

Ernest A. Mills Gave Back to His Community



Ernest A. Mills (1908-1989) was a hands-on manager, involved in every aspect of his manufacturing business. He also had a passion for the theater and was a close friend of American playwright and screenwriter, Clifford Odets.

Ernest A. Mills (Ernie) rose from humble beginnings to become a successful businessman, civic leader and philanthropist who gave back to the Asheville Community. His daughter, Pamela Mills Turner, described him as “firm, but fair, with a generous heart.”

Ernie grew up in New York City and was drawn to the excitement of Wall Street where he began his career as a messenger. Determined to create an impact he advanced quickly and soon became a trader on the stock market. Ernie would later tell his friend, and Asheville icon, Karl Straus that working on Wall Street during the crash in 1929 is where he would acquire a more measured view of the world of business.



Jim Turner (son-in-law), Albina Mills (wife), Ernest Mills, and Pam Turner (daughter and former member of the UNC Asheville Board of Trustees)



Albina Mills (1914-1994) was always generous with her volunteer time. As a registered nurse she participated in Red Cross Blood drives and served on the board of the Orthopedic Hospital, (now Care Partners). She also supported the Asheville Community Theater (ACT).

In 1935 during the Great Depression Ernie founded Mills Strap and Novelty a notions and undergarment manufacturing business where he worked with his father, Victor and his brothers Larry and Harry. In 1942, during World War II, the US government sought factories with experience in sewing nylon to manufacture parachutes. Mills quickly transformed its operation to support the US military, a decision that would impact not only the future of the company but also Ernie's family.

When the Korean War broke out Mills needed to expand their parachute operation because of growing demand. They looked to the South where a strong textile industry flourished. The location for the new plant was narrowed down to Durham and Asheville. On the day of his visit, Durham was experiencing a heat wave, and Asheville was cool and crisp. Knowing he would live where he worked, Asheville was the natural choice. Asheville was chosen for its quality of life, strong sense of community, and skilled workforce. In return the region gained a man who was committed to the economic

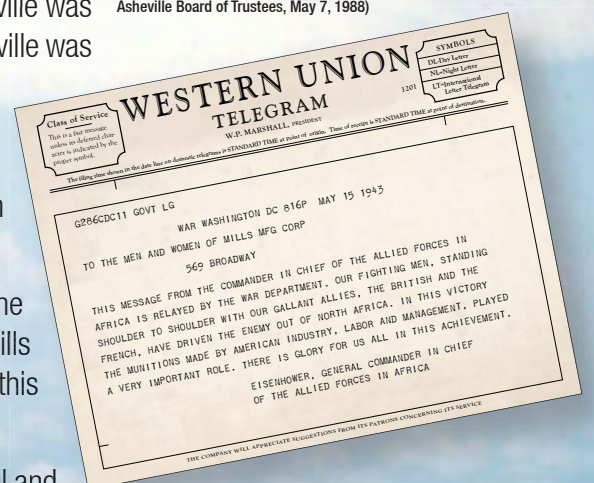
development, cultural growth and the strengthening of educational resources in Western North Carolina.

Mills' generosity was often anonymous and in addition to supporting major charities he supported many of his employees and others during times of crisis. In fact, one winter Mills stepped in to pay the heating bills of a local college as it struggled to pay its bills. He did this without recognition or request for repayment.

Ernie Mills was an intelligent, intense man who used his talents and energy to lead a useful and purposeful life. He was always generous with his time and money, especially where education was concerned. He provided scholarship funding to the University of North Carolina at Asheville. His philanthropy, which helped guide the growth and prosperity of the community included serving as a trustee or board member of several organizations: Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, St. Joseph's Hospital, and UNC Asheville. Because of the lack of educational opportunities during his youth, one of Ernest Mills' goals was to provide men and women greater access to higher education. Ernest Mills' substantial contributions are still recognized and honored by UNC Asheville today where Mills Hall stands in grateful tribute.



Ernie receiving an honorary Doctorate of Laws degree from UNC Asheville Chancellor David Brown (1988). "As one whose faithful leadership and service sustained and nurtured the development of the University as it grew..." (Excerpt from the resolution of the UNC Asheville Board of Trustees, May 7, 1988)



Not much has changed in the hands-on manufacture of parachutes since the 1950's when this photo was taken of an assembly worker. Quality control is taken very seriously as there is no room for error. The factory continues its operations today supplying a variety of parachutes to the United States government and internationally.



Ernie working at the Mills Strap and Novelty Company in New York City in the 1930's. They manufactured undergarments and novelty accessories.



The parachute business flourished, and in 1959, Mills Manufacturing moved from rented space to their own facility. They hired a food service managed by the local Lions Club and staffed by visually impaired workers. Their factory was one of the first new Asheville plants to have integrated bathrooms. (l-r Roy Sanders, Larry Mills, John Knox, Larry Windman, Dick Lamb, Hoonard Spahn, John Scheer, Ernie Mills)