



Arnold F. Procknow

DONALD E. PROCKNOW

1923–2016

Elected in 1988

“For outstanding leadership of a premier telecommunications manufacturing institution through an era of technological change.”

BY DICK MARTIN

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DONALD EUGENE PROCKNOW, the longest-serving and last CEO of AT&T's renowned manufacturing arm Western Electric, died July 1, 2016, at the age of 93.

He was born May 27, 1923, and raised in the small prairie town of Madison, South Dakota. His father ran a gasoline station and later worked for the Farmers Home Administration, a US agency that provided credit to farmers.

After high school Don attended the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, which was expanding its science and engineering programs. World War II interrupted his studies and he enlisted in the Navy, serving in the Pacific as the engineering officer aboard an infantry landing craft (that was subsequently used for repatriated refugees throughout the South China Sea).

After the war he enrolled in the University of Wisconsin (UW) in Madison, where he earned a BS in engineering in 1947. Straight out of college, he joined the Western Electric Company, one of the country's largest manufacturers. When *Fortune* magazine began its list of America's 500 leading industrial companies in 1955, Western Electric ranked 15th.

Aside from its size, Western Electric was known for its forward-looking management, manufacturing expertise, and

employee relations. When Don joined, the company could already claim an impressive number of innovations. In 1913 it had developed the first vacuum tube, ushering in the electronic age. By 1947 it had invented the loudspeaker, brought sound to motion pictures, and developed ground-breaking techniques of statistical quality control.

The company's Hawthorne Works in Cicero, Illinois, had been the site of a landmark industrial relations study in the 1920s and 1930s. Researchers studied how different light levels affected assembly line workers and found that productivity rose as the light was increased, but didn't fall as the lights were turned down again. They realized that the change in output had nothing to do with the level of light but with the extra attention paid to the workers. What became known as the "Hawthorne effect" rippled through industrial relations literature.

When Don joined the company, his first job was as an engineer at the Hawthorne Works—for a time in the very department in which the Hawthorne studies were conducted. That's also where he met his future wife, Esther Ehlert, who was a secretary.

As Don rose through the ranks, he absorbed the major conclusions of the famous study. His uncanny ability to remember names, even of people he met in passing on a factory tour, was known throughout the company. So was his ability to make every employee he met feel important and comfortable in his presence. When asked about his legacy, Don wrote, "Long before it was fashionable, Western [Electric] had a great emphasis on quality, starting with the people we brought into the business."

Don became president of Western Electric in 1971, just as electronic technology was dramatically changing the company's product line and sharply reducing the space required to manufacture it. That led to painful factory closings, including the storied Hawthorne Works where his career began. More painful still, Western Electric's employment dropped from a peak of 215,000 in 1970 to about 150,000 in 1980. The company's board of directors proposed to award Don a special bonus

for reducing costs so effectively, but he quietly turned it down, saying it would be unfair when others were losing their jobs. As one executive later told the *Wall Street Journal*, "He could have taken that bonus and no one would ever have known about it."

As if technological change were not enough of a challenge, in 1974 the US Justice Department filed an antitrust suit to force AT&T to divest its Western Electric manufacturing arm. Don didn't know how the suit would turn out, but he later explained that it was clear to him even then that "moving from electromechanical to electronic [technology] would open up opportunities for many, many other companies." Seeing that Western Electric would have "competition like we'd never had in our business," he built the company's first product management, marketing, and sales functions essentially from scratch.

It turned out to be a prescient move because in 1982 the government and AT&T reached an agreement to spin off not Western Electric but its operating telephone companies, which would no longer have a vested interest in purchasing from their captive supplier. "We were dealing along family lines," Don told the *New York Times*, "and we won't have the family business anymore."

"I took the approach that we didn't ask for this, we didn't want it," he later remembered, "but it's here and we've got to take advantage of the opportunities that it presents." And thanks to the steps he had taken to prepare the company for greater competition, he could add, "We're not afraid at all."

When the breakup occurred two years later, in 1984, the Western Electric name was simply retired and the company folded into other divisions of AT&T. As vice chair, Don remained with AT&T for a year to help with the transition.

Don served on the boards of directors of such major companies as J.P. Morgan, CPC International, Ingersoll-Rand, and the Prudential Insurance Company. He held leadership positions with the Boy Scouts of America and served as a director of the University of Wisconsin Foundation, chair of the board for the US-Korea Society, and trustee of the Logistics Management Institute, Clarkson University, and Drew University.

In recognition of his skills and accomplishments, he received the Chairman's Award from the American Association of Engineering Societies, Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Wisconsin, Distinguished Service Citation from the UW School of Engineering, and Silver Beaver and Silver Antelope from the Boy Scouts of America. He held honorary degrees from Clarkson University, Morris Harvey College (now the University of Charleston), Tougaloo College, South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, and Oklahoma Christian College.

Don had a unique combination of unassuming simplicity and restless drive that continued into retirement. He and Esther traveled extensively, including on over 20 cruises, of which his favorite was to Antarctica. They enjoyed a home in Vermont and a winter getaway on Hilton Head Island.

Never one to sit around much, Don enjoyed hiking, especially in the mountains. One of his most memorable hikes was up Mt. Whitney, the tallest mountain in the continental United States. He made the climb at age 65 with his two sons; they celebrated with a round of milkshakes after making their way down. He spent the balance of his retirement doing yardwork at his home in Buckingham, Pennsylvania, and continuing a lifelong devotion to community service by preparing and serving food to the homeless and bringing gifts to inmates in local prisons. True to his "get things done" nature, he played a fast version of golf and was known to tell the others in his foursome, "Take your time, but hurry up."

Don is survived by Esther, sons Eugene and Charles, and five grandchildren.

