it grew to become the world's largest privately owned textile and chemical manufacturer, died December 30, 2010 in Spartanburg, aged ninety-five.

One of the last in the tradition of those great industrialists who built America's manufacturing success, during his seven decades as the leader of Milliken & Company, Mr. Milliken expanded the business from a handful of plants to 50 manufacturing facilities in 7 countries.

Mr. Milliken lived by ideas and principles from which he never wavered. He believed that America's manufacturing leadership was the foundation of his nation's economic achievement.

His personal examples of uncompromising integrity, of hard work in any just cause, and an inexhaustible passion for excellence shone in his every undertaking. His beliefs were his commitments, whether to life-long education, to quality, to innovation, or as demonstrated in his absolute commitment to the health and safety of all of his associates.

He was an unabashed patriot and an ardent Conservative. He trusted in the ability and wisdom of people acting of their own accord. His devotion to country, to community, to his associates and to his family were fully in harmony with the beliefs that guided his life.

In his love of trees he found joy and beauty, and through them he expressed his commitment to the future. They were nature's gift to him, which he in turn gave to his fellow citizens.

A member of both the National and the South Carolina Business Halls of Fame, Mr. Milliken was repeatedly recognized as the 20th-century's greatest leader in American textiles because of the technological and workforce innovations Milliken & Company brought to the industry. In 1999, the industry's trade publication, *Textile World*, selected him as the textile industry's Leader of the Century. He was also an inaugural inductee to the American Textile Hall of Fame.

Early in his career, Roger Milliken built in Spartanburg, S.C. what would grow to become the world's largest and most productive textile and chemical research facility, now holding more than 2300 patents in the US alone. The culture of innovation that Roger Milliken created and nourished has enabled Milliken to grow, prosper and expand, both in the US and around the world, while most of its domestic competitors have withered.

As a "business-to-business" company, Milliken & Company's low public profile belies the ubiquity and impact of products based on Milliken's science, design and market insight.

For example Milliken's scientific leadership in polymer clarification and nucleation has enabled it to shape the growth of the world market for re-useable transparent food and storage containers across four generations of technology. And while Milliken's aesthetic designs win many prestigious global awards in the rarified air of interior design, it's innovative industrial designs continue to change the way we think about and use products in fields as pragmatic as the a new generation of automotive tires that advance safety and performance while enabling significant improvements in fuel efficiency.

Milliken's market insights identify unmet needs that have led, for example, to the development of new methods of deploying new fiber-optic cable to meet the world's ever-growing demand for communications infrastructure, while minimizing the social disruption of digging up streets in the world's crowded urban environments.

From the first generation of "easy-care" fabrics in the mid-twentieth century to the latest generation of advanced wound care bandages in the twenty-first century, Milliken's deep science, meaningful design and unique insights continue to solve global problems at a human level.

Early History

Roger Milliken was born October 24, 1915, in New York City, the eldest son of Gerrish and Agnes (Gayley) Milliken. He graduated from Yale University in 1937, and immediately entered business. Mr. Milliken didn't start in the executive suite, but instead worked as a "follow-up boy" in the New York office of Mercantile Stores, in which his family had an ownership stake. There he made the rounds of suppliers, seeing to it that coats and suits ordered by the stores were delivered. He, at times, pinned up the hems of women's coats, all the while learning the business from the ground up.

In 1941, he was given the stewardship of three small woolen mills in Maine. When his father died in 1947, the 32-year-old succeeded him as president.

Roger Milliken met his future wife, Justine (Nita) Van Rensselaer Hooper, at a dinner party which he almost didn't attend. She was in the city working at the research department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They married in 1948.

In 1954, Mr. Milliken and his family moved to Spartanburg, South Carolina, beginning a long and productive association with the people of the Palmetto State. Both Mr. and Mrs. Milliken moved into active community service, he serving on the board of Wofford College and she on the board of Converse College. Mr. Milliken also served on other corporate and nonprofit boards, including: Arthur D. Little, Westinghouse, Citicorp, Mercantile, W.R. Grace; and Institute of Textile Technology, The Heritage Foundation, the Greenville-Spartanburg Airport Commission, and the Spartanburg Day School.

Roger Milliken spearheaded forward-looking change in South Carolina, helping to create its thriving manufacturing and business environment. He was instrumental in attracting numerous businesses, including BMW, and, most recently, Southwest Airlines, to the Upstate. He was president of Milliken & Company until 1983, when he became Chairman and CEO. He relinquished the CEO title in 2005, and remained Chairman until his death.

Growing Milliken & Company

Of the various factors that helped Mr. Milliken grow the company, none was more important than his dedication to quality and process control. Early on, he recognized the value of Dr. W. Edwards Deming's work in Japan. By following the tenets, "Good is the enemy of best, and best is the enemy of better," and "The largest room in the world is the room for improvement," Mr. Milliken took the company on a decades-long journey that elevated its quality standards to the point where the entire company was awarded, in 1989, the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Milliken & Company has also received the European Quality Award and the Japanese TPM (Total Productive Maintenance) Excellence Award, making it the only company in the world to have won all three awards.

Mr. Milliken not only oversaw company policy and management, he was known, too, for extraordinary attention to detail in matters mechanical. A man of great curiosity, he would examine new technology thoroughly, sometimes crawling underneath a new loom to get a better understanding of the mechanisms at work.

It was Mr. Milliken's dedication to quality in manufacturing that helped keep Milliken & Company competitive against lower-cost suppliers outside the U.S. It also helped to preserve thousands of American jobs that otherwise would have likely been lost.

The American Worker

Along with dedication to quality, Mr. Milliken understood the importance of safeguarding the lives of company workers. When a devastating fire burned to the ground the massive Live Oak carpet manufacturing plant in LaGrange, Georgia, in 1995, Mr. Milliken showed up the next day and committed to rebuild "starting tomorrow" and to have the plant up and operating again within six months, a promise that was kept. He also assured the plant's 700 associates, none of whom were injured, that Milliken & Company would keep them employed in the meantime. When some of them transferred temporarily to Milliken plants abroad, he arranged for video teleconference calls for them to talk to their families.

Mr. Milliken was known for his outreach to Milliken workers, whom he insisted be called associates, not employees. It was common for him to walk up to an unknown associate, offer his hand and introduce himself simply, and engage in conversation. He was always eager to hear views from the factory floor and instituted an "Opportunity for Improvement" process, whereby management committed to review and quickly implement changes according to suggestions written in by associates. In this way Mr. Milliken harnessed the dedication, knowledge and creativity of those who had intimate, hands-on experience of the machinery and the daily familiarity with the manufacturing experience. In one instance, at the end of a meeting of some 400 Milliken & Company managers, Mr. Milliken stood on a chair, raised his right hand and asked those present to raise their hands and repeat after him: "I will listen; I will not shoot the messenger; I recognize that management is the problem."

To help protect the American worker, in 1983 Mr. Milliken launched the nationally known "Crafted with Pride in the U.S.A." advertising campaign, which aimed to control the flood of textile imports that were threatening the U.S. textile and apparel industry. In 2001, in his mid-80s, Mr. Milliken co-founded the American Manufacturing Trade Action Coalition (AMTAC). Based in Washington, DC, this organization is comprised of manufacturers who share a the common mission "to preserve and create American manufacturing jobs through the establishment of trade policy and other measures necessary for the U.S. manufacturing sector to stabilize and grow."

In 2008 Business Week listed Milliken & Company as one of the "Best Places to Launch a Career" and in 2009 FORTUNE magazine named it, for the fifth time, one of the "100 Best Companies to Work For."

Politics & Values

Mr. Milliken was well known for his support of Republican causes and candidates, particularly those who favored small government and the protection of American jobs.

After moving to Spartanburg in 1953, Mr. Milliken became an integral part of the rise of the Republican Party in the South. Long before the Republican Party gained a foothold in what was then a traditionally Democratic state, he worked on the grass-roots level to organize Republican precincts. From 1956 to 1984, he served as a delegate from South Carolina to eight Republican National Conventions. He successfully urged Barry Goldwater to run for President. Milliken was also a significant supporter of William F. Buckley, Jr., and his flagship magazine, National Review.

His support of Republican policy was not unequivocal, however. When Ross Perot ran for President opposing NAFTA, Mr. Milliken became a prominent supporter. He understood that there would be a huge cost to the offshoring

of American manufacturing. Believing in the foundational value of a strong middle class, he made every attempt to shift U.S. policy away from free trade to fair trade. On this issue, he worked closely with Democrats.

Environmental Stewardship

The American worker and conservative politics were not the only arenas in which Mr. Milliken focused his leadership. Roger Milliken was also an environmental steward long before the term “green” was fashionable. Sustainability has long been a watchword at Milliken & Company and was acted on in tangible ways, as the company pursued exemplary recycling and emissions- and waste-reduction programs which led to its current carbon-negative status. The company diverts 99.98% of all the company's waste away from landfills and to places where it can be reused, recycled, or converted to energy. Milliken and Company has reduced its rate of water usage by over 50% since 1991. Mr. Milliken loved the beauty of nature and worked with landscape architects and foresters to create beauty in and around Milliken plant locations, local schools and colleges, the Greenville-Spartanburg airport, and the community at large. Passionate about the connection between environment and humans, Mr. Milliken always paid keen attention to the effects of landscape and buildings on those who worked or walked within them. When creating the Milliken & Company headquarters in Spartanburg, he chose to buy more land than necessary in order to give it the space needed for fountains and vistas. He loved to walk the grounds, often making it a Sunday outing for his family, to stroll among the sweetgum trees and ponds and check on plantings and new possibilities.

In 1999, Mr. Milliken established the Noble Tree Foundation to encourage the planting of enduring and beautiful trees, particularly in rundown or overlooked corners of the Greenville-Spartanburg area and at traffic interchanges. In 2004, Mr. Milliken received the Frederick Law Olmsted Award, one of the highest honors bestowed by the National Arbor Day Foundation. And in 2007, the American Society of Landscape Architects conferred Honorary Membership on Mr. Milliken. He was also awarded the Frances K. Hutchinson Medal by the Garden Club of America. His environmental stewardship was just one of the reasons why the company was chosen as one of the “World’s Most Ethical Companies” by Ethisphere magazine in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010.

Community

Mr. Milliken’s ties to South Carolina were long and deep. The legacy he leaves behind is well illustrated by the vision and initiative he displayed in helping to build the Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport, which then played a major role in attracting new business to the region, including BMW's only manufacturing plant in North America and Michelin's North American headquarters.

As the only chairman of the Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport Commission since its inception in 1959 until his death, Mr. Milliken convinced government leaders in both cities that the region would be best served through the cooperative development of a single airport. As with all the building projects he undertook, he paid meticulous attention to its detail and landscaping, so that visitors from around the world would be greeted by welcoming views. In designing the airport, Mr. Milliken insisted on a landscape and fountain garden on the runway-side of the building -- the only one of its type in the Nation. Thus, for five decades, countless children have played in the garden while marveling at the huge planes landing and taking off. In 1992, he was named an Honorary Member of the American Institute of Architects, a true honor for one who did not have an architectural degree. In 2004, the airfield was named in his honor and is now known as Roger Milliken Field.

Mr. Milliken was also passionately dedicated to education, particularly in local schools. He was instrumental in the founding of the Spartanburg Day School in 1957, and served as a trustee and benefactor of the school until his death. He was also a long-time trustee of Wofford College in Spartanburg. Thanks in large part to Mr. Milliken's vision and support, in 2002 the entire Wofford campus was designated a National Arboretum, which in 2008 was renamed the

Roger Milliken Arboretum. Also in 2008, Wofford College named Mr. Milliken Trustee Emeritus and established Roger Milliken Day to be observed each year with a tree-planting ceremony.

Never afraid to tackle issues head on, whether popular or not, Mr. Milliken used his considerable personal influence to accomplish necessary change. Former president of Wofford College Joab Lesesne tells of one board meeting in 1964, when the board was debating whether to admit African-American students to the college. Mr. Milliken insisted that opening admissions was something the college had to do and that he would personally make up for any loss of alumni money that might result from the decision. His firmness in backing this new policy sprang from both pragmatism and his sense that it was simply the right thing to do. Wofford thus became one of the first historically white private colleges in the South to open its admissions fully and voluntarily to black applicants. Mr. Milliken also applied his vision to Wofford's science center. Not only did he contribute funds towards its building, he spent hours upon hours involved with its design, reviewing fixtures and sightlines, insistent on getting it right. Designed to be the intellectual crossroads of the campus, it opened in 2001 and was named in his honor.

In everything he did, Roger Milliken was a man of drive and passion. His energy was legendary: he was known for outlasting even younger associates or children and grandchildren on marathon days of exploration. He downhill skied well into his 80s. At the family's summer home in Northeast Harbor, Maine, he, for years, climbed mountains daily, raced sailboats twice a week, and participated in competitive card and board games, as well as games of croquet and ping-pong.

Nita, Mr. Milliken's wife of 55 years, died in 2003. He is survived by five children and nine grandchildren.

Roger Milliken wanted his epitaph to read, simply, "Builder." And so it will. And so he was, in countless ways.