



*EN Cole*

# Edward Nicholas Cole

## 1909-1977

By Elliott M. Estes

Edward N. Cole, retired President of General Motors Corporation, died at the controls of his private plane in a crash near Kalamazoo, Michigan, on May 2, 1977. Flying alone in bad weather, he was enroute to Checker Motor Corporation, where he was redesigning the company's taxi cabs with the same enthusiasm and innovative spirit that marked his forty-four year career at GM.

At the time of his death at age sixty-seven, Ed Cole was Chairman and Chief Executive of Checker Motor Corporation and Chairman of International Husky, Inc., an air-freight venture he had headed since his retirement from GM in 1974.

To the end, Ed Cole never lost his insatiable appetite for anything mechanical, his enthusiasm for challenge, his constant search for new ideas-better ways of doing things, or his ability to "sell" a pet project with missionary persuasiveness.

Before his death, he was seeking to raise additional capital to launch at International Husky, Inc., an innovative air-freight system using seventy-five jumbo jets, a nationwide network of automated terminals, and computers to control flights and cargo loads.

Ed Cole was born September 17, 1909, at Marne, a small town in southwestern Michigan, about fifty miles north of the field where his twin-engine plane nosed in. A farm boy, he worked hard at chores. Milking cows and delivering fresh milk to community residents was a major job during high school days. During winters, with his growing interest in motors and electricity, he built and sold

radios. In the summers, he sold Fordson tractors by giving farmers in-the-field demonstrations. He also rebuilt two old cars, becoming at age sixteen one of Marne's rare two-car owners.

Originally, Ed Cole wanted to be a lawyer and attended Grand Rapids Junior College. But one summer he took a job with an automobile supply company and got his first taste of what the industry was like. This led him to enroll in General Motors Institute (GMI) in 1930, a co-op school where he was sponsored by GM'S Cadillac Division.

Because of his talent, he was taken from GMI before graduation and assigned to a special Cadillac engineering project. He advanced through several jobs at Cadillac and in 1943 became Chief Design Engineer responsible for U.S. Army light tanks and combat vehicles. With the war over, Cadillac returned to civilian production, and Ed Cole was promoted to Chief Engineer in 1946 and Works Manager in 1950. With the outbreak of the Korean conflict, he was named manager of the Cleveland tank plant, and he got it into production three months ahead of schedule.

Throughout his life, associates marveled at how fast the energetic Ed Cole worked. "Whatever he's doing, he's a man in a hurry," said one. "Ed has just one speed," said another, "full throttle." His desire to speed up the action was clearly demonstrated when he visited the new Chevrolet Engineering Center in 1956. Noticing the new escalators in the building, he had their speed increased about thirty percent. "No sense in wasting people's time when they're riding," Cole said.

Promoted to Chief Engineer at Chevrolet in 1952, by the summer of 1956 Cole had been promoted again-to be Chevrolet General Manager and a Vice-President of GM. in 1961, he was elected to the GM Board of Directors and named a corporate Group Vice-President. In 1965 he became an Executive Vice-President, and by the time of his retirement, seven years later, he was Chairman of the Corporation's Administration and Executive Committees and served on a third policymaking body, the Finance Committee.

When he retired from GM, Ed Cole held eighteen separate patents and was widely recognized as one of the industry's most

brilliant and innovative leaders. Even from the President's office on the Fourteenth floor of the GM Building, he took an active, personal role in GM'S products and its engineering. "I like to stay close to the hardware," he once explained. "That's where the action is."

Ed Cole was associated with many of the industry's most important projects while he was at GM. Not all of them were successful, but none lacked daring and imagination. Among his most important "credits" were:

- A major role in the development of the Cadillac short-stroke V8 engine.
- The moving force behind the innovative, rear-engined, air-cooled Corvair.
- A hand in the development of the Corvette sports car.
- A prime mover behind the Air Cushion Restraint System.
- A major proponent of the Rotary or Wankel engine.
- A major role in the development of the catalytic converter to control exhaust emissions.

It is this last development which automotive history will likely deem the most important. Trusting Ed Cole's vision and courage, GM took the lead in 1970 in lowering engine compression ratios and designing for unleaded gasoline to be ready for the day when catalytic converters would be used to control automotive pollution. Many in and outside the industry and more than a few within GM doubted that day would ever come. But it did when the 1975 models were introduced, enabling manufacturers to reduce emissions and improve gas mileage at the same time.

Today, more sophisticated catalytic systems are being developed to reduce emissions even further without serious losses in fuel economy. If Ed Cole needed a monument-which he doesn't-I couldn't think of a better one than this important new technology.

Ed Cole was a member of many professional, business, and charitable organizations. He was a Member of the Society of Automotive Engineers, Engineering Society of Detroit, the Detroit Board of Commerce, and the Economic Club of Detroit. He was active in the National Academy of Engineering, serving as a

Member and then Chairman of the NAE Finance Committee; on the National Research Council Assembly of Engineering Executive Committee in 1974-75; and as NAE Treasurer and a Member of both the NAE Council and Executive Committee from 1974 until his death.

Ed Cole did contribute a great deal to the auto industry and to the communities in which he lived. Among the things he left behind was a motto that summed up his attitude about innovation and the need to change. It will serve other unordinary, uniquely gifted people who follow him as well as it did Ed.

"If we find a better way," he said, "let's kick hell out of the status quo. The fact 'we have always done it this way' is the best reason I know to take a particularly close look at a system or procedure."

