

OBITUARIES

ROBERT VLASIC
1926 – 2022

Pickle Firm's Chief Relied on Humor

By JAMES R. HAGERTY

A no-nonsense industrial engineer by training and inclination, Robert Vlasic wasn't known for joking around. He believed in orderliness—even his junk drawer was organized—and punctuality. "If you're not 10 minutes early," he told his sons, "you're late."

Yet Mr. Vlasic, who headed the family-owned maker of Vlasic pickles, recognized that humor had a vital place in marketing. In the early 1970s, he introduced television ads playing on the notion that pregnant women craved pickles. The ads featured a cartoon stork that wielded pickles like cigars and wore a bow tie, just like Mr. Vlasic.

"We decided that pickles are a fun food," he told the Detroit Free Press. "We decided we didn't want to take ourselves or our business too seriously."

By advertising and prodding supermarkets for better shelf displays, he transformed Vlasic Foods Inc. from a regional supplier into the nation's largest pickle producer, surpassing H.J. Heinz Co. In 1978, Mr. Vlasic sold the company to Campbell Soup Co. for about \$35 million of stock. He joined Campbell's board and served as chairman from 1988 to 1993.

As Campbell chairman, he got himself into a pickle by pursuing a merger with Quaker Oats Co. in 1989. Dorrance family shareholders of Campbell vehemently rejected that plan.

Mr. Vlasic died May 8 at his home in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. He was 96 years old.

Robert Joseph Vlasic was born March 9, 1926, in Detroit. His father, Joseph Vlasic, was a Croatian immigrant who distributed milk and other dairy products and eventually added ice, horse-radish, ham and pickles.

As a teenager, young Robert began helping with deliveries. He served in the Navy near the end of World War II and rejoined the

family business after earning his engineering degree at the University of Michigan.

In the mid-1950s, Vlasic Foods acquired a sauerkraut plant in Imlay City, Mich., and converted it into a pickle plant. The Vlasics had decided they wanted to produce food rather than merely distributing it. They put their focus on pickles, then a growth business. Per capita pickle consumption in the U.S. reached about 8 pounds in 1974, quadruple the level of four decades earlier.

Robert Vlasic took over management from his father in 1963. He delegated considerable authority to operating executives so long as they met financial targets. He demanded regular updates from them on one-page forms that he designed himself. "Give

me good news fast," he often said, "and bad news faster."

Spreading his bets, Mr. Vlasic also ran businesses involved in vehicle and office-equipment leasing, a nursing home and real estate. In the late 1970s, he decided the pickle business would be better off as part of a larger food company and persuaded Campbell Soup to buy it. Vlasic Foods is now part of Conagra Brands Inc.

Mr. Vlasic provided financial advice and other support to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit. He helped fund an early-childhood learning center at the Cranbrook Educational Community in Bloomfield Hills.

He collected pickle jokes and compiled 101 of them into a pamphlet. Sample (and not the worst): "Why did the pickle close its eyes? It saw the salad dressing."

