

M. Gerald O'Neil, Akron businessman and leader

By Grant Segall

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Michael Gerald O'Neil
1922-2009

Survivors: wife, Jean; seven children; a stepdaughter; six adopted nephews and nieces; 14 grandchildren and a sister.
Arrangements: Hummel Funeral Home

The Rubber City lost one of its last tire tycoons Tuesday, when Michael Gerald O'Neil died at his Akron home at age 87. O'Neil helped diversify his town and his father's businesses, including General Tire, in polymers, movies, missiles and more. He was also a top donor and activist.

"Jerry O'Neil was such a force for good in our community," Mayor Don Plusquellic said Wednesday. "His corporate leadership and philanthropy forever changed Akron for the better." Deputy Mayor Dave Lieberth, who once interviewed O'Neil for a documentary, said: "He was creative, and he was often contentious. He'd take a different point of view. He'd make people prove their case."

Time Magazine called O'Neil "a cool risk-taker." He had a sense of humor, too. Asked about rumors from rival Goodyear, O'Neil said, "I was raised around horse manure."

He grew up partly in what is now O'Neil House, a bed and breakfast place, and partly on a farm, now O'Neill Woods of the Summit County Metro Parks.

O'Neil spent 19 years as a Metro Parks trustee and nearly a decade as chairman of Goals for Greater Akron, which reshaped Akron's transit systems, emergency dispatch service and more. He was also a leader of St. Thomas Hospital, where a wing is named for him, and of Akron Children's Hospital, where he headed the drive for a Ronald McDonald House. He also founded the all-male Sharon Golf Club.

O'Neil's grandfather, another Michael, founded a popular downtown department store. His father, William, started General Tire early last century.

Michael Gerald O'Neil graduated from LaSalle Military Academy in New York and Holy Cross College in Massachusetts. He taught flying during World War II and flew private or corporate planes until age 79.

He started on General Tire's assembly line. In 1960, his father died, and the three surviving sons took over parts of the evolving business. Michael Gerald O'Neil, youngest of the three, became president and later chairman of the manufacturing lines, expanding them widely and turning them into GenCorp. He also chaired RKO General Inc., which owned movie theaters, a Hollywood studio and much of Frontier Airlines.

O'Neil was considered the last direct descendant of an Akron tire founder to remain in the field. But he left GenCorp in 1993. The company is now part of Continental Tire North America in Charlotte, N.C.

He raised 14 children, half of them adopted nieces and nephews, including Judge Deborah Cook of the U.S. Court of Appeals. "He was a tremendous guy, who gave back at every turn," Cook said Wednesday. She said he contributed not just to charities but quietly to many people in need.

Through a second marriage, he became stepfather of Patricia Bowman, whom William Kennedy Smith was later acquitted of raping in Palm Beach, Fla., the winter home of both clans. Bowman and O'Neil stepped forward after initial anonymity in the case. "It's too late to hide, I'm telling you," O'Neil said to the Miami Herald. "Now's the time to let everybody know and get on with our lives."

Relatives said he often drove them in a Winnebago on camping trips. He also liked to tinker and to improve household efficiency. Said his son, Shawn, "He's the only one who can properly load a dishwasher."