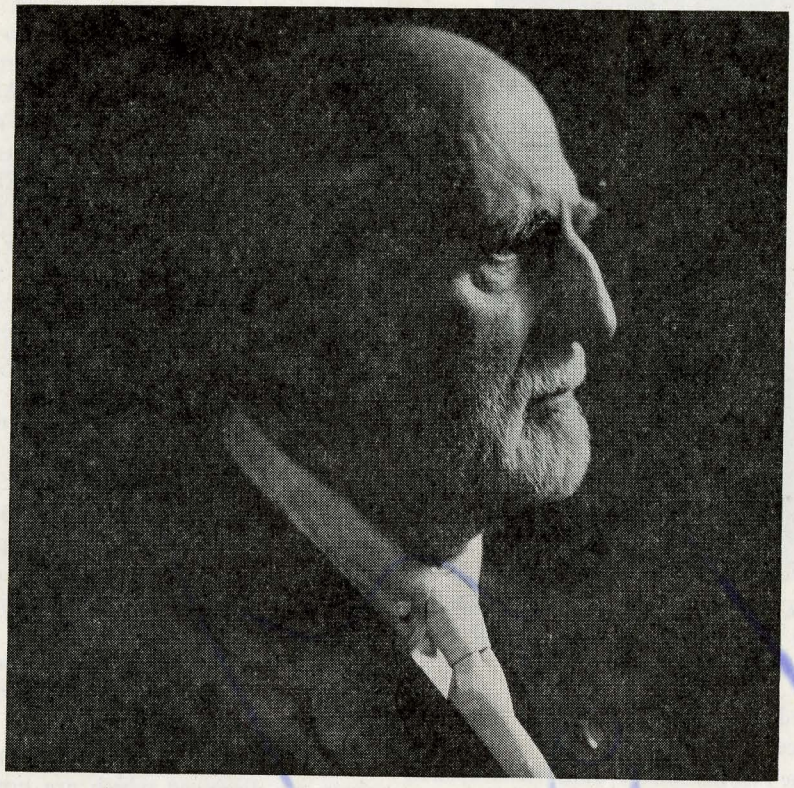
The Lengthened Shadow of One Man



MR. DOW's death—with his boots on as he had wished—brought to an end what was perhaps the most brilliant job of bossing a big Public Utility in the history of a great Nation whose annals are replete with accomplishment. Starting as Vice-President and General Manager of The Edison Illuminating Company in July, 1896, he was responsible for more than forty-five years for making those decisions that determine the destiny of an enterprise. It was only during the last two years that, as Chairman of the Executive Committee, his role had been advisory rather than responsible.

It is correct decisions that count. Routine management is important but destinies are molded when two alternatives require a choice between them. It is a boss's job to make these decisions. Mr. Dow realized this. In 1926 he wrote, "Nevertheless if we will progress—indeed, if we are to live—we must make decisions, and we must continue to make decisions, exactly as if there were such a thing as certainty." They may have fine minds and so avoid gross blunders, but in the end a decision is partly intuitive. Mr. Dow's brilliant record of important decisions well made, far in advance of established practice, is outstanding.

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Partly because of his own ideals and partly from his long business experience, Mr. Dow insisted more and more as the years went by that people with whom the Company dealt, customers and vendors and employees, must be treated with friendliness and with fundamental fairness. Time and again valid contracts were modified when unexpected events made them appear unfair; time and again customers who had run into hard luck were released from their obligations. but woe betide the man who tried to take undue advantage of this decency; Mr. Dow's Scotch tongue lashed out at him with a tirade that shriveled the unfortunate wretch in his tracks.

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For more than forty years there was decision after decision — engineering, financial, public relations, rates and labor—important decisions, fundamental to the welfare of the company, made from two to twenty years ahead of final public acceptance; a scintillating string of triumphs. There were mistakes, of course. . . . But the mistakes were few and the correct decisions were many. If you toss a coin you will be right half of the time, but Mr. Dow was right very much more than half of the time, and he was from two to twenty years ahead of the field. This was his great contribution to the Detroit Edison Company.

These successes were not achieved with trivial things. The service offered by the company has become essential to nearly three million people. Mr. Dow has supervised the investment of more than half a billion dollars of other people's savings. And to us, ten thousand of us—men and women and boys and girls—his Company offers a livelihood, through good times and bad; pleasant associations with people we can admire; an adequate outlet for intelligence, ambition and energy. It is granted to only a few men to be principally responsible for such important achievements.

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How was it accomplished? By luck? No—the percentage of accuracy was far too high. By intuition? Perhaps—he claimed, smiling, some acquaintance with the pixies. By high intelligence? Certainly. His was undoubtedly one of the best minds in the nation. By character? Yes! His motto was live and let live. He had no great use for personal wealth—money was something to be spent, freely, joyously. By hard work? Of course. The forty-hour week was for his men—not for him. His appetite for information was insatiable and he had a habit of recording neatly in his little black note book his memoranda of all kinds of facts and information that came to his hand. His mastery of the English language was unequalled, and his writing had a clarity and brevity and charm that could only come from the mind of a man such as he.

He dealt on somewhat better than even terms with specialists in a dozen lines of human thought—he out-figured engineers and out-talked lawyers; he expounded theories to professors and theology to parsons; he fearlessly raided predatory politicians and he out-bargained financiers. Now it is better than even money that he is showing Charon how to row.

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This imposing record of accomplishment, with its undeniable proof of intelligence and ability, may account for the respect but it does not account for the affection with which he is remembered by the ten thousand men and women who make up his staff. After years and years of being praised and reprimanded and lectured and bulldozed by him, a feeling of deep personal loss comes to all of us at his death.

—From a tribute to Alex Dow, by Harry Snow in the Detroit Edison Synchronizer.