

ELMER ANDERSEN ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT

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Archival Processor: Caroline Draper
Copyeditors: Erica Fugger and Cameron Vanderscoff
Date: March 6, 2003
Location: Arden Hills, Minnesota
Session Number: 1
Project: National Home Front Project
Interview Contributor: Concordia University, St. Paul
Accession Number: AndersenElmer_HFN-OH_030603

ABSTRACT

Biography

Elmer L. Andersen was born on June 17, 1909 in Chicago, Illinois. One of four children, he grew up in Muskegon, Michigan, attending public schools and graduating from junior college in 1928. Andersen relocated to Minneapolis and, after a year as a salesman, enrolled at the University of Minnesota. He graduated in 1931 with a degree in business administration. He was married in 1932 to Eleanor Johnson.

In 1934, Andersen began working in sales for the H.B. Fuller Company in St. Paul. By 1941, he was president of the company. Andersen remained with H.B. Fuller as President and CEO until 1974, building it into a Fortune 500 company with a worldwide presence. Andersen was also involved in politics for many years, serving as a Minnesota state senator (1949-58) and as governor of Minnesota (1961-63).

Summary

In this interview, Elmer Andersen describes his experience of managing and expanding the H.B. Fuller company during World War II. He recounts how government and military-related contracts played an important role in the company's growth, and how wartime rationing affected business. He also discusses President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, American patriotism, and his memory of the end of World War I.

Keywords

St. Paul, Minnesota, H.B. Fuller Company, rationing, patriotism, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Pearl Harbor, World War I, business

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STORY TRANSCRIPTS

Story 1: World War I Armistice Day [02:12 – 04:01]

TS: Well, I have to ask you, as one of the elder statesmen of our oral history project, born 1909, do you have a recollection of the end of World War I?

The end of it?

TS: *Yes, which would be 1918. What could you recall about that?*

I recall two things. I was selling newspapers, and the means of communication of important news was an extra. And an extra was good luck for a newsboy because everybody wanted one. They'd frequently, instead of giving you three cents, the cost of the paper, they'd give you a nickel and tell you to keep the change, or a dime. Or even some high rollers would give you a quarter. There would be so much excitement.

So the end of the war was a great day. Enormous headline: "War Ends!" We took in quite a bit of money. There was only one event that exceeded the liberality of buyers of papers to those on Armistice Day 1918, and no one has ever been able to guess correctly when that was, though a woman came closest to it. She said, "I suppose it was an athletic event." And indeed it was. It was when Jack Dempsey knocked out Jess Willard. The whole nation was enthralled with this young Manassa Mauler from Colorado.

Story 2: Buying the H.B. Fuller Company and the Start of the War **[14:01 – 15:57]**

Friends urged me not to make the investment and take on the company because the war was going on in Europe. They said, "We're bound to get into it, and there's going to be no place for a domestic company like Fuller, and you'll lose," and so on and so on. A bunch of naysayers. But my wife was encouraging and her folks were encouraging and helpful, and we decided to go ahead in 1941.

So July 1 I became president, and things began to happen. I was very aggressively minded, and one thing I thought right off was that we should buy material in larger quantities at lower prices to be more competitive in the marketplace and grow. So I began to buy carloads of material that previously had been bought in small lots, and even some of our suppliers were concerned that I was going overboard and would drive the company out of business. But it proved to be very fortunate, because when the war broke out, one of the first things done was to provide allocation of all scarce materials, and that meant about everything. The base was a percentage of what you bought in the last six months of '41.

TS: *Which would benefit you greatly.*

I had been buying heavily, so we entered the war with a good buying base.

Story 3: Visiting the Recruitment Office **[22:44 – 24:24]**

While that was going on it was still in my mind, wondering what my personal responsibility was. So I thought I'd at least had to go down to the recruiting station and talk it over with them.

So I went down and met with an officer and said that I wanted to do my share, and I had a family and had a business and it would be quite a wrench, but I wanted to know what I should do. He

said, “Where do you work?” I said, “Fuller.” “What do you do?” “I’m president.” “What do you make?” “Adhesives.” “Anything for the war effort?” “Yes. We’ve succeeded in producing a water-resistant adhesive, and we’re selling quantities of it to many packers of war materiel so that it can be dumped in the water and safely floated to land.” He said, “Well, my gosh, you can do more good staying at home running that company than going into the Army. So just go home and turn out a lot of good glue.” [laughter] That was an enormous relief.

TS: *In a sense, it sounds like you’re saying it made you feel like you made the effort.*

Yes. It kind of took a burden off my mind. I didn’t want to be a slacker, and I didn’t want to duck away from it, but I certainly didn’t relish the idea of leaving my family and business and dislocating my life if there was any suitable alternative.

Story 4: Holding Jobs for Employees in the Service

[25:23 – 26:00]

But we worked a lot of overtime as our fellows were drafted. Some of them were drafted, and some of them enlisted. We kept their jobs open, and to avoid the difficulty of hiring a replacement and later having to lay the replacement off, we worked overtime. We were working as much as eighty hours a week, so the payroll was pretty good for the people. They were getting pretty good pay.

Story 5: Patriotism and President Roosevelt

[50:37 – 52:57]

I’d say that was the spirit of the enterprise. People were bound and determined we were going to win that war, and the odds were very bad at first. We were getting blown out of the water all over the place. But there were never any despondency. And I think that was the greatest contribution Franklin Roosevelt made, was keeping up the spirit of the people.

TS: *Let me ask you, on the subject of President Roosevelt, President Roosevelt died on the 12th of April 1945. I’m wondering how you reacted to the news of the president’s death?*

It wasn’t shocking because I felt he shouldn’t have run the last time. He was mortally ill, as everyone could see. It was certain that he wasn’t going to survive another term. That was why there was so much speculation on who was going to be vice president. Truman had made quite a record in the Senate as Chair of the Investigating Committee to try and keep profiteers out of the war effort. So when he named vice president everybody kind of took for granted he was going to become president, though he wasn’t very highly regarded at first because he was identified with the Pendergast machine in Kansas City.

So when he died it wasn’t—it was a profound loss because people had spent most of their lives under him as president, and they could hardly imagine anyone else as president. So it was a traumatic condition, but it was in a way expected. The main regret was that he couldn’t have lived to see the peace, to see the war end.