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Milton K. Cummings

By
Raymond C. Watson, Jr.

In his lifetime, Milton Kyser Cummings was often called the “Number One Citizen of Huntsville.” As a young man, his business acumen carried him from a disabled helper in a small firm to one of the most successful cotton brokers in North Alabama. Adjusting to the changing economy, he led the first high-technology firm in the city from near bankruptcy to become the largest space and defense industry in the State. Simultaneously, he was recognized as a humanitarian, opportunity leader for minorities and people with disabilities, and advisor to government officials from the local to national levels.

Cummings was born on 12 August 1911, in Gadsden, Alabama, but the family soon moved to Huntsville, where his father was a native. Milton lost a lower leg due to osteomyelitis when he was four years old, but his compensation was so thorough that in his teens he was a champion tennis player. While in high school, he began work at Shelby Fletcher Brokerage firm, learning this activity from the ground up.

When Milton was 16 and graduated from high school, Fletcher – recognizing Milton’s intelligence and determination – offered to pay for his college education; Milton, however, declined the offer, feeling that he must continue working to help support his family. His father died while Milton was still in his teens, making him responsible for his family as the Great Depression began.

Fletcher died in 1936, leaving Cummings \$5,000 in his will. Despite the risks from the ongoing depression, Cummings used this inheritance to open his own cotton brokerage firm. He became well known to the Tennessee Valley farmers, buying

bailed cotton and selling it to the cotton mills in Huntsville. Respected as an ‘honest broker,’ Cummings was soon the most successful cotton merchant in the region.

As World War II got underway, there was a great demand for cotton materials. Although his physical disability prevented him serving in military duty, he provided a vital wartime service in brokering cotton. With severely injured servicemen returning to the U.S., Cummings also visited hospitals and rehabilitation facilities demonstrating to and encouraging amputees.

Near the start of the 1950s, Cummings projected the potential decline in cotton profitability – this was soon verified – and turned his attention to personal investments in the stock market. With his own stock ticker and great attention to the market, he exhibited a genius for buying and selling at just the right time. In this, Cummings was highly successful, soon building a considerable fortune.

As Cummings rose as a successful businessman, he gained political interest, particularly at high levels in the Democratic Party. Two of his closest friends were Congressman Bob Jones of Scottsboro and U.S. Senator John Sparkman. Sparkman was the 1952 Democratic vice-presidential candidate and was also a close neighbor, living less than a city block from Cummings.

When Wernher von Braun and his team came to Huntsville, the city had no high-technology infrastructure to support their missile-development activities. The Chamber of Commerce was asked to recruit to the city an appropriate engineering and manufacturing firm. Marietta Tool and Engineering in Marietta, Georgia, responded, agreeing to form a new engineering company in Huntsville and move their existing precision machine shops from Marietta. On 1 July 1953, this opened as Alabama Engineering and Tool Company, Inc. (AETC); the stock was locally owned.

After two years and only modest success, AETC was merged with a firm owned by Rufus P. Brown and moving from Indianapolis, Indiana. The name was changed to Brown Engineering Company, Inc. (BECO), on 29 June 1956.

For the next two years, the operation languished and approached bankruptcy. There were some technical successes, including support to the Army Ballistic Missile Agency (ABMA) in building and launching Explorer, America's first satellite. In December 1957, the BECO Board made the decision to return the firm to local ownership. New stock was issued, and Rufus Brown was bought out; the company name, however, was retained.

Milton Cummings had been invited to invest in a new BECO stock issue. He had become a personal friend of Wernher von Braun, who at that time was leading the missile development and space program for the Army Ballistic Missile Agency (ABMA) at Redstone Arsenal; thus Cummings recognized its potential of gaining a foothold in the emerging space market. Convinced that the space field was where Huntsville business was headed, Cummings personally underwrote the new stock issue.

As the largest stockholder of BECO, Cummings agreed to serve as the company's President for three months. In his words, "Once I had the opportunity to more closely examine Brown Engineering, I became convinced of its great potential and accepted a permanent position." This began on 6 May 1958, but rather than three months, this lasted eight years. Within a short time, Cummings brought BECO to a strong financial condition. To strengthen his understanding of NASA and Army programs, he hired Joseph C. Moquin – a highly qualified civil service leader – as his Executive Vice President. Effective 1 July 1960, NASA absorbed the largest part of ABMA to become the George C. Marshall Space Flight Center (MSFC); Wernher von Braun was MSFC's initial Director.



Milton Cummings

With Cummings's financial and management capabilities being recognized through political and federal relationships, BECO's business flourished. In 1961, Cummings and Moquin initiated the Huntsville Research Park, adjacent to the Redstone Arsenal and the emerging University of Alabama's Huntsville Graduate Center. As the Saturn booster and Apollo moon-landing programs evolved, BECO was by far the largest local contractor, reaching over 3,500 personnel in a few years.

In addition to engineering and manufacturing activities, Cummings expanded the company with its Research Laboratories, providing Huntsville with the first non-government advanced research capabilities. In 1967, BECO was acquired by Teledyne Corporation, with Teledyne Brown Engineering (TBE) becoming the flagship company of the Corporation.

The engineering on the Saturn vehicle and other hardware were under Vice President, William A. Giardini. Throughout the 1960s, BECO/TBE provided over 20 million man-hours in support of NASA's space program. Vice President Raymond C. Watson, Jr. (this article's author) led the Research Laboratories and other advanced technologies developments; included were lunar exploration experiments and the basic test model of the lunar roving vehicle. In 1969, NASA presented Outstanding Public Service Awards to 98 leaders from throughout industry for their

contributions to the Saturn-Apollo effort; included were Milton Cummings, William Giardini, and Raymond Watson.

While space activities dominated company work in the 1960s, there were also significant defense-related activities. Included was the initiation of the company's efforts in ballistic missile defense, as well as intelligence analysis. In association with the latter activity, Milton Cummings – as the President – received the first Top Secret security clearance granted to a non-government individual in Huntsville. At that time, the responsible local governmental intelligence agency was under Carl E. Duckett, who later became the leader of the Central Intelligence Agency's Directorate of Science and Technology. Cummings and Duckett developed a close relationship – both were from modest backgrounds, were highly people motivated, and neither had a college education. This relationship continued throughout Cummings's lifetime. Later, Duckett often invited Cummings to visit the CIA in Langley, Virginia, and give advice on public reactions to disclosed intelligence activities.

Cummings stepped down from the presidency of TBE in 1966, but remained as Chairman of the Board of Directors. At that time, he had significant holdings in Teledyne Corporation stock. Cummings died 7 March 1973.

Milton Cummings married Nanny Vastus Ivy in 1936; they had three daughters, Jean, Carol Ann, and Nancy, and William Brooks Wilkinson, MD, was his stepson. Their primary residence was in a large colonial house built in 1860 at 603 Adams Street; large groups were often entertained there with chamber musicians. In time, he gave up tennis but was an avid golfer. A Christian, Cummings was a Deacon for 23 years and then an Elder in the Presbyterian Church.

Throughout his career, Cummings was a “people” person. While fully at ease with persons of all social strata or educational level, he especially identified himself with the working class. At BECO, he frequently visited the manufacturing facilities, where he knew many of the workers by name. He often expressed the belief, “We are our brother’s keeper,” and so conducted his personal life as well as his business activities.

Under Cummings leadership, BECO increased to about 4,500 employees; this included persons in a number of high-technology activities that he established in other cities. As of 2016, it is estimated that BECO/TBE has about 32,000 “alumni.” A significant portion of these former employees are still in the Huntsville area, many in senior positions with government, industrial, and academic organizations, and a number in firms that they founded. Thus, Cummings had a direct influence over the evolution of Greater Huntsville as one of the Nation’s high-technology centers.

Although he never attended college, Cummings significantly supported educational advancement in Huntsville. He had joined with Army officials in encouraging the University of Alabama to expand their Huntsville Branch into a full Center, particularly in provisions for earning graduate degrees. In June 1961, he accompanied Wernher von Braun in requesting the Alabama Legislature to support a Research Center in Huntsville; the response was a \$3 million (\$14 million in present value) bond issue that was approved by Alabama voters.

Cummings set an example for Southern firms in equal opportunity employment, long before it was federally mandated. In 1963, he was a principal founder and first President of the Association of Huntsville Area Companies (AHAC), an organization devoted to ensuring equal opportunity for minorities

in employment, education, housing, and community affairs. Huntsville led Alabama in all aspects of race relations, including the quiet integration of the University of Alabama's Huntsville Graduate Center.

Cummings was also in the forefront of providing employment opportunities for the handicapped. Well before any Federal requirements, Cummings had BECO provide full accommodations for these "special resources." An article in the company's newsletter described the contributions being made by 25 physically handicapped employees.

Cummings received many recognitions and honors. Auburn University conferred the degree Doctor of Laws, Honoris Causa, on him in August 1962. In April 1964, Cummings was the keynote speaker at Vanderbilt University's symposium on "The Impact of the Space Age on the South." Previously noted was Cummings's 1969 recognition by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration as an industrial leader in the Apollo Program. The United States House of Representatives recognized him through a Memorial Tribute being read into its minutes in 1973. Also in 1973, the Huntsville Research Park was renamed Cummings Research Park, soon becoming the second largest research park in the Nation and the fourth largest in the World.

About the Author: *Raymond Coke Watson, Jr., Ph.D., P.E., was born at Anniston, Alabama, in 1926, and raised during the Great Depression on a small farm in Calhoun County. Upon completing a special non-degree program through the Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now Auburn University) preparing "instant engineers" to meet wartime needs, he began his professional career in 1942. Through the years, part-time*

studies led to degrees in engineering, physics, mathematics, and business administration, with undergraduate minors in history and literature.

After 18 years of engineering, research, and college teaching experience, including two wartime years in the U.S. Navy, Watson was hired by Milton Cummings in 1960, coming to Huntsville to establish the Research Laboratories of Brown Engineering Company (later Teledyne Brown Engineering).

Watson's overall career has combined a broad variety of industrial and academic positions. He has some 450 reports, papers, and presentations, including 5 books (3 on technical history) and about 50 Wikipedia and magazine articles. To date, he is still fully engaged as a consultant and writer. His latest book is Huntsville's Technological Evolution (Trafford, 2015).

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