

ERNEST TENER WEIR: LAST OF THE GREAT STEELMASTERS

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PART 2

As a public relations representative of Ketchum, Incorporated, the writer first entered National Steel headquarters with no expectation that he would have a permanent office there until his retirement almost thirty-two years in the future. He was amazed to find that the company's total space was about two-thirds of a floor shared with its law firm, Thorp, Bostwick, Reed, and Armstrong. Its total staff — from Weir to the most recent office boy — included fewer than three dozen men and women.

The explanation for this seeming paucity in space and staff of a large corporation was soon forthcoming. National Steel's subsidiary companies operated under their own names and exercised a high degree of autonomy. They had the large offices with the full range of officers and personnel. The National Steel headquarters was the center of major policy making and of the top administrative and financial functions. Meetings of the directors and of the executive committee usually were held there.

Ernest Weir was then fifty-eight years old, although his appearance and vigor made him seem considerably younger. His height was average, his build rather stocky, and his carriage extremely erect. His face rounded down from a broad forehead to a prominent, square chin, and he had the high color often seen in the very fair-complexioned. His hair was full and silver grey with flecks of the original bright blond. But his eyes, light blue, direct and piercing, were his dominant feature. He was careful about his personal appearance almost to the point of vanity. His suits were quiet in shade and pattern with the unobtrusive elegance of the first-rank tailor, his shoes handmade, and his accessories carefully matched. During business hours, at least, he always looked as though he had stepped from the proverbial bandbox.

At the outset of this article, it was noted that Weir's formal education ended at the eighth grade. But he was a well-educated man and became so through the same route followed by many others. He was

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a rapid and prodigious reader. His major interests, probably, were history and biography, but he had read many of the classics and kept well abreast of current writing. He was an especial admirer of the works of Charles Dickens, and there was a rumor abroad that he had read *David Copperfield* fifty times. Asked about this, he replied with a smile that he had read it more than once but hardly that often. His speech was slow and decisive; his vocabulary extensive and used with good pronunciation and grammar. His profanity rarely went beyond "hell" and "damn," and he never used coarse language at any time. Also, he had an inherent gentility. The writer can state that, except on occasions of great stress or urgency, he was received in Mr. Weir's office as he was received in Mr. Weir's home, where Weir was always a gracious host.

None of the above should be taken to mean that Ernest Weir had traces of Caspar Milquetoast in his makeup. He could be decidedly brusque and outspoken. He often was described as "stubborn" — even "bullheaded." On occasion he was. In the writer's experience, Weir would accept contrary opinion to the point where he indicated he had made a final decision, and, in a few cases — very few — beyond it. He was a master in the art of "chewing out" someone he considered faulty in work or judgment. However, once over it was done with and forgotten. On mornings when the writer was on the receiving end in such an incident, he later could expect Weir to come to his office door with a cheery, "Going to lunch?"

In Pittsburgh, this meant to a private dining room in the Duquesne Club. The "regulars" usually included two or three from the office plus Earl F. Reed, general counsel and a director; J. Steele Gow, executive head of the Falk Foundation; and, when he was in town, Thomas E. Millsop, president of Weirton Steel and later the chief executive of National Steel. Naturally, Weir sat at the head of the table, but he did not monopolize the conversation. Ordinarily, he did not favor discussion of company business. Instead, the talk could range over books, sports, music, theater, and events prominent in the current news. At times there would be "irregular" guests who were active in various fields in the United States or overseas and, always, the conversation then centered on their particular interests.

So far, this article has concentrated on Ernest Weir's landmark achievements as an industrial entrepreneur. There was never a lessening of the interest and energy devoted to this phase of his life. The continued progress of his company remained uppermost in his

mind. From this point, however, the emphasis of this article will be placed on his activity in matters concerning the steel industry and business in general, as well as in national and international affairs. These brought him such characterizations as rugged individualist — foremost critic of government — pet hate of the New Deal — steel baron — labor baiter — Roosevelt hater, as well as the familiar stubborn, bullheaded, and worse.

Some of these characterizations held the Biblical grain of truth, but they deserve appraisal in a more accurate context. He did not oppose for the sake of opposition. He was not against everything his opponents stood for. His whole record attests that he was not anti-labor. His motives were never ulterior. His positions were never “knee-jerk” reactions. On the contrary, they were carefully thought out on the basis of what he considered right and permanent principles. Once taken, they were voiced with vigor and without regard for the power of his opposition or consequences to himself. The vehemence of attacks on him, often supported with outright smears, gave sufficient evidence that his fire hit the intended targets.

By 1934, of course, Weir was well known throughout industry and the world of business. Also, he was a lifelong Republican and active in the party's financial affairs at the national level. Now, however, his name was becoming known to the general public because of its frequent appearance in the news, often under large headlines, in editorials, and in the commentary of columnists, and on the radio. Much of this publicity hardly could be regarded as complimentary.

In the early months of Franklin Roosevelt's first administration, Weir had been a strong supporter of the New Deal in the firm belief that the president was making effective but conservative use of federal powers to lead the country out of depression. Weir was an active participant in small and large meetings held at the president's call in Washington. Roosevelt, apparently, was strongly attracted to Weir and, on a number of occasions, singled him out for lengthy private discussions. That this attraction continued was indicated some years later by Senator Joseph Guffey at the Duquesne Club table where he was sometimes a guest due to a close friendship with Earl F. Reed dating from their college days. The senator reported that in a meeting with Roosevelt on the previous day, the president had said:

“Joe, I can't understand why Ernie Weir goes around the country talking about me the way he does. I *like* Ernie.”

On his side, Weir was by no means immune to the famous

Roosevelt charm, but by the summer of 1933, a 180-degree change took place in his attitude toward the New Deal. It is a matter of record that a change occurred in the attitude, policy, and conduct of the New Deal. Weir began to speak out in opposition to this new course. At the time, his was only one of many voices raised against the New Deal by prominent persons in diverse fields, but not for long. In later years, he became one of the very few leaders with the courage and conviction to hold their ground. With him, it was an unrelenting campaign that he waged consistently through the years before and after World War II.

Throughout, Weir was conscious of the heavy odds against him. He realized that his maximum impact as an individual would be vastly outweighed by the power, publicity, and popularity of the New Deal. He felt deeply, however, that someone had to take a stand against it — that someone had to point out its errors and dangers; and he kept on doggedly as he became a conspicuous and lonely voice of opposition. He was an easy target for the “big guns” of the liberals. He could be and was described as a black reactionary, a rich man heedless of the condition and needs of the common man, whose sole motive was greed for profits.

As was natural, Ernest Weir’s basic principles and outlook were those of the last quarter of the nineteenth century when he came to manhood. Under its standards, *he* was a liberal. Also he was part of, and strongly influenced by, the explosive progress in the early years of this century when findings of science were so vigorously applied in all manner of production and distribution with dramatic effects on living standards and, in fact, the entire way of life in the United States. Weir strenuously rejected the idea that the opportunity for continuing progress was minimal, along with the corollary New Deal philosophy that the American economy was mature, and that the only remedy for social ills was to be found in a redistribution of wealth through means devised and controlled by government. He regarded this as a craven, defeatist approach founded on negation of America’s basic principles and distrust of the individual American.

It also was natural that Ernest Weir’s viewpoint was that of a man with long and broad experience in business who recognized long-term profit as essential to its health and growth. But to him, the term “business” embraced the activity of all individuals at every level in the private sector, which was the sole foundation and support for all other activity, including that of local, state, and federal government.

Weir saw the New Deal as a purveyor of transient, illusory gain at an exorbitant, permanent cost to the American people in money terms and, much more important, in loss of personal freedom. He was fully aware of the plight of the "ill-housed, ill-clothed, ill-fed" and was as sympathetic toward them as the most warmhearted liberals. However, he disbelieved utterly that a handful of men in Washington — no matter how brilliant and well meaning — had the ability to shape and control the economic destiny of America's millions. The attempt to do so, he thought, could lead only to titanic mistakes at huge cost and eventual disaster. He was convinced that the surest remedy for the dismal conditions of the 1930s would be found in the unfettered freedom of day-by-day economic decision and action by individual Americans in a free market, and that this would provide, again as in the past, the quickest, most certain way to recovery and renewed progress. He bitterly resented New Deal attempts to develop class distinctions, and its use of government largesse and other means to buy the support of various voting blocs — actions, in his opinion, infected with the motive of political gain and dangerously divisive.

Ernest Weir had a sincere and abiding respect for the individual American. This was illustrated quite clearly in the 1930s at a very small luncheon of men who were close to him. A member of the group voiced the opinion that one of the most destructive developments in government of the United States was the constitutional amendment that transferred the election of senators from state legislatures to a direct, popular vote. He admitted that the old system had grievous faults but considered these the lesser evil because the new system had converted the Senate — formerly a conservative, deliberate body which tended to check rash and hasty action by the House — into the more radical legislative arm.

"I think you are completely wrong," Weir replied. "Under the old system I knew of all too many senators who could be bought and sold. Lincoln placed his trust in the ultimate good sense of the American people and I go along with his thinking 100 percent."

Weir's general antipathy toward the New Deal started in the summer of 1933. It came into sharp focus in the autumn of that year. Under the new and broad provisions of the National Industrial Recovery Act, national unions engaged in intensive organizing campaigns throughout the country. Several locals had been formed at Weirton by the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Plate Workers. Prior to this, an organization of employee representatives, elected

by their fellow workers, had been recognized as exclusive bargaining agent by the Weirton Steel Company. Suddenly, one of the Amalgamated locals decided to call a strike — without informing the other locals or making a public announcement — and immediately sent pickets to all plant gates. Many Weirton workers braved the picket lines to go to their jobs, but many others returned to their homes. When made known, the Amalgamated demand was that the company retract its recognition of the employee representatives and give it to the Amalgamated.

John C. Williams, then president of Weirton Steel, was in Europe. So Ernest Weir went to Weirton and announced that his office would be open to any employees who cared to talk with him. For days they streamed in and were admitted in groups as large as the office could hold. They told Weir that they had known nothing about plans for the strike, that they did not want it, and that they were sure that their feeling was shared by all but a small minority of Weirton employees. His decision was to reject the Amalgamated demand and to continue recognition of the employee representatives. The strike dragged on for a few weeks but dwindled to an end as the overwhelming majority of Weirton Steel workers returned to their jobs.

The Amalgamated then took its case to the newly formed National Labor Board, which consisted of a number of prominent men from government and other fields who served on a voluntary basis with the assistance of a paid staff. A meeting was called and attended by spokesmen for the Amalgamated, the employee representatives, and the company, including Weir. Each party presented its position. The final decision was to hold an election in which Weirton workers could make a clear-cut choice between the Amalgamated and the employee representatives. It was to be held under board supervision and rules which were written and accepted without reservation by the three parties before the end of the hearing.

Polling booths were installed and other physical arrangements were made at Weirton Steel's three plant locations. Almost on the eve of election day, National Labor Board agents came to Weirton with copies of the election rules to be posted on plant bulletin boards. It was noted immediately that the rules were not those that had been agreed upon at the board meeting. Substantial changes had been made in an obvious attempt to favor the Amalgamated. The new rules were rejected by both the employee representatives and company officers who refused to hold the election under them despite heated demands

from board agents that it proceed on schedule. The agents then left for Pittsburgh to visit Weir who, of course, had been informed of the matter during their trip. He saw the agents, accepted a copy of the rules, and gave the agents the same answer they had received at Weirton. The next event followed within the hour.

It was a telephone call from General Hugh S. Johnson, head of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), who started with a diatribe accusing Weir of bad faith and ended with a threat:

"If this election is not held as scheduled," he said, "you will go to jail."

"What you mean, General, is that we will go to court," Weir replied. "That's fine with me. I have complete confidence in the courts. If I am wrong, I'll go to jail."

The Department of Justice instituted proceedings against Weirton Steel and the employee representatives before the Federal District Court in Wilmington, Delaware. Beginning in October 1934, the hearing lasted for seven weeks with scores of witnesses and thousands of pages of testimony and legal argument. One interesting development was the testimony of several Labor Board members who admitted that substantial changes had been made in the election rules, but that a vigorous investigation had failed to identify the persons responsible. The case concluded with a sweeping decision against the government on the basis of both fact and law. This ended the first phase of the famous struggle between Weirton Steel and a national union which was forcefully supported by the federal bureaucracy.

The controversy over union representation of Weirton Steel employees continued for more than fifteen years into the early 1950s. At that point — after previous demands and opportunities to do so had been ignored — the new National Labor Relations Board ordered and supervised an election. The contestants were the United Steelworkers of America and the Independent Union of Weirton Workers which had been organized many years before as successor to the employee representatives. The latter won the election and an independent union continues as the bargaining representative of Weirton employees today.

General Johnson was one of the mainstays of the New Deal during its early years. Disenchanted with its later development, he resigned from government office and entered journalism by way of a widely published Washington column. In 1940 Weir became chairman of the Republican National Finance Committee. Another columnist, Ray-

mond Clapper, who had been a consistent supporter of the New Deal, made this the subject of five columns in a brief period — all highly critical of Weir. These sparked a flood of newspaper editorials, syndicated columns, cartoons, and radio comment. Some of this supported Weir, but most of it followed Clapper's line. General Johnson joined the hue and cry with his column of March 3, 1940, which follows in part:

"When the New Deal, and especially NRA, began its crusade for better labor relations, especially in the then crustacean steel industry, they had no more sincere supporter than Mr. Weir. The President knows that, even if some of his associates don't.

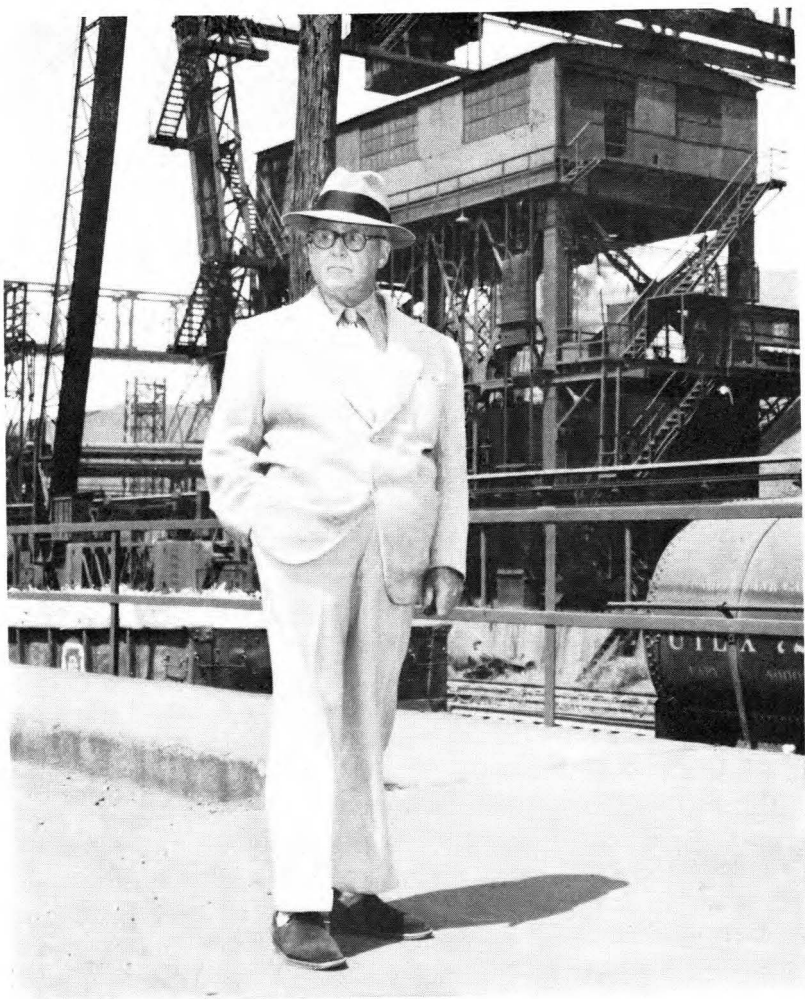
"His [Weir's] own relations were good. His was one of the first great companies voluntarily to seek an election to determine the question of majority representation. . . . On the eve of the election, an officious young lawyer of the later, or Janissariat, type of 'Fourth New Dealer' appeared to supervise it and announced a radically different procedure from that formally and regularly decreed by the Board.

"Mr. Weir refused to accept this new ukase and was upheld in court. From that time on, he got the worst running around and series of kicks in the pants of any industrialist of those times.

"At first hand, I don't know enough about developments since to say whether that soured his view or changed his attitude, but I do know that when the New Deal started, he was considered by it the most liberal and progressive employer in his industry."

The general, of course, had not known about the radical change in rules when he made his belligerent telephone call to Weir. Other incidents of this nature, plus a growing distaste for the general direction of the New Deal, led to Johnson's resignation. Eventually, these two men became great friends, a fact which made Weir the logical choice to introduce the general when he made an address in Pittsburgh's Carnegie Hall during 1940.

The National Labor Board affair certainly was a factor in souring Ernest Weir's views on the New Deal, but his opposition to it on general principles had started months before. It was based on a fundamental repugnance to the results he foresaw from the enormous centralization of power in the federal government; creation of radical, new controls over the American economy; irresponsible fiscal policy; the mushrooming growth of bureaucracy; class appeals and favoritism



Weir at Weirton steel plant.

to various blocs for political purposes; inevitable inflation; and, above all, erosion of individual freedom.

His viewpoint on inflation — a topmost concern today — was somewhat ambivalent. He rarely dealt with it in public statements, because he was speaking against the background of history's greatest deflationary period which profoundly affected popular thinking from the early 1930s to the end of his life. In private, he voiced the opinion that, in his experience, a "little" inflation had proved constructive because it made available the money essential to continuous progress. He was fully aware, however, that no effective mechanism existed to prevent the "little" from becoming a "lot." On the contrary, he recognized the irresistible attraction of inflation to politicians who—through misinterpretation and misapplication of John Maynard Keynes's theory — regarded huge deficit spending as a sure and seemingly painless road to popularity with their constituents. Ernest Weir saw that road as leading to inflation in the disastrous magnitude that had afflicted Germany and France after World War I. He knew — even if the politicians did not — that the deficit spending barrel had a bottom.

His most specific statement on inflation came when he was the principal speaker at the annual dinner of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) in December 1939. He said:

"At the end of the present fiscal year, our Federal debt will be \$44 billion — thirty-six times the debt before the [First] World War. . . . To what new height would the Federal debt soar in another war and another depression? One Hundred billion? One Hundred and Fifty billion? Name your own figure. You will be as accurate as anyone can be. Nor could anyone say that the debts of another war could not cause the collapse of our entire economic system with total destruction of the values represented in savings deposits, securities, insurance policies, and all other forms of savings."

Actually, in terms of constant dollars, Weir's "One Hundred and Fifty billion" is not far from the present national debt. The results of gross inflation — if not the cause — are now generally apparent. If Ernest Weir were here to see it, his most likely comment would be "of course." It is ironic that it has been almost solely the success of men like Weir in maintaining productivity in the private economy which has kept the gap between real and inflated values close enough to postpone reaping the bitter fruits of heedless spending and debt creation.

The NAM speech was the high point of Weir's personal cam-

paing against United States involvement in war which started when the first drumbeats in Europe signalled the approach of World War II. He urged a drastic scaling down of the suddenly enlarged export of steel scrap and other basic materials. A great proportion of these were being shipped to Germany and Japan, which he accurately identified as our most likely potential enemies. In both public statements and private communications with members of Congress as the war threat intensified, he fervently argued for retention and strict observance of the Neutrality Acts. He maintained that the United States should manufacture no arms and munitions for direct sale to other nations, on the grounds that this could breed "war hysteria" here, and could create incidents leading to our involvement, as they had in World War I. All other exports to belligerents, he said, should be on a rigid "cash and carry" basis. Again, in both public and private communications, he stressed the dangers in any surrender of congressional powers to the executive branch.

In this campaign, for once, Ernest Weir was on the popular side. Public opinion polls showed repeatedly that Americans in overwhelming numbers were opposed to our entry into another war not of our making. This sentiment prevailed with unabated strength until the attack on Pearl Harbor and caused President Roosevelt to promise "again, again and again" that Americans would not be sent to fight in another foreign war. But these same polls also revealed a large, popular belief that the majority of American businessmen welcomed war as a source of big profits and as a means to end the depression. Weir did his utmost to prove that this was not so, giving detailed expositions to demonstrate that businessmen had personal as well as economic reasons to detest war as fervently as other Americans.

Ernest Weir's tendency to act in ways contrary to conventional wisdom was quite as marked in the business world as elsewhere. It was in large part the key to the dramatic success of his own company. And, at times, it placed him in direct opposition to other leaders in his industry. A number of incidents illustrative of this Weir trait were well described in the writings of Dr. Ernest Dale, then an associate professor in the Graduate School of Business and Public Administration of Cornell University. He had received a grant from the Social Science Research Council to investigate the basic principles underlying success or failure in business organizations and in the course of his study had a number of interviews with Weir. Material from these was used in a book and a series of articles in scholarly publications.

Extracts quoted below are from one of the latter, published by the University of California in 1959 under the title, "Ernest Weir: Iconoclast of Management." In comment on Weir's action on wages, Dr. Dale wrote: "He went further than U. S. Steel in reducing wages after 1929, but in 1933 he notified the American Iron and Steel Institute that he was raising wages 15 per cent and forced the rest of the industry to follow suit. 'Steel manufacturers,' he said, 'are not justified in even considering any further liquidation of labor. We have gone, if anything, too far along those lines.' In 1935 he criticized other companies for raising wages, saying the increase was economically unwise, but in 1941 he again forced a rise in industry rates."

In that year, as was then customary, the United Steelworkers of America had initiated negotiations with the largest steel company, United States Steel, on the well-founded theory that the final agreement would perforce establish a new wage pattern for the entire steel industry. The union made, and held, to an original demand for an increase of ten cents per hour. The company countered with an original offer of five cents which was increased to seven cents. At this point, positions were frozen, and tedious, fruitless negotiations lumbered on day after day. In the light of the huge wage increases of recent years, the union's demand might appear too small for argument. But it must be remembered that in those days ten cents was a substantial percentage of prevailing wage rates, and the demand came after a decade in which the steel industry as a whole had labored under recurring and serious losses.

Again quoting Dr. Dale: "Weir knew that the projected profit statements from the industry would show ability to pay and believed that haggling and delay were not justified. As the bickering went on, he told his associates: 'It isn't enough — seven cents. When profit reports come later they'll make poor-mouth claims look ridiculous. And it will cost a lot of labor confidence.'"

Weir ended his impatience by acting on this conclusion. He instructed the Weirton Steel management — then negotiating with the independent union which also had demanded a ten-cent increase — to grant the demand. He knew, of course, that the same increase would become effective at all National Steel plants and moreover would establish the pattern for every other steel company. His action was described as a "bombshell." The news — spread countrywide immediately under big headlines and in excited broadcasts — ended the United States Steel negotiations, and brought the anticipated new industry wage structure.

Weir also took positions contrary to the thinking of other industry leaders on prices. Dr. Dale commented: "Some time later, Weir opposed U. S. Steel's plan to hike prices; supported a war-time price freeze, and marched out of the Institute in token of his disagreement. . . . All his life Weir drove his own way, though many of his fellow-creatures of varying shades of opinion thought his conduct foolish, perverse and wrong. . . . It was by violating conservative traditions that he achieved his success."

In his reference to the "march out" of the institute, Dr. Dale was somewhat inaccurate. At the time, Weir was the highly active president of the institute. He was in New York to preside at a regular board meeting which had proceeded normally. The "march out" incident took place at the customary informal luncheon which followed the meeting. His opposition to the price hike might have been mentioned, but it was his wage increase that brought matters to a head. Eugene Grace, then chief executive of Bethlehem Steel, made some biting remarks to the effect that it was "presumptuous" for a relatively small company to establish a wage pattern for the entire steel industry. He probably was supported by others. Heated words were passed; Weir resigned as president and withdrew his personal membership and that of National Steel from the institute.

A short time later, at the urging of many friends in the steel industry and outside of it, he rescinded his actions by reinstating his own and company memberships, and he agreed to serve out his first year as president. At the annual meeting, however, he adamantly refused to follow standard practice and serve a second year. This created a dilemma for the institute because no other steel-company head would accept nomination in his place. The impasse was broken by changing the bylaws to provide that the institute president should be a paid executive and that a steel-industry head should serve as chairman of the board of directors. This arrangement has been in effect from that time on.

Two other extracts from the Dale article throw further light on Ernest Weir's philosophy and ability. The first is a quotation of a Weir statement: "The only reason for production is consumption demand, and there must be a balance between them. If the producer expects his goods to be consumed, he must do his share in having the consumers' income on an equitable basis. If the producer's profit is excessive, it must be taken from the consumer, and slowly but surely the power of consumption declines and production is not absorbed."

This was hardly the view of an economic royalist.

The second illustrates one of the keys to Weir's success. As was noted above, each National Steel unit was accorded a high degree of autonomy. The same principle applied within the units. From the top downward, managers were given authority in proportion to their responsibility. The yardstick of performance was the relationship between costs and earnings of the operations in their charge. Sincere testimony to the constructive effect of this policy was given in the comments of a manager in another steel company to Dr. Dale:

"I have never been able to understand why we [in his company] do not have financial authority commensurate with responsibility. I have friends at a competitive company [Weirton Steel] and I know that when they write a good order [for equipment or other requirements] they get what they need. They are responsible people holding responsible jobs and they know it is up to them to make a good showing cost-wise. When they say they want it, they get it immediately. A superintendent in our company can make a mistake that will cost half a million dollars, yet he cannot authorize the purchase of a \$5,000 tractor."

To this, Dr. Dale added: "And middle management [in National Steel] did not hesitate to insist on its prerogatives. One new higher-echelon executive who persisted in checking too closely on a lesser member of management was frankly told: 'This is not the way we do things here. I am not a flunky. If you want to know how I'm doing, take a look at the profit and loss statement.' The underling not only got away with it but won his point and was free from further interference."

With entry of the United States into World War II, Ernest Weir declared a unilateral truce with the New Deal, and his company plunged wholeheartedly into the task of war production. Mostly, it was routine steel making, but some of it was entirely unique and in volume without precedent — achievements of innovative daring characteristic of Weir's operations.

One of these was the rolling of brass on steel facilities. The brass industry was able to produce plenty of primary material, but its rolling capacity was insufficient to meet the huge, abnormal demand for brass in forms used to make shells and for other war uses. The situation became desperate and an Ordnance Department official telephoned President Millsop, of Weirton Steel, to ask if it would be possible to roll brass on high-volume steel mills. The reply: "Send us some

brass and we will soon tell you." The material arrived in the "cakes" which are the brass industry's equivalent to the much larger and heavier steel ingots. A small, temporary furnace was installed beside the structural mill. The cakes were heated and placed one at a time in front of the giant rolls. Then by hand they were worked back and forth through the mill by what probably was the highest priced rolling crew in history because its members were highly-skilled workmen, supervisors, and managers. This crew developed the technique for volume production which was so successful that the wartime brass shortage was converted to abundance in a matter of a few months.

Weirton Steel also succeeded in adapting steel facilities for volume production of magnesium and this, along with the brass achievement, brought another task that was more difficult and much more dramatic. One day late in the war, two army officers came to the Weirton office in a station wagon loaded with rolls of a nickel-mesh material similar to window screening. They wanted it to be finished to certain extremely precise specifications and said frankly that the problem had been presented to more than a score of other companies most of which had refused to tackle it and none of which had solved it. They came to Weirton as a last resort and they were well repaid because Weirton not only met the specifications but did so in short order. Sometime later, it was learned that this material was for the hush-hush Manhattan Project and was used in construction of the atomic bomb.

Another feat was National Steel's only venture in the direct production of war material. After the Allies invaded Italy, stubborn resistance by German forces made northward progress a slow, costly, and grisly business. Air bombing could not dislodge the Germans from the stalemate at Monte Cassino. Artillery provided the only effective means, and the best weapon was the eight-inch howitzer. The guns were on hand, but there was a dearth of shells. Three steel companies were asked to undertake shell production — National, Jones and Laughlin, and a third, headed by a widely proclaimed industrial "genius" with great popularity in government circles, which was assigned about half the anticipated production. The third company failed miserably, and the situation was saved only because National and Jones and Laughlin were able to exceed their quotas.

At Weirton, a large warehouse was converted into a shell factory, and forging equipment was installed. There was a delay in receipt of remaining facilities which were being built to United States

order in Canada, and expert workmen were sent from Weirton to help expedite the job. In the first month of operation with a hastily recruited and trained work force, Weirton produced more than 80 percent of its quota and greatly exceeded it in the next two months. By that time — thanks to National and Jones and Laughlin — all shells needed were in Italy or on their way, and the project was terminated. The government had offered to pay for and hold ownership in the shellmaking facilities. The offer was rejected. Ernest Weir wanted no government property in his plants. The writer cannot state as a positive fact that all these exotic projects were accomplished at financial loss but offers an educated guess that they were. In any event, they proved that the label of “war profiteer” could not apply to Ernest Weir.

Following the war, Weir resumed his criticism of what he considered as misguided and harmful administration of the federal government. His points of attack differed; his principles remained the same. From the Truman administration into the early Eisenhower years, he concentrated his fire on the United States position in the Cold War. He regarded our country’s stance as misbegotten and perilous in both strategy and tactics. His view was reinforced on several trips to Europe where he found almost unanimous support in talks with men he had known for years who were influential in government, industry, and finance. Because their countries were so heavily dependent on the United States at that time, Weir neither named nor directly quoted them in speeches and writings. As usual, his thinking on this subject was direct and uncomplicated.

He had no sympathy for communism as a political or economic system nor for Russia’s flagrant disregard for its pledged word and its ruthless use of force to impose control on satellite countries. He was in thorough accord with America’s basic objective to halt Russian expansion. But he considered American action as reflexive, naive, emotional, and ineffectual to the point of nourishing the very thing it sought to quell while alienating the Western world. He advocated an entirely different approach.

“What we actually are doing in the Cold War,” he said, “is waging a religious war against Communism. If there has been some good in wars for other reasons, there has been none in religious wars. All have been futile. Their deaths, suffering, and destruction resulted only in more rigid attitudes on both sides and continuing hatreds. The truth is that we are fighting a myth. The Russian system is not com-

munistic; it is another form of state capitalism. Our position will have no effect on the Russian people even if they are able to learn its true purpose. Some of them doubtless believe in their system and support it with religious fervor while most accept and even welcome it for the practical reason that to them it has brought improvement over life under the czars. For various reasons, most undeveloped countries do not share our hostility toward 'communism' and some see benefits in it. There is no strong support for us in any of the advanced countries."

Other points of his argument were:

Throughout its history, Russia has been fearful of outside influence and has done its utmost to seal its borders against it. It always has been devious and unreliable in international relations.

In part, Russian expansionism is doubtless an attempt to move toward its stated goal of worldwide communism, with Moscow the modern counterpart of ancient Rome. In very large measure, however, it also has been a defensive strategy designed to extend its ramparts as far as possible from its home frontiers. In the past, Russia waged aggressive wars only with the odds enormously in its favor against much smaller nations. All its big wars were defensive. In our time, Russia has instigated military action in Greece, Korea, the Middle East, and elsewhere, and it has supported it with material and advisors. Russia has exercised extreme care to keep its own forces out of direct conflict.

Russia's success in extending its control so far to the west did not result from its own strength. It was simply a move into a vacuum created by foolish concessions of our amateur diplomacy with "Good Old Joe" at Yalta and Potsdam and by our supine acceptance of broken agreements.

All the above offered persuasive evidence that Russia, while taking any opportunity to seize and hold an advantage or to create trouble for the Western world, would do nothing that held danger of involvement in a major war. This could happen only if it misread a situation as posing a serious and immediate threat to Russian security. The United States Cold War action raised the possibility of a situation of this kind and, since both sides had "the bomb," could trigger the holocaust of World War III.

Against this background, Ernest Weir urged the alternative of engaging Russia in continuous negotiations on all matters at issue. By this time, he thought, we should have learned how to deal with

Russia's leaders. No agreements should be made that involved the least surrender of vital interests or principles. No concessions of any kind should be made without a *quid pro quo* for ourselves and other Western nations. He expected negotiation to be long, tedious, irritating, and probably not too productive but firmly believed it gradually would neutralize tensions and hold other advantages. If we maintained an open, rational position while Russia refused to negotiate or held to intransigent, excessive demands, we would gain in the world opinion for which Russia had some respect. Under any circumstances, we would buy time — and time was on our side, even in Russia itself.

This latter conclusion was based on Russia's obvious need to develop and utilize modern technology which occasioned a prior need for a great expansion of education of the Russian people. Education, over a long period, he held, would vitiate the power of thought control in a closed society. In many areas it would develop leadership that would demand a higher consumption economy, more personal freedom, and a greater range of contact with the outside world. All this, he believed, would contribute to making international peace and stability more important to Russia than hazardous ideological adventures.

These were the elements that provided the basis for Weir's last campaign. Again, he became a pamphleteer and took to the speaker's stand. His works were publicized in the world press, including a reprint of his longest and most complete statement in Moscow's *Izvestia* with surprisingly little editing or deletion. Mailings running into hundreds of thousands were made in the United States and overseas, many in response to requests. This effort was made at a considerable physical cost. The weight of years was beginning to tell on Ernest Weir with a visible reduction in his vigor and resiliency. Also, he literally hated to make speeches. He lacked oratorical talent, could not extemporize, and, despite years of practice, was always nervous on the speaking stand before large audiences. Expectably, there was a reversal in the acceptance of his New Deal and Cold War campaigns. Conservatives and moderates who strongly approved the first looked askance at the second. Radicals and liberals who jeered at the first warmly applauded the second.

Weir received more than a little mail accusing him of being soft on communism, procommunist, and even a traitor. He shrugged it off. He knew exactly what he was doing; thought it should be done; and that was the end of it. Time has borne him out. In 1959, Dr. Dale wrote the following about Weir's Cold War campaign:

"Writing with persuasiveness and forcefulness, he [Weir] anticipated Ambassador Kennan and Senator Fulbright by almost a decade in his proposals which were designed to halt rising military budgets and the abysmal decline of professional diplomacy, to promote rising living standards and the good life. To this Weir devoted the last ten years of his life. It was the one issue he had not resolved at his death."

Since then has come the *détente* with Russia and the reconciliation with China that have been accorded preponderant approval by the American public. The *détente* leaves much to desire, but, at minimum, it has defused the threat of nuclear war. It was achieved by moving toward the same objectives by the same methods and with the same reservations that Ernest Weir so strenuously urged more than twenty years ago. It raises a question now futile but still logical. Might not today's world be more prosperous, stable, pleasant, and safe, fewer billions of dollars wasted, fewer Americans killed and maimed, if men with the vision and courage of an Ernest Weir had been entrusted to do some hardheaded bargaining long ago when the conditions for it were so much more favorable?

In a similar vein, virtually all the evils he foresaw in the radical break with prior American tradition and principles, inaugurated by the New Deal and continued relentlessly through four decades, are now here to haunt our country with seemingly unsolvable problems and burdens. As one instance, who now is not fully aware of the bitter cost, if not the major causes of inflation? It is sheer irony that it has been men like Ernest Weir — reviled as greedy, self-serving reactionaries — whose exertions in the private sector to increase American productivity have kept the gap between real and inflated values narrow enough to postpone the sorry day of reckoning so long past his lifetime.

The building and expansion of productive enterprise was the dominant motive in Weir's life. His greatest satisfaction was in the knowledge that his role was pivotal in supplying a vast quantity of essential products; in finding new and better ways to do it; in providing well-paid employment with above-average stability for many thousands — directly in his own plants and indirectly in many others that were sources of supplies and equipment — and, through this combination, in creating the solid basis of support for home building, banks, retail stores, churches, schools, hospitals, and many other constructive elements in the lives of communities.

Weir disapproved of those men who amassed great wealth through operations in the financial markets. He regarded them as merely shrewd and successful gamblers. Some of these he cited as examples, followed by the question, "*What* did they build?" His close connections with many leaders in finance and industry must have brought him many opportunities for profitable investments, and he might have taken advantage of some to a minor degree. His substantial investments, however, were in enterprises in which he had both influence and responsibility. By ordinary standards, he was a very wealthy man but, in this respect, his rank was far below that of the conspicuous great American fortunes. The income tax was in being throughout his years of high earnings.

He detested high-stake gamblers and gambling of any kind. "They might say it's for fun and relaxation," he said, "but the real lure is hope of easy money." His own wagers were limited to games of bridge and golf. He was an enthusiastic but mediocre golfer. When he was host, the caddies were generously tipped in advance; the golf carts were paid for and well stocked with new balls. On the number one tee, however, he would argue strenuously about handicaps and usually wound up with an advantage in undeserved strokes which he accepted in high glee. The invariable stakes were ten cents a hole.

Throughout his life, Ernest Weir never forgot the insecurity of his boyhood and youth. On one occasion when airplanes were grounded by weather, he made the long trip by car from Pittsburgh to White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, where he was to make an address. On the journey he was in a reminiscent mood that was quite rare with him, and he was unusually talkative during the ride and a picnic lunch shared with his chauffeur and fellow passenger on the steps of a little country church to which he was attracted by its picturesque charm. He recalled his early days in West Virginia and compared conditions of life then with the many improvements that had since become commonplace for the great majority of people.

It was on this trip also that he described the family's three-room house in Oakland and also mentioned persons who influenced his life. It was obvious that supreme among these was his mother, both to Ernest and to his brother David, who was later to give the name "Margaret Manson Weir" to a handsome swimming pool and recreation ground that he donated to the Weirton community. Of his father, Ernest said, "He had no ambition. All he thought about was horses. They were his life." After a period of silence, he spoke again,

"You know, I remember a day when I literally did not have a penny."

This happened after the family had moved to the North Side and his job was still at the Oliver Wire Company. The daily trip from home started by train on a commuter's monthly ticket to the Fort Wayne Station in Allegheny from which he walked to the South Side. His route took him across the Sixth Street Bridge, then a toll bridge with a one-cent fare for pedestrians. In line before the turnstile on his return one evening, he made the shocking discovery that he had no money. He stayed in line and as he reached the attendant, blurted out, "I don't *have* a penny." The attendant stared at him during a tense moment of indecision, and there was a great relief when he finally said, "You look like an honest boy. You'll pay me tomorrow." The next day Ernest gave him two pennies with many thanks for his kindness.

After this story was told, his companion recalled — but did not mention — another occasion on which Ernest did not have a penny — or any other small change. It was in the 1930s. Weir had gone to the KDKA studios to record a radio speech that some organization had requested for nationwide distribution. Standing in the entrance corridor was a coin-operated coffee dispenser — then an entirely new device. His ever-present curiosity brought him to a halt, and after fumbling through his pockets to no avail he cast an appealing glance to his companion. A dime was dropped in the slot marked "black" which produced a cardboard cupful that was tasted by both men. But this was not enough. Other dimes brought forth the full range of choices: black with sugar, coffee with cream, and coffee with cream and sugar. Each was duly tasted, then Weir rendered his judgment: "This is not at all bad and the manufacture of vending machines is going to grow into a very substantial business." As usual he was right.

Many times, the writer has tried to assess the faculties shared by a number of outstanding men he has had the good fortune to know. So far as he could determine, the sole commonly held trait was an extraordinary reserve of energy. This was evidenced strongly by the best known, Ernest Weir, who even in his late years was able to carry on a vigorous wrestling match with a problem long after associates had lapsed into wearied numbness. Other characteristics: an instinctive ability to isolate key fundamentals from an obscuring clutter of detail; a keen eye for worthwhile innovation unimpeded by regard for the traditional or conventional; remarkable foresight, seemingly prophetic but actually a thorough and accurate appraisal of the

effects that must necessarily follow given causes ; careful weighing of the pros and cons in a situation that ended with a decisive and clear determination of appropriate procedure ; courage to take any action he considered right and necessary and to accept the consequences. These, of course, were but a few of the elements of a highly complex personality, but they were of critical importance in Ernest Weir's swift rise to his eminent status as an industrialist. They also were present if unavailing — as he recognized — in his long and stubborn battle to turn tides in the wide arenas of national and international affairs.

Ernest Tener Weir — last of the great steelmasters — died in June 1957, just a few weeks short of his eighty-second birthday. Fittingly, his last resting place is in Pittsburgh, the place of his birth and throughout life, his home.