Otto Neil Miller

1909-1988

By S. D. Bechtel, Jr.

Otto N. Miller, retired chairman of the board and chief executive officer of Chevron Corporation (then Standard Oil of California), died in San Francisco on the morning of February 4, 1988, following a brief illness. He had retired from Chevron in 1974, after serving as the chief executive for seven years (from 1966 to 1974), capping a distinguished career that spanned two generations during a time of tremendous growth and prosperity for the multinational petroleum company. One of the world's largest enterprises, and the largest U.S. corporation west of the Rocky Mountains, San Francisco-based Chevron grew in assets and global stature under the astute guidance of Otto Miller.

During his thirty-nine years with Chevron, Otto Miller demonstrated a rare combination of qualities: technical expertise, a visionary's insight into broad industry trends, a keen sense of when to capitalize on change, and leadership traits that enabled him to advance meteorically into positions of increasing responsibility.

Throughout the petroleum industry, Otto Miller was widely known as a strong executive ahead of his time in recognizing key issues in the public arena as well as bold opportunities in the private sector. His career encompassed virtually all aspects of petroleum operations. When he was named the company's president in 1961, a business magazine characterized
him as a member of "the new breed of oil executive, experienced in all facets of the business and charged with coordinating them."

Colleagues described Otto Miller as a rugged individualist, a diplomat, a risk taker, a tough taskmaster, a brilliant intellect. Personable and athletic-looking, Otto Miller also showed bulldog determination, always fortified by mastery of the facts of any issue under consideration. He had little or no patience for mediocre performance. He often worked a six-day week, sometimes staying with the job sixteen hours a day. Since his early days at Chevron, he was described as knowing only one speed when it came to work: full throttle.

Under Otto Miller's tenure as a chief executive, Chevron's income and sales more than doubled, and the company's worldwide crude oil production soared almost two-fold. Also under his direction, the company consolidated its position as an industry leader in developing oil and natural gas in the outer continental shelf of the U.S., expanded direct operations into Europe for the first time, and became one of the world's leading operators of supertankers.

The San Francisco resident and native of Harlan, Iowa, was educated at Iowa State College and the University of Michigan, where he received a Ph.D. in chemical engineering in 1934. He joined Chevron after graduation, and spent his early years in research and development at the company's El Segundo, California, refinery. While there, he became one of the early authorities on catalytic cracking and directed a successful technical research program that led to the construction of the company's first hydrogen sulfide plant, which made an early contribution to environmental air quality.

At the outset of World War II, Otto Miller was counsel to the government's aviation gasoline program. In 1940 he moved to San Francisco where he began his extraordinary rise through the company's manufacturing organization. In 1943 he moved to New York to serve as chief process engineer for the Arabian American Oil Company, a Chevron affiliate, and was chiefly responsible for the planning and
construction of the Ras Tanura refinery in Saudi Arabia. This refinery, which produced 100,000 barrels per day of aviation gasoline, made a significant contribution to the ultimate success of the allies in Europe and Asia.

At this point in his career, Otto Miller had demonstrated a conscientiousness in improving manufacturing techniques and in finding more productive uses for personnel and equipment. His remarkable capabilities and inexhaustible dedication were quickly recognized and rewarded.

In 1944 he returned to the west coast to serve as assistant to the general manager of the manufacturing department and superintendent of the cracking division at El Segundo. In 1946 at the age of thirty-seven, Otto Miller became the youngest man ever to hold the position of general manager of Chevron's Manufacturing Department.

In 1954 Otto Miller was elected a vice-president of the company, with responsibility for manufacturing operations on the west coast. During this period, he developed an engineering concept that resulted in the construction of a pipeline from the Rangley Field in Wyoming to Salt Lake City. Under his general guidance, a new refinery was designed and constructed at Salt Lake City and refined products were transported by pipeline to the west coast.

In 1957 he was assigned new and broadening responsibilities—natural gas utilization, crude pricing, and east coast marketing activities. In 1959 he was elected to the board of directors and assumed responsibility for eastern hemisphere operations. Two years later, in 1961, Otto Miller was named Chevron's eighth president.

One of his primary tasks was to integrate the recently acquired Standard Oil Company (Kentucky) into then-Standard of California's corporate family. For a number of years afterward, that purchase was a vital refining and marketing part of the company in the southeastern United States. By now, however, Chevron bore little resemblance to the company that had hired Otto Miller twenty-seven years earlier. What had been essentially a west coast company concentrating in
a rapidly growing area had become an international complex with far-flung interests and wide diversifications.

On December 29, 1966, Otto Miller became the company's chief executive officer and chairman of the board of directors. He wasted no time in putting his imprint on the company. He foresaw accelerating demand for petroleum energy throughout the world and the company's need to sustain its momentum of expansion and growth. Within months plans were executed to expand the company's majority-owned and-operated refinery at Pernis, The Netherlands. Later, an entirely new refining facility was erected at Feluy in Belgium.

The company also participated in the construction of a new refinery in The Bahamas—a facility primarily to manufacture fuel oil for the northeastern U.S. As clean air laws were enacted and other sources of energy were restricted in their use, demand for petroleum products soared. Chevron responded by redoubling its efforts to locate new sources of oil, often in remote areas of the world.

In order to effect greater economies and safety in the worldwide transportation of crude oil, Otto Miller launched the company on a ten-year marine expansion program, which more than tripled the capacity of the company's international tanker fleet. Terminal facilities were enlarged or adapted to accommodate the new generation of ships.

During Otto Miller's tenure as chief executive, Chevron extended its role as an innovator of petroleum processes. New hydro-cracking and reforming methods were developed and patented by the company and incorporated into refinery expansion projects. Otto Miller also was strongly conscious of the company's marketing image. He directed the revitalization of corporate identity, which included new service station architecture, a remodeling and rebuilding program for existing units, and a redesigned Chevron hallmark.

Otto Miller knew the true meaning of involvement and participation. His contributions to Chevron and the entire petroleum industry are manifold and well known. In addition
to being active in numerous petroleum-and transportation-related councils and associations, Otto Miller served two consecutive one-year terms as chairman of the board of directors of the American Petroleum Institute, the industry's principal trade association.

During that time, he spoke forcefully on the need for the petroleum industry to communicate with the public on issues of vital concern, especially on the environment. He urged both government and industry to work together to create reasonable solutions to pollution problems by relying heavily on technological advancements. He had also been a member of the National Petroleum Council and the Business Council.

As a director on several company boards and an active leader in civic and trade groups, Otto Miller also was a well-rounded, full-time citizen, dedicated to America and to his family. On the occasion of a commencement address at the University of Southern California (USC), Otto Miller received an honorary doctor of laws degree. The chairman of USC's board of trustees, in presenting Otto Miller for the degree, stated: "Otto Miller has earned the hearty respect of his peers, and he has served in numerous esteemed professional positions. He has earned the respect of his community and nation for invaluable civic and philanthropic efforts. And he holds the respect of the world for service on many significant international commissions. Above Standard Oil's familiar double Chevron is an invisible but unmistakable arc—the Otto Miller brand of success."


In addition, Otto Miller served on the board of trustees
of the National Review Board of The East-West Center, and the council of the Americas and Grace Cathedral. He was also a member of the board of governors of the San Francisco Symphony Association, the Business Committee for the Arts, the management council for Bay Area Employment Opportunity, and the advisory council of the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

In 1980 an Otto N. Miller professorship in earth sciences was created at Stanford University. He received a distinguished achievement citation from his undergraduate alma mater, Iowa State University, in 1982, and in 1983 was awarded the Anson Marston Medal at Iowa State. Earlier, he was honored with a distinguished alumnus citation from the University of Michigan, as well as a number of other recognitions from the University of Michigan and Iowa State University.

Despite his strong dedication to hard work, Otto Miller never lost his passion for "hard play" in the rugged out-of-doors, which began with his boyhood on a farm in Iowa. In retirement, he was afforded the luxury of channeling his massive energies into these pursuits. He especially enjoyed bird hunting and trout fishing. Throughout his career Otto Miller had a rich family life, and spent much of retirement time enjoying the companionship of his wife, son, daughter, daughter-in-law, three sisters, one brother, and five grandchildren.