A tribute to Erik Jonsson

A man of vision and accomplishments
A global look at his contributions
A wise man ahead of his time
Parting words from Erik
By Bert Holmes

Erik Jonsson was a man of extraordinary talent and vision who combined a successful business career at TI with superb leadership of the diverse community of Dallas.

He was not well-known to journalists or to the public at large before he became mayor of Dallas in 1964. But he quickly moved to the forefront as the people of Dallas endured the dark days following the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

A man previously known for his business acumen and corporate leadership proved to be a public leader who was wise, sensitive, determined and talented. In a community presided over for years by business executives, Mr. Jonsson demonstrated that the skills learned in the corporate world could help solve the problems of ordinary citizens in a diverse community.

Since retiring as mayor in 1971, Mr. Jonsson has received much attention as the founder of the huge and successful Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, but he touched almost every facet of life in the city.

Education and medicine were particularly benefited by Mr. Jonsson, whose personal concerns and financial gifts inspired growth and change. The breadth of his interests was demonstrated in his support of education, from preschools to postgraduate training.

Knowing that the residents of Dallas, as well as TI, needed specialized scientific training, he helped fund the Graduate Research Center. Eventually, the center became the University of Texas at Dallas, which continues to benefit from the gifts of Mr. Jonsson and his TI associates.

Mr. Jonsson demonstrated his love of people and of his city when he devised and launched his most successful experiment in local government, Goals for Dallas.

Conceived in the fall of 1964, a year after the assassination, Goals for Dallas was officially launched in 1966 when 87 people of varied backgrounds convened to review plans for improvements in all phases of community life.

The proposals were enthusiastically debated throughout the city in succeeding years, as residents in all parts of Dallas and from all backgrounds joined for the first time in an organized, but open, planning process.

Mr. Jonsson asked Goals conferees whether they wanted to deal with the future or be run over by it. His own answer was obvious: “We must dream no small dreams. We must envision great, ambitious, difficult goals. Yet our objectives must be within our reach.”

The Goals program continued for 20 years, always with Mr. Jonsson’s support. The city also has a new city hall and central library, thanks to his leadership and vision. There are also an expanded convention center, branch libraries and highway improvements.

Erik Jonsson remained active and involved with his city until his death at age 93. He provided not only advice and counsel, but also helped community agencies raise the funds they needed for community programs. In 1994, for example, Mr. Jonsson, along with Cecil Green and Bea Haggerty, also members of the TI family, was honored with the Spirit of Generations Award from Senior Citizens of Greater Dallas.

Mr. Jonsson’s service to his city obviously spanned the generations, from schools and parks for the children and expanded career opportunities for working families to services for the elderly.

A man of vision and accomplishments, Erik Jonsson will be remembered as a giant among Dallas leaders.
Erik Jonsson’s life at a glance

Sept. 6, 1901: John Erik Jonsson is born in Brooklyn, N.Y., the only child of Swedish immigrants.

1918: He graduates from Montclair High School in Montclair, N.J.

1922: He earns a master’s degree in mechanical engineering from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y.

He joins the Aluminum Co. of America and works as a mill apprentice near Knoxville, Tenn.

Feb. 8, 1923: Erik and Margaret Fonde are married.

1929: Erik returns to ALCOA. While living in Newark, N.J., he begins conducting business with J. Clarence Karcher, the husband of his wife’s cousin. “Doc” Karcher and a colleague, Eugene McDermott, use reflection seismology to search for oil.

Aug. 1, 1930: Erik joins Geophysical Service, supervising its lab in Newark, N.J. Estimated revenues: $300,000.

April, 1934: Erik moves to Dallas, Texas. His management responsibilities increase when he is named Secretary of Geophysical Service.

1939: The name of the company is changed to Coronado Corporation, with Geophysical Service Inc. (GSI) as a subsidiary of Coronado.

1940: Coronado estimated revenues are $800,000.

1941: Stanolind Oil and Gas Co. acquires Coronado Corporation and retains its oil-producing unit. The new owners offer to sell the GSI oil exploration business to J. Erik Jonsson, Cecil H. Green, Eugene McDermott, and H. Bates Peacock for $275,000. They have 10 days to secure financing and take ownership.

Dec. 6, 1941: Erik Jonsson, Eugene McDermott, Cecil Green and H. Bates Peacock become new owners of GSI.

1942: GSI begins producing submarine detection devices as part of the World War II effort. Erik also becomes GSI’s sales representative in Washington.

1945: Pat Haggerty joins company.

1950: GSI estimated revenues are $7.6 million — with 1,128 employees.

1951: The company’s name is changed to Texas Instruments Incorporated; GSI becomes a wholly owned subsidiary of TI.

1951: Erik becomes president of Texas Instruments Incorporated, serving in that capacity until 1958.

1952: TI purchases a license from Western Electric to manufacture transistors; enters semiconductor business.

1953: TI merges with Intercontinental Rubber Company, a New York Stock Exchange-listed company. Erik bought the first 100 shares of TXN at $5 1/4 each when the stock began trading on Oct. 1.

1954: The first pocket-sized transistor radio is introduced using TI’s mass-produced transistors.

TI researcher Gordon Teal demonstrates TI’s breakthrough production of silicon transistors at the 1954 National Conference on Airborne Electronics.

“The worth of a man to his society,” Texas Instruments co-founder Erik Jonsson said, “can be measured by the contributions he makes to it — less the cost of sustaining himself and his mistakes in it.”

From the global company he helped build to the All-American city that he led, to the countless learning centers that he nurtured and supported, to the mighty Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport that he championed, Erik’s contributions are immeasurable.

“In Erik Jonsson, Dallas had the greatest builder of its history,” Lee Cullum wrote in The Dallas Morning News.

The Brooklyn, N.Y.-born son of Swedish immigrants wanted to be a journalist. But Erik lacked one prerequisite course to enter Columbia University, probably because he had completed high school in three years instead of four to lessen his parents’ financial burden. He entered Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, earning a master’s degree in mechanical engineering in 1922.

After working for the Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA), making an unsuccessful try as a Pontiac dealer and working for ALCOA again, Erik joined Geophysical Service in 1930. He arrived in Dallas in 1934 to continue his work for the oil exploration company.

“Erik became responsible for the hiring of additional key field personnel, and he showed excellent judgment in match-
1956: TI begins manufacturing semiconductors outside the United States with the establishment of Texas Instruments Limited in the United Kingdom.

Sept. 12, 1958: Jack Kilby, a TI engineer, demonstrates the integrated circuit. The integrated circuit made possible the invention of the electronic hand-held calculator in 1967.

1958: Erik becomes chairman of board.

1959: TI merges with Metals & Controls Corporation, acquiring operations in Attleboro, Mass., Versailles, Ky., and in Holland, Italy, France, Mexico, Argentina and Australia.

1959: Erik receives doctor of engineering, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, N.Y.


1961: Erik co-founds the Graduate Research Center of the Southwest with McDermott and Green. After a name change in 1967, it is gifted to the state in 1969, becoming a part of the University of Texas system.

Erik receives doctor of science, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, N.Y.

1962: Erik named Dallas Man of the Year.

1963: Receives doctor of science, Austin College, Sherman, Texas.

Nov. 22, 1963: Erik, as president of the Dallas Citizens Council, informs a luncheon crowd of 2,600 that President John F. Kennedy has been shot. The audience was awaiting the arrival of the president, who was to be the event’s speaker.

1964: Receives doctor of laws, Southern Methodist University, Dallas.

Dallas Mayor Earle Cabell resigns to run for Congress. The City Council elects Erik to serve as councilman and mayor. He is reelected three times, serving as Dallas’ mayor from February 1964 to May 1971.

1966: Erik proposes Goals For Dallas, a pioneer urban goal-setting program. He serves as its chairman from 1965 until 1976, when he becomes chairman emeritus.


1967: Erik persuades Dallas voters to approve a $175 million bond issue that finances Dallas City Hall, the Dallas Convention Center and the Dallas Central Library.

1968: Erik receives doctor of civil laws degree, University of Dallas, Irving, Texas.

Erik receives Henry Lawrence Gantt Medal from the American Society of Mechanical Engineers and the American Management Association.

Erik becomes the first chairman of the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport Board. He is the driving force behind a partnership to create what has become a world-class transportation center, Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. He remains chairman until 1976.

1970: TI total revenues: $827.6 million; 44,752 employees.

Erik receives the Hoover Medal, jointly

Jonsson, at Haggerty’s urging, purchased a license from Western Electric Company in 1952 and launched TI’s electronics business by manufacturing transistors.

“I had a hard time convincing Western Electric to sell me a license,” Erik said later. “They just didn’t think we could make a transistor. They thought we were too young and inexperienced.”

TI, which got the license in May, produced its first transistor by Christmas. That was the first giant step in an amazing succession of technological firsts.

“Erik is the one who kept us together," said Willis Adcock, who joined TI in 1953 and later became the first TI Principal Fellow. “He got the money and kept everything organized so we could do the work. Erik could always see the bright side. He was very unique in that sense.”

Erik, who retired as TI board chairman in 1966, already had embarked on a second career in public service. He served as Dallas mayor between 1964 and 1971. He rallied the city after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. During Erik’s time in the $20-a-week mayor’s job, he pushed through a $175 million bond issue, then the biggest in Dallas history, and led the campaigns for a new city hall and the D/FW Airport. More than 100,000 Dallas and Dallas-area residents participated in his Goals for Dallas program.
In ‘67, Jonsson backs building a new City Hall, library and convention center

awarded by American Society of Civil Engineers; American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical and Petroleum Engineers; American Society of Mechanical Engineers; and Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers.

**September 1970:** Baylor University Medical Center of Dallas dedicates the new $6 million J. Erik and Margaret Jonsson Medical and Surgical Hospital.

In talking about TI, Erik said, “ Somehow, we always did what we said we would do, and that’s probably why we’re still around.”

“Erik Jonsson brought new energy and spirit to Dallas at a time when it most needed it,” said Darwin Payne, author of *Big D* and chairman of the journalism department at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. “At Dallas’ gloomiest moment, he elevated it to a city of hope and inspiration.”

*Look Magazine*, in 1970, declared Dallas an All-American city. Dallas was the only city of its size to be so honored. Erik, as the first chairman of the board of the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport, ensured its place as a city of the world.

“We were determined to build the best airport that anybody had built up to that point,” Erik had said. By 1992, the facility, in terms of passenger travel, had become the second busiest airport in the world.

“Erik was for excellence,” Willis said. “He had a vision for the future. It’s impossible to drive around Dallas without seeing his efforts.”

When he was about 7 years old, Erik first read the story of Horatio Alger Jr. Erik kept the book throughout his life and recalled its storyline during a 1992 interview.

“He never had any money. He always made some by hard work and then he invested it very carefully and scientifically in something that was about to be a booming business,” Erik said of young Horatio. “He got rich, but he never forgot to be a good guy.”

Erik lived that story. He used to say that “the best way to correct an adverse opinion is to perform.” In talking about TI, he said, “ Somehow, we always did what we said we would do, and that’s probably why we’re still around.”

As his friend Stanley Marcus wrote in *The Dallas Morning News*, Erik “was a wise man whose mind outlived his body.”

— Ish Haley, TI Internal Communications
Jerry Junkins on Erik Jonsson

“Erik Jonsson was a man of great vision. For me personally, Erik was the embodiment of those strong ethical and business principles on which TI has been based.

“His sense of purpose, his sense of responsibility, and — most of all — his sense of adventure did much to shape the culture of Texas Instruments in its early years. Erik knew that people would be the key to TI’s success, and he sought people of character, courage and imagination. He also recognized the value of hard work, persistence, absolute integrity and the ability to adapt quickly to changing circumstances. Over the years, these elements have been woven into the fabric of TI.

“Erik’s legacy is found not only in TI, but in the many civic and cultural institutions to which he gave so much of himself. The D/FW Airport, the Dallas Public Library, Children’s Medical Center and the University of Texas at Dallas are only a few of the institutions that bear the mark of Erik and Margaret Jonsson. But most importantly, his spirit lives on in the sense of responsibility we all share for the future of our community.”

— Jerry Junkins, TI Chairman, President and CEO

Parting words from Erik

■ “You never say, ‘I can’t.’ If you have an idea, and it’s reasonable at all, give it a try.

■ “Your time is so limited. You can only give it or sell it to somebody else who can use it properly. If you’re in the wrong job, you have to change, even if you’re older. I’ve changed my business several times.”

■ “Goal-setting is a very healthy thing for a person to do. If you set goals for yourself, the first thing to do would be to get a piece of paper with some lines you can write on. Write down a set of goals.”

— Erik Jonsson

Memorial contributions

Erik Jonsson’s family has designated three institutions where memorial contributions may be made in his honor. Their addresses and phone numbers are:

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
Attn: William McGoldrick
Vice president, Institute Relations
Development Office
Pittsburgh Building
Troy, N.Y. 12180
Phone: 518-276-6051

The Lamplighter School of Dallas
11611 Inwood Road
Dallas, Texas 75229
Phone: 214-369-9201

J. Erik Jonsson Memorial Fund
The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas
Lock Box 910888
Dallas, Texas 75391-0888
Phone: 214-648-2510

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