



*J. Erik Jansson*

## J. ERIK JONSSON

1901–1995

Elected in 1971

*“For contributions as an engineer, industrialist, public servant, and philanthropist, to effective management and the broad-scale application of engineering concepts to urban problems.”*

BY ROLAND W. SCHMITT

**J.** ERIK JONSSON, a pioneer of the semiconductor industry, visionary political leader of his home city of Dallas, and generous philanthropist, died at the age of 93 at his home on September 1, 1995. In 1971, he was elected to the National Academy of Engineering, and in 1974 the academy awarded him the prestigious Founders Medal.

Erik Jonsson was born in 1901 in Brooklyn, New York, the only child of Swedish immigrants. His father, who owned a small grocery store, wanted Erik to cut school short and join him in the business, but his mother encouraged him to get a good education. She prevailed, and after completing four years of high school in three years, Erik entered Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), from which he graduated in 1922 with a degree in mechanical engineering. Thus, began his lifelong association with RPI. He eventually became the largest benefactor of that institution in its history.

After graduation, Erik Jonsson took the best job offer he could get—\$125 a month—as a rolling mill apprentice with the Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA). He made a brief but unsuccessful try as a Pontiac dealer but soon returned to ALCOA. He met his future wife, Margaret Fonde, at a Halloween party on a business trip to Tennessee and proposed the next day on their first date. They were married in 1923 and remained joined

for 61 years until Margaret's death in 1984. The couple had three children, Kenneth, Philip, and Margaret.

In 1929, Erik began conducting business with J. Clarence Karcher, the husband of his wife's cousin. Karcher and Eugene McDermott were using reflection seismology to search for oil. Erik joined their company in 1930 as head of their laboratory in Newark, New Jersey. He later said he thought Karcher and McDermott were "crazy" for starting a business during the Depression, but he admired them and wanted to be part of the venture.

The company, Geophysical Service Inc. (GSI), manufactured equipment to locate oil. Because of the nature of the business, in 1934 the firm moved to Dallas, closer to the oil fields. After the company had made a few significant oil discoveries of its own, Stanoline Oil (later Standard Oil of New Jersey) decided to buy the company in 1941. However, the new owners did not want the oil exploration part of the business, so Jonsson, Eugene McDermott, Cecil Green, and H. Bates Peacock bought it. The deal was closed on December 6, 1941, the day before Pearl Harbor.

Because of their experience making seismometers, GSI soon had a contract making magnetic detectors as antisubmarine devices. Erik Jonsson became the sales representative in Washington, and the business grew into sonar, radar, and other military equipment. At the end of the war, the military business was bigger than the geophysical business, so they changed the name to Texas Instruments (TI), and Erik Jonsson became president of the company in 1951.

In 1952, at the urging of Pat Haggerty who had joined the company in 1945, Erik persuaded a reluctant Western Electric to sell TI a license to manufacture transistors; Western Electric had thought TI was too young and inexperienced a company to succeed. Nevertheless, TI got the license in May and produced its first transistor by Christmas. By 1954, the first pocket-sized transistor radio, using TI's mass-produced transistors, appeared on the market. TI subsequently introduced a number of pioneering innovations in semiconductors, including breakthrough production of silicon transistors and the integrated circuit. Erik

became chairman of the board in 1958, a position he held for eight years; he was honorary chairman for another 11 years.

During his tenure at TI, Erik was also heavily involved in civic affairs. He was president of the Dallas Chamber of Commerce from 1957–1958, president of the United Way of Dallas from 1961–1962, and president of the Dallas Citizens' Council in 1963. In the latter capacity, he hosted a luncheon on November 22, 1963, at which he had to inform the 2,600 guests that crowded the room that the speaker they were awaiting, President John F. Kennedy, had been shot. In 1964, the mayor of Dallas, Earle Cabell, resigned to run for Congress. Other civic leaders turned to Erik Jonsson at this gloomy period following Kennedy's assassination and asked him to become mayor. He was elected to the vacancy by the City Council and was subsequently re-elected three times by popular vote. He held the post from February 1964 to May 1971.

As mayor of Dallas, Erik Jonsson launched a pioneering program, Goals for Dallas, to define the future course of growth and development for the city. His vision was essential to the development of the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, the Dallas city hall, the Dallas convention center, and the Dallas central library, which was named for him.

Erik Jonsson was a wide-ranging, generous philanthropist whose contributions were focused largely on education. He was a large contributor to Skidmore College and to his alma mater, RPI. He and his cofounders at TI, Eugene McDermott and Cecil Green, also founded the Southwest Center for Advanced Studies, which grew into the University of Texas at Dallas. He gave generously to many institutions of higher education: a hospital at Baylor University Medical Center; a cancer research center at UCLA; and general donations to Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Tulane University, Carnegie Mellon University, Bishop College, and Austin College. His support of pre-college education included significant contributions to the Hockaday School and the Lamplighter School. He made his philanthropic contributions with as much perception and foresight as he devoted to his endeavors in industry and politics. To honor in perpetuity Erik's many contributions to science, technology, and policy, in

1991 Kenneth A. Jonsson, the honoree's son, The Jonsson Foundation, and an anonymous donor provided funds to name the National Academy of Sciences' conference facility in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, the J. Erik Jonsson Center.

During my tenure as president of RPI (1988–1993), I often visited Erik in Dallas and was struck by the regard and affection the citizens of that city showed for him as we moved about the town. He also visited the campus in Troy, New York, occasionally. After every encounter with him, I came away with a new idea or challenge; his energy and insight remained strong until the end.

Erik Jonsson's life, filled with achievements and generosity, inspired many around him. He constantly urged others to reach for more challenging goals and visionary plans than they might otherwise have considered.

Erik Jonsson is survived by his sons Kenneth Jonsson of Santa Monica, California, and Philip Jonsson of Dallas, Texas, and a daughter, Margaret Jonsson Rogers of Dallas, Texas.

