

## OBITUARIES

ROBERT P. GWINN 1907-2009

# Chief of Sunbeam, CEO of Britannica

Leader helmed powerful brands in halcyon days

By Trevor Jensen  
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Robert P. Gwinn ran Sunbeam when it was the nation's largest maker of small appliances and later was chairman of Encyclopaedia Britannica, where he oversaw major new editions and international expansion.

Mr. Gwinn, 102, died of natural causes Thursday, Dec. 10, at his home in west suburban Riverside, said Carol Dvorak, his personal assistant.

Mr. Gwinn joined Sunbeam in 1936 as a salesman and advanced through the executive ranks. He became president of the Chicago-based company in 1955 and chairman in 1971, remaining in that capacity until the company was sold in 1981 to Allegheny International Inc. of Pittsburgh.

At Encyclopaedia Britannica — founded in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1768 — Mr. Gwinn took over as chairman and CEO in 1973 from longtime owner and publisher William Benton.

Britannica at the time relied heavily on direct sales, where Mr. Gwinn's experience from Sunbeam translated neatly, said William J. Bowe, executive vice president and general counsel at the company.

"He was highly regarded at Sunbeam and at Britannica as someone who knew about handling a sales force," Bowe said. "He could fire up a group of salespeople with a speech."

He continued efforts started by Benton to make Britannica more widely available internationally, spreading English versions as well as translations throughout Europe and the Pacific Rim, Bowe said.

Under Mr. Gwinn's leadership, Britannica's best



Robert P. Gwinn, in 1990, with the just-published 60-volume second edition of "Great Books of the Western World," published by Encyclopaedia Britannica.

known collections underwent significant updates.

In 1985, Britannica introduced a major revision of its 15th edition, and in 1990 the company published a second edition of the "Great Books of the Western World," adding several 20th-century authors such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

In both endeavors, Mr. Gwinn worked with the philosopher and public intellectual Mortimer Adler, co-creator of "Great Books" and longtime chairman of Britannica's board of editors.

"Gwinn enormously admired Adler's intellect, and I think Adler admired Gwinn's ability to get ('Great Books') into the hands of a wider audience, Bowe said.

Mr. Gwinn approved the \$4.5 million cost for the new

edition.

"Sure, we know people aren't going to break down doors to buy the set," Mr. Gwinn told the Tribune in 1990. "But we look at ourselves as the guardians of a semipublic trust, and it's tremendously important that the 'Great Books' be brought right up to date."

Mr. Gwinn grew up on a farm in Anderson, Ind., and graduated from the University of Chicago in 1929.

His wife, Nancy Gwinn, died in 1989.

He is survived by a son, Richard; five grandchildren; and several great-grandchildren.

A wake is set for 2 to 8 p.m. Sunday at Woodlawn Funeral Home, 7750 W. Cermak Road, Forest Park.

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