

Curtis L. Carlson (1914 - 1999)

Former Owner /CEO of Radisson Hotels, Carlson Travel



Curtis L. Carlson, the founder and chairman of the board of Carlson Companies, died Friday evening, February 19, 1999 at Methodist Hospital, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Noble Curt Carlson was 84.

Noble Carlson emerged from a humble background — as the son of Swedish-American immigrants — to build one of the largest privately held companies in the world.

Recognized as a phenomenal salesman, Mr. Carlson's rise in the business world started with a simple idea — "Gold Bond" trading stamps. He originally sold the stamps to small grocery stores in the 1930s and 1940s. The consumer incentive idea rocketed Mr. Carlson into national prominence in the grocery business and retail industry in the 1950s and 1960s as "Gold Bond stamps" became household words across North America. Eventually, Gold Bond made its way into Europe and Japan.

Today, Carlson Companies encompasses more than 100 companies with operations in more than 140 countries. The company's brands employ more than 160,000 people systemwide, and total sales generated by the brands worldwide reached \$22 billion in systemwide revenues in 1998.

The Early Days

Curtis L. Carlson was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on July 9, 1914, the son of Charles and Leatha Carlson. Both of his parents were immigrants raised by parents who struggled economically to make it in America. They were part of a massive group of Scandinavian people who came to Minnesota and Wisconsin in the late 1800s.

Carlson's parents were married in 1905 in Minneapolis. In the early days, his father drove a sprinkler truck for the City of Minneapolis. After his son was born in 1914, Charles Carlson went to work for a wholesale grocery firm. Besides Curt, the Carlsons had four other children -- three sons and a daughter.

Carlson's father opened up his own neighborhood grocery store after he left the wholesale food business. As a young boy, Curt earned money after school by working for his father in this store. Here he received his first taste of food retailing, which would later have a significant impact on his business life. The Carlson family had a moderate income. The youngsters were taught the value of money early and the principle that if you wanted something badly enough, you would have to work for it.

Carlson grew up in south Minneapolis and attended elementary and high school there. When he was nine years old, he took on his first job as a golf caddie at the Interlachen Country Club in Edina, Minnesota. He made 50 cents for caddying one golf bag and 75 cents for carrying two. At age 11, he obtained his first newspaper route. During the next few years, he had as many as three newspaper routes at one time -- farming out two of them to his younger brothers for delivery. Carlson realized a small profit from his brothers for these additional two routes. He still supervised the routes during his first year in college. This

business arrangement was one of the first signs that Carlson would develop into an enterprising entrepreneur.

He also operated a corner newsstand at a busy south Minneapolis intersection where he sold newspapers. He had his biggest newsstand sale on "Black Tuesday" when banner headlines carried the message that the stock market had crashed. It was October 29, 1929. It signaled the beginning of the Depression, and Carlson, at age 15, together with Americans everywhere, faced an uncertain future. Carlson graduated from West High School in south Minneapolis in 1932 before entering the University of Minnesota. To earn money for college, Carlson drove a soda pop truck and sold advertising by placing information on fraternity and sorority bulletin boards.

Following graduation from the University of Minnesota in 1937 where he majored in economics, Carlson went to work for Procter & Gamble as a soap salesman for \$110 per month. During that time he noticed that the Leader retail department store in downtown Minneapolis was giving away red coupons for so many dollars in purchases. These coupons could be redeemed for cash or merchandise at the department store. He reasoned that if the coupons stimulated business in department stores with their exclusive lines of merchandise, they would be effective for grocery stores as well. After all, Carlson figured, grocery stores needed a point of difference since they all sold identical products. With this thought in mind, Carlson applied for a license in Minneapolis to operate a new company — the Gold Bond Stamp Company. The Hennepin County Clerk of District Court issued the certificate on June 8, 1938.

Carlson continued his regular job with Procter & Gamble for 16 months. However, during the evenings and on weekends, he continued to perfect and sell his trading stamp idea to local merchants — particularly the small "Mom and Pop" food stores in the Minneapolis area.

The entrepreneur worked the neighborhoods throughout Minneapolis and, in the fall of 1938, he quit his job with Procter & Gamble to devote his full energies to his new trading stamp idea. The year 1938 marked another important time for Carlson. He married his college sweetheart, Arleen Martin, whom he met in class when they attended the University of Minnesota. They eventually had two daughters, Marilyn and Barbara.

In the late 1930s and very early 1940s, merchants, particularly those who operated small food stores, began giving Gold Bond stamps in ever-increasing numbers throughout the city. Carlson's trading stamp business was beginning to catch on -- first locally, then regionally, nationally and internationally.

Carlson did not invent the trading stamp. He perfected it within the retail food business and was the first one to introduce the trading stamp into food stores. The growth of Carlson's struggling young company was virtually paralyzed with the advent of World War II in 1941 and the post-war adjustment period. However, by the end of World War II in 1945 and by the early 1950s, the Gold Bond Stamp Company was operating in 11 Midwestern states and beginning to make an impact on the national scene.

A major breakthrough for Carlson's business occurred in 1953 when he sold Gold Bond trading stamps to one of the largest wholesale grocery chains in the nation, Super Valu, which operated hundreds of large supermarkets across the Midwest. Super Valu was the first major supermarket food chain in the nation to use trading stamps.

Almost overnight, Gold Bond stamps became part of everyday life for Americans. "It was an idea whose time had come!" Carlson would say later. During the 1960s, the trading stamp business had grown to such a phenomenal extent that further growth projections were impossible. Nineteen out of the top 20 food chains were issuing trading stamps, and 50 percent of all gasoline stations were giving stamps on purchases. It was a time to review the present and anticipate the future of trading stamps.

As a result of strategic planning, Carlson began to diversify his capital into other businesses, including real estate in the western suburbs of Minneapolis. Part of the property would be the future home of his Carlson Companies World Headquarters, which opened in 1989.

Among Carlson's major diversifications was the 1962 purchase of the nationally known Radisson Hotel in downtown Minneapolis. This marked the beginning of the expansion of the Radisson name. Later, T.G.I. Friday's restaurants joined the Hospitality Group. This diversification into other businesses, besides trading stamps, prompted his company to change its name from the Gold Bond Stamp Company to Carlson Companies, Inc., in 1973.

Carlson's success story in American business has been the subject of major articles in many top national publications. "Time," "Business Week," "Fortune," "The Wall Street Journal," "Forbes," "U.S. News & World Report," "Newsweek," "Town & Country," "Travel Agent," "Travel Weekly," "Business Travel News," "Leaders," and "Der Spiegel" -- all have devoted stories to the incredible business career of one of America's top entrepreneurs.

A number of major daily newspapers, including "USA Today," "The New York Times," "Chicago Sun-Times," "St. Louis Globe-Democrat," "Minneapolis Star Tribune," "Charlotte News-Observer," "Dallas Morning News," "Dallas Times Herald," "the St. Paul Pioneer Press," as well as the Associated Press and United Press International, have carried one or more major national and international news feature stories on Curt Carlson.

In step with the expansion of his businesses over these past 60 years, Carlson took on leadership responsibilities in civic and community organizations. Carlson Companies is a pioneer and charter member of the "Five Percent Club" (now called the Minnesota Keystone Club), which includes top Minneapolis-St. Paul area corporations that give five percent of their earnings to non-profit organizations.

In 1997, Carlson Companies received the Minnesota Keystone program's first-ever Honored Company Award, recognizing the corporation for its distinguished history of community giving. In 1980, Carlson gave \$1 million to his alma mater, the University of Minnesota, to help reorganize its Political Science School into the new Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. Carlson chaired the committee that raised \$12 million to fund the new school. In April 1986, Carlson gave a personal gift of \$25 million to the University. This was the largest single gift ever given to a public university. At the same time, Carlson agreed to spearhead a three-year drive, which raised \$365 million with the specific objective of moving the University of Minnesota's ranking into the top five public universities in America. Called "The Minnesota Campaign," the drive was the largest ever conducted by a public university in the nation during a three-year period.

Carlson's \$25 million gift provided the spark for this fund raising campaign for the University of Minnesota. This was Carlson's way of paying back his obligation to the University for properly preparing him to enter the business world in the late 1930s, a time when America was still in the aftermath of the Depression. He was able to attend the University at a reasonable tuition cost -- an opportunity he would never forget.

To honor Carlson, in October 1986 the University of Minnesota's prestigious School of Management was renamed the "Curtis L. Carlson School of Management." It marks only the second time in its history that the University has named a school after a person. The University's School of Public Affairs had been renamed the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs in 1977.

In 1993, Carlson gave still another personal gift of \$10 million to the University of Minnesota's School of Management to spark its drive to build a new, free-standing Business School. This latest \$10 million contribution raises Carlson's total gift to the University of Minnesota to \$35 million. It places him as the nation's third single-largest contributor to a business school. A shining new facility opened in December 1997 to house the Carlson School of Management, featuring state-of-the-art, tele-teaching rooms, at-desk computer connectivity for students, and an extensive corporate learning center. The new building opened for classes in January 1998.

Carlson's philanthropic efforts earned him "Town & Country" magazine's prestigious "Generous American Award" for 1987-1988, plus a major story on his philanthropy in the publication's December 1987 issue. "Town & Country" called Carlson "a visionary with a different tactic... the man who has inspired the new philosophy of corporate giving."

The Present:

On March 23, 1998, Carlson named Marilyn Carlson Nelson president and chief executive officer of Carlson companies. Until his death, Curtis L. Carlson continued to serve as chairman of the board. Curtis L. Carlson, the man and the entrepreneur, will be missed.

-<https://www.muratshrine.org/bios/carlson.php>
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