

James M. Roche Biography



James M. Roche - Class of 1923 - (12/16/1906 – 6/6/2004) was an American statistician who served as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Chairman of the Board at General Motors Corporation. He is credited for promoting racial equality within General Motors (GM).

Roche was born in Elgin, Illinois. He married Louise McMillan in 1929 and eventually had a daughter and two sons. Roche never went to college because of his father's early death. He was one of the few American industrialists lacking a college education.

He joined GM as a statistician in 1927 in the Chicago sales and service branch and slowly worked his way up through the ranks, becoming president of the corporation in 1965. Most of his career was spent at the Cadillac Division, becoming head of the division in 1957. Roche became vice-president of General Motors in 1957, and executive vice-president and board member in 1962.

Roche is cited as dedicating General Motors and himself personally to ensuring equal employment opportunities. In 1971, he offered Rev. Leon Sullivan, a Philadelphia minister active in the civil rights movement, a seat on the GM board - GM's first black board member. Sullivan later sought to have GM and other corporations leave South Africa in protest of the country's apartheid policies.

Roche issued an apology in 1966 for the company's efforts to discredit consumer activist Ralph Nader after Nader published the book *Unsafe at Any Speed*, which criticized the GM-built Corvair as being unsafe. GM was accused of spying on Nader, although Roche noted that he was unaware of such actions.

During Roche's tenure, public opinion about automobile companies was changing from praise for producing cars which allowed freedom and mobility to dissatisfaction.

Roche served as Chairman of GM from June 1, 1965 to October 31, 1967 and as Chairman of the Board of Directors from November 1, 1967 to December 31, 1971. He retired in 1971 because of a mandatory retirement age.

Roche served on the board of directors of PepsiCo, Jack Eckerd Corp., the New York Stock exchange and other entities. After retirement he served several years as chairman of the National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve. He also volunteered in many community development programs, mostly in Detroit. Roche was quoted as saying in 1987, "Anybody who achieves a top position in an organization owes a debt of some kind,... If you have a talent and you have your health, you should help others."

Roche is an inductee to the Automotive Hall of Fame. Ten colleges and universities awarded him honorary degrees.

Time magazine called "Roche is a folksy sort who never shows his temper and whose greatest failing, according to companions and competitors alike, is that 'he may be too much of a gentleman.'" "