Andrew Carnegie Biography

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Andrew Carnegie helped build the formidable American steel industry, a process that turned a poor young man into one of the richest entrepreneurs of his age. Later in his life, Carnegie sold his steel business and systematically gave his collected fortune away to cultural, educational and scientific institutions for "the improvement of mankind."

Carnegie was born in Dunfermline, the medieval capital of Scotland, in 1835. The town was a center of the linen industry, and Andrew's father was a weaver, a profession the young Carnegie was expected to follow. But the industrial revolution that would later make Carnegie the richest man in the world, destroyed the weavers' craft. When the steam-powered looms came to Dunfermline in 1847 hundreds of hand loom weavers became expendable. Andrew's mother went to work to support the family, opening a small grocery shop and mending shoes.

"I began to learn what poverty meant," Andrew would later write. "It was burnt into my heart then that my father had to beg for work. And then and there came the resolve that I would cure that when I got to be a man."

An ambition for riches would mark Carnegie's path in life. However, a belief in political egalitarianism was another ambition he inherited from his family. Andrew's father, his grandfather Tom Morrison and his uncle Tom Jr. were all Scottish radicals who fought to do away with inherited privilege and to bring about the rights of common workers.

But Andrew's mother, fearing for the survival of her family, pushed the family to leave the poverty of Scotland for the possibilities in America. She borrowed 20 pounds she needed to pay the fare for the Atlantic passage and in 1848 the Carnegies joined two of Margaret's sisters in Pittsburgh, then a sooty city that was the iron-manufacturing center of the country.

William Carnegie secured work in a cotton factory and his son Andrew took work in the same building as a bobbin boy for $1.20 a week. Later, Carnegie worked as a messenger boy in the city's telegraph office. He did each job to the best of his ability and seized every opportunity to take on new responsibilities. For example, he memorized Pittsburgh's street lay-out as well as the important names and addresses of those he delivered to.

Carnegie often was asked to deliver messages to the theater. He arranged to make these deliveries at night--and stayed on to watch plays by Shakespeare and other great playwrights. In what would be a life-long pursuit of knowledge, Carnegie also took advantage of a small library that a local benefactor made available to working boys.

One of the men Carnegie met at the telegraph office was Thomas A. Scott, then beginning his impressive career at Pennsylvania Railroad. Scott was taken by the young worker and referred to him as "my boy Andy," hiring him as his private secretary and personal telegrapher at $35 a month.

"I couldn't imagine," Carnegie said many years later. "what I could ever do with so much money." Ever eager to take on new responsibilities, Carnegie worked his way up the ladder in Pennsylvania Railroad and succeeded Scott as superintendent of the Pittsburgh Division. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Scott was hired to supervise military transportation for the North and Carnegie worked as his right hand man.

The Civil War fueled the iron industry, and by the time the war was over, Carnegie saw the potential in the field and resigned from Pennsylvania Railroad. It was one of many bold moves that would typify Carnegie's life in industry and earn him his fortune. He then turned his attention to the Keystone Bridge Company, which worked to replace wooden bridges with stronger iron ones. In three years he had an annual income of $50,000.

However, Andrew expressed his uneasiness with the businessman's life. In a letter to himself at age 33, he wrote: "To continue much longer overwhelmed by business cares and with most of my thoughts wholly upon the way to make more money in the shortest time, must degrade me beyond hope of permanent recovery. I will resign business at thirty-five, but during the ensuing two years I wish to spend the afternoons in receiving instruction and in reading systematically."

Carnegie would continue making unparalleled amounts of money for the next 30 years. Two years after he wrote that letter Carnegie would embrace a new steel refining process being used by Englishman Henry Bessemer to convert huge batches of iron into steel, which was much more flexible than brittle iron. Carnegie threw his own money into the process and even borrowed heavily to build a new steel plant near Pittsburgh. Carnegie was ruthless in keeping down costs and managed by the motto "watch costs and the profits take care of themselves."

Carnegie was unusual among the industrial captains of his day because he preached for the rights of laborers to unionize and to protect their jobs. However, Carnegie's actions did not always match his rhetoric. Carnegie's steel workers were often pushed to long hours and low wages. In the Homestead Strike of 1892, Carnegie threw his support behind plant manager Henry Frick, who locked out workers and hired Pinkerton thugs to intimidate strikers. Many were killed in the conflict, and it was an episode that would forever hurt Carnegie's reputation and haunt the man.

Still, Carnegie's steel juggernaut was unstoppable, and by 1900 Carnegie Steel produced more of the metal than all of Great Britain. That was also the year that financier J. P. Morgan mounted a major challenge to Carnegie's steel empire. While Carnegie believed he could beat Morgan in a battle lasting five, 10 or 15 years, the fight did not appeal to the 64-year old man eager to spend more time with his wife Louise, whom he had married in 1886, and their daughter, Margaret.

Carnegie wrote the asking price for his steel business on a piece of paper and had one of his managers deliver the offer to Morgan. Morgan accepted without hesitation, buying the company for $480 million. "Congratulations, Mr. Carnegie," Morgan said to Carnegie when they finalized the deal, "you are now the richest man in the world."

Fond of saying that "the man who dies rich dies disgraced," Carnegie then turned his attention to giving away his fortune. He abhorred charity, and instead put his money to use helping others help themselves. That was the reason he spent much of his collected fortune on establishing over 2,500 public libraries as well as supporting institutions of higher learning. By the time Carnegie's life was over, he gave away 350 million dollars.

Carnegie also was one of the first to call for a "league of nations" and he built "a palace of peace" that would later evolve into the World Court. His hopes for a civilized world of peace were destroyed, though, with the onset of World War I in 1914. Louise said that with these hostilities her husband's "heart was broken." Carnegie lived for another five years, but the last entry in his autobiography was the day World War I began.

Andrew Carnegie Organizer

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| How he acquired his wealth |  |
| How he (or his related industries) treated workers |  |
| How he spentHis money |  |
| How he donatedHis money |  |
| Robber Baron or Captain of Industry? |  |