Walker Lee Cisler

1897-1994

By Harvey A. Wagner

Walker Lee Cisler, former chairman of the board and chief executive officer of Detroit Edison, died on October 18, 1994, at his home in Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan. He was ninety-seven years old.

Born October 8, 1897, in Marietta, Ohio, Walker grew up in Gradyville, Pennsylvania. After serving in World War I, he graduated from Cornell University in 1922 with a degree in mechanical engineering. He then joined Public Service Electric and Gas in New Jersey, where he held various engineering and management positions.

In 1941 Walker Cisler was loaned to the Office of Production Management, later named the War Production Board. He served as chief of the Equipment Production Branch, where he helped organize utilities to serve both the military and civilian needs for power equipment for the United States and its allies.

In mid-1943 he joined Detroit Edison as chief engineer of power plants. However, he was quickly granted a leave of absence when General Dwight D. Eisenhower asked Walker to join his staff. Walker became the chief of the public utilities headquarters for General Eisenhower's command, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force. His main job: rebuild the power plants in war-torn Europe. Walker served in Sicily, Italy, visited Russia, and entered Paris with General
Charles de Gaulle in August 1944. In less than two weeks, he had gas and electric service restored to Paris. By the time he completed his assignment in 1945, the French power system had been repaired and was generating more electric power than it had in 1938, the last normal year before the war.

He returned to Detroit Edison after the war as chief engineer of power plants and subsequently became executive vice-president of the company in 1948, president in 1951, and, in 1954, also chief executive officer. In 1964 he was elected chairman of the board, while continuing as chief executive officer.

From early in his association with the Detroit Edison Company, Walker became actively engaged in the development of atomic energy. He served as executive secretary to the Industrial Advisory Group of the Atomic Energy Commission in 1947-1948 and spearheaded Detroit Edison's participation in the Atomic Power Development Associates, Inc., and the Power Reactor Development Company-two organizations formed to design, construct, and operate the Enrico Fermi fast breeder reactor project, the first commercial breeder reactor to produce electric power. It was a remarkable engineering and scientific first.

He headed the two corporations in addition to being the president of the Fund for Peaceful Atomic Development, Inc. He was the first president of the Atomic Industrial Forum.

In 1991 the American Nuclear Society established the Walker Lee Cisler Medal to be awarded for distinguished contributions in the development of the fast breeder reactor. Walker Cisler was the first recipient of the award.

Active in professional, technical, and service organizations, Walker was a fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, the American Institute of Management, and the American Nuclear Society. He served as president of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, the Engineers Joint Council, and the Edison Electric Institute.

Walker was a founding member of the National Academy of Engineering and was active in the formulation of its policies and objectives. Over the years, he gave liberally of his time in
support of the needs of the growing Academy. The Academy's success can be attributed to the effort Walker and others like him devoted to its objectives.

In 1968 Walker was elected chairman of the International Executive Council of the World Energy Conference (WEC), becoming the first American to hold this high office. The WEC, which has representation in sixty-eight countries, celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in Detroit in 1974.

Walker has been honored with awards by the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, the Western Society of Engineers, the American Institute of Consulting Engineers, the Engineers Society of Western Pennsylvania, the National Society of Professional Engineers, and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers and has received joint awards from several of the engineering societies.

Deeply involved in education, Walker was a trustee of Marietta College and the Michigan Colleges Foundation; a director of Suomi College; an honorary trustee of the University of Detroit; and a member of the board of directors Development Fund of Northern Michigan University. Walker was deeply devoted to his alma mater, Cornell University, having served as a member of its board of trustees for many years, and was a trustee emeritus at the time of his death.

Besides working with service organizations of national scope, including the Business Council and Freedom's Foundation at Valley Forge, Walker was active in local civic and state affairs. He was chairman of The Economic Club of Detroit, chairman of the Michigan Committee of the Newcomen Society in North America, president of the Metropolitan Detroit Citizens Development Authority, chairman of the Governor's Commission on Land Use, a board member of Detroit Renaissance, and a member of New Detroit Incorporated. He also participated in many of Detroit's cultural organizations.

A project close to his heart was the Thomas Alva Edison Foundation. The foundation was established in 1946 under the presidency of Charles Kettering. Its objective was to preserve Edison's legacy of ingenuity and innovation and to help create a
better understanding of science and technology, especially among today's youth. Walker assumed the leadership of the foundation in 1958, and he continued its work until his death.

To the very end of his life, Walker Cisler was dedicated to bringing the benefits of electric power to the world, founding Overseas Advisory Associates, a network of retired utility engineering and management executives to assist developing countries. These included Vietnam, Bangladesh, Brazil, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Korea, Taiwan, and Jamaica.

Perhaps Cornell University said it best in presenting its Award of Honor to him on May 26, 1990. It reads as follows:

"Walker Lee Cisler '22, social visionary and indefatigable champion of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, honored worldwide for his extraordinary and unending efforts to develop cheap and plentiful electrical resources, recipient of eighteen decorations, seventeen honorary degrees, and ten awards in the field of engineering, honorary chairman of the World Energy Conference, highly valued presidential councillor and trustee emeritus. Cornell honors his generosity of spirit, his boundless energy and patience, his deep commitment to peace, and, in his own words, 'to making things better' for all people."