



Robert C. Sprague

1900-1991

By Robert C. Duncan

ROBERT C. SPRAGUE, engineer and entrepreneur who founded the Sprague Electric Company and developed it into a thriving company of eight thousand employees, died on September 27, 1991, at his home in Williamstown, Massachusetts. He was ninety-one years old.

Bob Sprague was born in New York City on August 3, 1900. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy (B.S.) in 1920, the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School (B.S.) in 1922, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (S.M.) in 1924. He continued his career as a naval architect and was a member of the staff that superintended the design and construction of the aircraft carrier USS *Lexington*. He resigned from the U.S. Navy in 1928.

As a twenty-six-year-old lieutenant in the U.S. Navy, Bob developed an adjustable "tone control" device to improve the sound quality of his radio. The heart of this device was a fixed paper condenser, which he patented. This was the first of a lifetime total of nineteen patent awards. This first patent led to the birth of the Sprague Specialties Company, which he and his wife, Florence, operated out of their Quincy, Massachusetts, home, using \$25,000 in capital raised through limited personal savings and the sale of stock to a few friends and relatives.

Sales of those earlier capacitors were slow until Bob designed them to be smaller, lighter, and cheaper. His new company did \$54,000 worth of business in 1927. By 1929 the company had

grown to 525 people with sales of \$500,000. He moved his company from Quincy to North Adams, Massachusetts, in 1930. He bought a new plant in North Adams three weeks before the stock market crash on "Black Friday" in October 1929.

The depression years were difficult for the Sprague Specialty Company; however, World War II provided a financial shot in the arm. Production, employment, and profitability boomed during the war years, largely because of many military applications for capacitors. Under Bob's leadership the company continued to grow in the postwar years to a peak of eight thousand employees in six U.S. facilities, and one each in Europe and the Far East. The company changed its name to Sprague Electric Company in 1943, and Bob retired as chairman in 1971.

Bob had a long history of service to his country and his community. He served from 1942 to 1945 as a member of the War Production Board's advisory committee on capacitors. In 1954 he was appointed by President Eisenhower as a consultant on continental defense to the National Security Council and a consultant to the Technological Capabilities Panel of the Science Advisory Committee to the Office of Defense Mobilization (Killian Committee). In 1957 he was appointed by the president to be director of the Security Resources Panel (Gaither Committee) of the Science Advisory Committee of the Office of Defense Mobilization.

Elected to the National Academy of Engineering in February 1985, Bob was a dedicated professional known for his technical expertise and his willingness to contribute his time and energy to many worthwhile causes. He was recognized by many awards and honorary degrees. He received honorary doctorates from Northeastern University, Williams College, Tufts University, Lowell Technological Institute, University of New Hampshire, North Adams State College, and University of Massachusetts. He was twice awarded the Medal of Honor by the Electronic Industries Association. He received the "Man of the Year" awards from the New England Council and the Hotchkiss Alumni Association. He was a fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was a member of the corporations of the Massachusetts Institute

of Technology and Northeastern University. He served on the board of directors for the First National Bank of Boston, Charles Stark Draper Laboratory, MITRE Corporation, Micro-Bit Corporation, Electrostatic Research Corporation, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, and Associated Industries of Massachusetts. He was a trustee of Hudson Institute.

An avid skier until leg problems took him off the slopes at age eighty-three, Bob was the author of two books on skiing. Perhaps his greatest love outside his family and his office was the Williamstown Theatre Festival. Bob is widely considered to have been the person most responsible for the success of this summer theatre activity, which is considered by many to be the most outstanding program of its kind in America. The program was started more than thirty years ago and has a worldwide reputation for excellence. The list of performers in this summer theatre festival is a "Who's Who" of the stars of today's stage and screen, all of whom came to know and admire Bob Sprague as a patron and friend.