



John Swearingen, Oil Executive

John E. Swearingen, the most powerful oil executive of his generation and a highly visible defender of the industry in the energy crisis of the 1970s, died on Friday in Birmingham, Ala. He was 89 and lived in Chicago.

His death was confirmed by John Bryan, a close friend and former chief executive of Sara Lee, who said Mr. Swearingen had Alzheimer's disease.

For two decades, Mr. Swearingen presided over Standard Oil of Indiana, the Midwest energy conglomerate, one of the companies founded after the federal government broke up the Rockefeller oil trust.

When he took over in 1960, at the unusually young age of 41, it was a lumbering regional energy company with a big problem: low oil and gas reserves.

"In many respects," Mr. Swearingen said in an interview at the time, "this is a second-rate company."

Soon enough, though, it was the envy of the industry. Mr. Swearingen pushed the company to expand its fuel exploration aggressively, leasing offshore drilling rights in the United States, Africa and the Middle East.

To cut costs, he installed labor-saving technology in refineries, merged 26 regional offices into 8 and reduced the number of employees by thousands. He also pursued new ventures through subsidiaries like roadside restaurants and car insurance.

Sales, profits and dividends for investors soared, turning Mr. Swearingen into an oil industry legend. By 1980, the total value of his company's stock was exceeded by that of only five other corporations — Exxon, I.B.M., General Motors, General Electric and Eastman Kodak.

"He took this ragtag group of oil companies and built them into a major American oil company," Mr. Bryan said.

Standard Oil became widely known as Amoco. It merged at the end of 1998 with British Petroleum and the successor company, BP Amoco, acquired ARCO in 2000.

John Eldred Swearingen was born on Sept. 7, 1918, in Columbia, S.C., where his father was the state's superintendent of schools. He entered the University of South Carolina at 16, graduating in 1938, and earned a master's degree at the Carnegie Institute of Technology the next year.

In 1969, he married Bonnie Bolding, a stockbroker and a former beauty queen. They were prominent in Chicago social circles.

Mr. Swearingen's salary of more than half a million dollars made him one of the highest-paid executives in the country.

In an interview with The New York Times in 1980, Mrs. Swearingen said, half-jokingly, that she loved "the smell of oil, which should be bottled like perfume."

Mr. Swearingen is survived by his wife; two daughters from a previous marriage, Marcia Pfleeger and Linda Arnold; seven grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

Despite his prominence as an executive, he did not become a household name until fuel shortages gripped the nation in the 1970s. By then, he led the American Petroleum Institute, which vigorously opposed the imposition of federal regulations on gasoline production and costs.

When President Jimmy Carter pushed for energy legislation, including a windfall profits tax on oil companies, Mr. Swearingen appeared in television programs and at news conferences to rebut criticism of oil companies as profiteers. He derided the president's plans, telling reporters that "I think we have a bunch of amateurs running the government."

He retired from Standard Oil in 1983. But less than a year later, he was recruited, along with the banker William Ogden, to save the Continental Illinois National Bank and Trust Company from insolvency. The plan the two put in place turned the bank around within a year, cutting costs, refocusing its operations on its Midwest customers and recruiting experienced directors.

As a boss, Mr. Swearingen "was not warm and fuzzy," said Mr. Bryan, who served with him on the board of Standard Oil and recruited him to serve as a Sara Lee director.

"He was decisive, and precise," Mr. Bryan said. "No one every made a presentation in his boardroom without a script."