

**Obituary**  
**Curtis Carlson**  
**February 22, 1999**

Curtis Carlson, who started the Gold Bond Stamp Co. with a \$55 loan during the Great Depression and built it into the giant Carlson Cos. Inc. that included Radisson Hotels Worldwide, has died. He was 84. Carlson died Friday at a suburban Minneapolis hospital after a stroke on Feb. 10.

Carlson was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the son of Charles and Leatha Carlson. Charles Carlson was a Swedish-American immigrant who arrived as a child in Minnesota; Leatha Carlson was born in Downing, Wisconsin of a Danish father and Swedish mother. He began a promising career with Procter and Gamble after earning a BA in Economics in 1937 from the University of Minnesota where he served as President, and Recruitment Chair for Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity.

Carlson was the third child of Swedish immigrants in a family of five children. His mother worked as a maid in her early years and his father drove a sprinkler wagon for the city of Minneapolis and was a grocery salesman before opening his own grocery store.

Carlson began his career with a \$110-a-month job as a soap salesman for Procter & Gamble, earning a gold watch and a \$330 bonus the first year. He started his trading stamp business at night with a \$55 loan from his landlord, and within six months said goodbye to selling soap.

Carlson founded the Gold Bond Stamp Company in 1938. Carlson used "Gold Bond Stamps", a consumer loyalty program based on trading stamps, to provide consumer incentive for grocery stores. Carlson was the first entrepreneur to develop a loyalty program for the grocery chain through the issuance of trading stamps. What began as a simple loyalty program for grocers in the Midwest grew into one of the largest service providers of frequent shopper / buyer programs across a variety of retail and hospitality sectors.

Carlson expanded his offerings by purchasing the downtown Minneapolis Radisson Hotel in 1960 and building it into a national chain. He also acquired TGI Fridays, Carlson Leisure Group and hundreds of other hospitality businesses.

The Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota is named for him. Curt Carlson created an estate in Lake Nebagamon, Wisconsin for his family to gather. Publicly known as Minnesuing Acres after the lake it is located on, the Carlson family refer to it as "the lodge". This estate was where his family gathers for important holidays. This estate was later converted to a business resort for corporations. It continues to host business seminars as well as Carlson/Gage family get-togethers.

The company, with 147,000 employees, also includes Carlson Marketing Group, Carlson Wagonlit Travel franchises, A.T. Mays travel agencies, Country Inns and Suites, Radisson Seven Seas Cruises and TGI Friday restaurants. Carlson Cos. had \$7.8 billion in annual revenue in 1998. The Carlson name was worth another \$14.2 billion in annual revenue to franchises and other businesses licensed by the company.

From 1938 to 1978, Gold Bond grew at a rate of 30% a year, never failing to meet sales goals set by the founder. During the post-World War II era when trading stamps were in their heyday, Gold Bond broke new ground by signing up such nontraditional accounts as rural movie theaters, feed mills, turkey hatcheries and mortuaries.

The hotel chain that Carlson launched in 1962 when he bought Minneapolis' Radisson Hotel now has 375 properties. Until stricken, Carlson had remained active in the business. But he had relinquished control last year to his daughter, Marilyn Carlson Nelson.

Carlson is survived by his wife of 60 years, Arleen; two daughters, Marilyn Carlson Nelson and Barbara Carlson Gage; eight grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.