Elliott M. Estes

1916-1988

By Robert A. Frosch

Elliott M. (Pete) Estes, an engineer who rose through the ranks of General Motors (GM) to become its fifteenth president and a true pioneer in the auto industry, died on March 24, 1988. He was on his way to a meeting of the board of directors of Kellogg Corporation in Chicago when he collapsed on the street at O'Hare Airport. He was pronounced dead of a heart attack at Resurrection Hospital shortly afterward.

Thus ended the life of one of the great men of General Motors—a man who saw his industry and his company undergo tremendous and dramatic change. And throughout his career, he was in the forefront of that change.

It all started in the southwest Michigan town of Mendon, in the old Wakeman Hotel, owned by his grandparents, on January 7, 1916, when Elliott Marantette Estes was born. His mother worked at the hotel and his father was a bank clerk. At a very early age, Pete showed an interest in machinery and "things that move."

At age fourteen he learned to drive and repair his parents' Reo Flying Cloud automobile; he was interested in the steam engines and threshing machines on an uncle's farm; and he once even outfitted his coaster wagon with a one-cylinder engine.

When Pete was about age ten, he and his family moved
to the nearby town of Constantine, where he finished high school and got his first job—making butter in a local creamery. He liked making a dollar a day at the creamery and thought that was a good place to be, particularly when the National Recovery Administration's regulations raised his pay to $3.20 a day—until he found that his boss, who had been there for years, made only $5 a day. That seemed not to be a very inviting future, and he began to look for other opportunities.

At the suggestion of a cousin, Pete applied to General Motors Institute (GMI)—probably the best career move he ever made. Because he did well in his first year, he was assigned to the GM Research Laboratories and was an apprentice to the founder of the laboratories, Charles F. "Boss" Kettering. Kettering was a prolific inventor and eventually gathered in more patents than any American except Thomas Edison.

Through four years at GMI and two years at the University of Cincinnati where he earned his degree, Pete spent half his time in the classroom and half at the research lab at the side of Boss Ket. Pete often reflected on the profound influence Boss Ket had on his life. Ket believed in "letting the engine tell you whether or not it is designed right—it doesn't care what school the designer attended or how smart he is."

Pete left the research labs in 1946 and took a job as a motor development engineer at Oldsmobile. He considered that his first big break in the corporation—it gave him the opportunity to work on the famous Olds Rocket V8 engine, the industry's first high-compression engine. Pete said that engine "put Oldsmobile on the map" and helped him to advance through several promotions to assistant chief engineer at Oldsmobile.

When Semon E. (Bunky) Knudsen became general manager of Pontiac in 1956, he summoned Pete to be his chief engineer. Together they changed Pontiac's image from an "old lady's car" to a younger and hotter number. In those years Pontiac
brought out the perimeter frame, the 4-cylinder Tempest with front-mounted engine and rear-mounted transmission for better weight distribution, and the famous Pontiac "wide track" principle.

At age forty-five Pete was appointed a GM vice-president and general manager of Pontiac—the youngest general manager at any of the GM car divisions. Pontiac captured third place in the new car registrations for the first time, and the New York Times called Pete "automotive management's rookie-of-the-year." Pontiac's share of the domestic market rose from 6.4 percent in 1961 to 9.5 percent in 1965.

Pete's successes at Pontiac earned him the spot of general manager of Chevrolet. In 1965, the year he took over, Chevrolet built three million cars and trucks—the first single manufacturer in history to do that in one calendar year. Pete earned the reputation of being a relentless competitor. When Ford began to close in on Chevrolet for first place by bringing out the very successful Mustang, Pete countered with the Camaro that became one of America's most popular production line sports cars and enabled Chevrolet to hold on to first place.

After Chevrolet, Pete continued his rapid rise up the corporate ladder. In 1969 he became group executive in charge of the car and truck group. A year later, he was named head of the overseas operations. In 1972 he was appointed executive vice-president in charge of the operations staff and became a director of the corporation. He was named president of General Motors on October 1, 1974.

In his forty-six years with General Motors, Pete Estes served the corporation well in many capacities—as student, engineer, manager, administrator, and top executive. He demanded excellence from his subordinates, but he always drove himself harder than anyone else. His contributions were many. He provided the major impetus for GM's massive product down-sizing program, which eventually touched every product line and resulted in a 93 percent increase in the fuel economy of the GM fleet by the time Pete retired in 1981. He pioneered
GM's electric car technology, and he moved the corporation aggressively toward achieving and surpassing federal government safety, pollution, and fuel economy standards.

With his great warmth and sincerity, Pete always brought out the best in people. He was one of the great communicators in General Motors. He received the same enthusiastic response whether he was making a speech, appearing on TV, shaking hands at a reception, or in a one-on-one interview with reporters. He is remembered by his associates and many others for representing his country so well in the British Broadcasting Corporation's documentary series "Americans."

He carried the same diligence and enthusiasm into his non-GM activities: as the first chairman of the Meadow Brook Festival and Theatre in Rochester, Michigan; and as a member of the Founder's Society of the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Society of Automotive Engineers, and numerous other clubs, foundations, and boards of directors.

As one of the foremost leaders during times of great change in the automotive industry, and for his many contributions to engineering that helped to revolutionize that industry, E. M. (Pete) Estes is most deserving of a memorial tribute in the National Academy of Engineering.