

John H. Leslie, 89

Executive an engineer at heart

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John H. Leslie spent decades as a top executive for a major Chicago-area strapping manufacturer, but he was at heart simply an engineer fascinated with machinery.

Mr. Leslie, 89, a longtime Winnetka resident and retired chairman of the board and president of Signode Strapping Co., died of complications from Alzheimer's disease Friday, Jan. 2, in Seattle.

An amateur pilot for years until his progressive deafness forced him out of the skies, he rebuilt a Stanley Steamer during the 1930s and drove it to the West Coast.

"As a result, he developed this love of steam engines and knew more about steam than anybody on earth," said his daughter, Vicki Leslie. "He also was a great history buff, especially the Civil War, and loved the Mississippi steamboats that were used to transport cotton."

So in the late 1960s, he and a friend built a 7-foot-long exact replica of the J.M. White, a Mississippi paddle wheeler destroyed in a fire 88 years earlier.

"He designed a miniature steam engine for it with a remote control and then flooded our front yard to play with it," said his daughter. In 1974, he drove the J.M. White--mounted in a specially constructed case--to the Smithsonian Institution where it was included in a marine transportation display.

Born in Evanston and receiving an engineering degree in 1937 from Harvard University, Mr. Leslie worked for a few years in steel rolling mills before joining Stewart Warner as a chief engineer.

While there, he headed the team that during World War II developed a heat exchange device as an airplane wing de-icer, allowing the aircraft to fly higher and significantly adding to the country's war efforts.

After the war, he moved to Signode, headed by his father, John W., who had helped save the company's predecessor Seal and Fastener Co. from a financial crisis around 1918. Signode began in Chicago and then in the mid-1970s moved its headquarters to Glenview.

"Signode developed the tools to make strapping more usable and economical," said Robert Reilly, ex-manager of the company's corporate facilities planning and engineering division.

"It started with the stretching tool and the sealing tool Jack's father bought from a French inventor. The stretching tool took the slack out of the strapping. The sealing tool was like a pliers ... that when squeezed together around the metal clip that joined the straps indented the edges and formed a joint."

Mr. Leslie married his wife, Virginia, in 1950 and the two settled in Winnetka. After her death in 1997, he moved to Seattle to be closer to his children.

Mr. Leslie became Signode's president and chief executive officer in 1949. Under his tenure, the company grew into a Fortune 500 company with about a dozen domestic and international plants, and it was one of the principal manufacturers of strapping. He was elected chairman in 1962.

The company went on to develop a number of applications for plastic and steel strapping and the automatic machines for those applications. The strapping provided safe transportation of numerous products.

He stepped down as president in 1973 and as chief executive officer in 1975, remaining chairman until his retirement in 1982. The firm later became part of Illinois Tool Works.

Mr. Leslie was a strong voice in the 1980s against the continued use of Winnetka's municipally owned power plant, and he had served as director of numerous civic, education and medical boards.

Other survivors include his son, James, and four grandchildren. A service is being planned in Winnetka in the spring.