

A MEMORIAL TO THE LIFE OF

Ross D. Siragusa





Ross D. Siragusa



1906 — 1996

Ross D. Siragusa



Anne F. Patterson

Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

The life of Ross David Siragusa is the story of an entrepreneur who started a small business in the depths of the Depression and led it to become one of the largest appliance and consumer electronics manufacturers in the world. He founded the company that became Admiral Corporation with an initial investment in 1934 of only \$3,400 in cash and \$5,000 in equipment. He did not even have a college education. However, his intelligence and drive to succeed were sufficient assets. Forty years later, Admiral had grown into a worldwide enterprise with more than \$500 million in sales, 11,000 employees and 23,000 shareholders.

But Ross Siragusa's life is more than the story of a highly successful businessman. This complex man had many talents and sides to his personality and excelled in almost everything he did-as a sportsman, a philanthropist, and a generous and caring friend to the less fortunate as well as to the famous. A tough businessman in a tough business, he also was a charismatic person and a charming host who could enthrall listeners with stories of his life experiences. Having lived his life to the hilt, Siragusa left behind him an important legacy, The Siragusa Foundation, when he died in 1996.



BUILDING A BUSINESS

Ross Siragusa was born in 1906 in Buffalo, N.Y. His parents, Giacomo Siragusa, a shoemaker, and Stella Barreca Siragusa, returned to their home town, Lascari, Italy, shortly after his birth. After Mt. Etna erupted in 1908, they returned to the United States and settled in Chicago. Three younger siblings were born: Josephine, Gloria, and Dominic, the last of whom would later play an important role in his brother's business.

By age 14, Siragusa was attending Loyola Academy, studying to be a concert pianist, and building his own radio set. He also swam competitively at Loyola, and this sport probably helped develop his physical strength, which would become an asset in future sports activities. "When I was 16, I felt I had to make up my mind about whether I wanted a future as a concert pianist or one in electronics. I decided I could make more money by going into electronics," he told his granddaughter Alisa Perrotte.

His first electronics job was testing bell-ringing transformers at Jefferson Electric Co. during a summer vacation when he was 17. He was let go because he spent more time learning how transformers were made than on testing them, according to Ross, Jr., Siragusa's oldest son.

After graduating from high school in 1924, Siragusa started his own business, Transformer Corporation of America, which sold battery chargers for radios. In that era radios used "wet" batteries,



which needed frequent recharging. Within five years, his company had become the largest seller of radio transformers in the world. A New York bank offered to buy out the 23-year-old entrepreneur for more than \$5 million in 1929, but Siragusa turned the offer down. However, with the onset of the Depression, the company went into bankruptcy in 1934.

“Ross tried to pay off all his creditors. These were people who later became his suppliers in his future business. They were willing to sell to him again because of his honesty and efforts to pay them back,” says Vincent Barreca, Siragusa’s cousin, who joined the business in 1936 and became its president in 1962. 90% of the debt was paid back.

Siragusa wasted no time in worrying about this failure. He sold his car and most of his home furnishings. With \$8,400 in cash and equipment, he was ready to start his own company again, this time in the more lucrative field of radios. He named his new business Continental Radio and Television, although television was still very much a future possibility at the time. The first office was the corner of a borrowed garage.

He believed that a good radio could be manufactured and marketed for under \$10. With that in mind, he began marketing a small table-model radio, which was sold for \$9.95 by mail order houses, jewelry stores, and chain stores under private brand names.

Sales were hard to come by in the beginning. When his company was down to its last \$200, Siragusa boarded a bus for Pittsburgh and unannounced, called on a buyer at Busch Jewelers, a large jewelry



chain. He walked away with an order for 250 radios. The buyer also agreed to pay on receipt of invoice. This meant that Continental received payment before its suppliers' bills were due.

Because he had few assets, Siragusa was unable to obtain a manufacturing license from RCA for needed radio components. He circumvented this problem by signing a contract with Radio Products Corp., a bankrupt RCA licensee. He financed Radio Products production and distributed the products through Continental, which chalked up \$250,000 in sales during the first year. When the figures were added for 1935, sales had increased to \$1 million, despite the fact that the U.S. economy was still in the Depression.

One year later in 1936, sales of radios and radio-phonograph combinations were hitting the \$2 million mark. Siragusa purchased the brand name ADMIRAL for \$200 from a client who was not using it, and the company introduced its own sponsored brand under the Admiral name. He was able to sell a little used previous brand name CLARION for \$400.

Siragusa saw an opportunity to capitalize on a gap in the radio-phonograph combination market in 1939. RCA had come out with a new automatic record changer and offered it to Continental. Siragusa came up with the idea of producing a combined radio and phonograph enclosed in a molded plastic cabinet and retailing it for \$55. His brother Dominic, who had a plastic molding plant, produced the cabinets. "We bought 50,000 record changers from RCA, who couldn't keep pace with the demand. Within a year we were making our own record changers," Barreca says.



“Ross was a terrific merchandiser. He sensed what the public would buy, then had our engineers design it,” he adds.

“Product development was my father’s strongest suit,” agrees Ross, Jr., who held various executive positions at Admiral for 23 years, finally becoming its president in 1969. “He excelled at conceiving products with the proper appeal and offering them at the right price points. His business philosophy was: sell a lot at low profit margins and low overhead. Make your profit on volume. This approach worked fairly well for awhile, until our competitors began to catch up.”

Other special products pioneered by the company during the pre-war period were a record loading apparatus known as the “Slide-a-way” and a camera-style 3-way portable radio, played from either alternating or direct current or batteries. Sales of both private brand sets manufactured to customers’ specifications and of “Admiral” sets kept on growing. During the twelve months prior to the stoppage of production of civilian sets by government order in May 1942, sales had increased to approximately \$9 million, with the majority of the company’s business volume in sets sold under the Admiral name.



Admiral Becomes A Major Player

Recognizing opportunity and seizing it was one of the major ingredients of Ross Siragusa's and Admiral's success. Siragusa often saw an opportunity well before it had actually presented itself. For example, he took the risk of investing \$500,000 in new plants and equipment in anticipation of the need for a vast quantity of electronic equipment for World War II. He made this investment without a single order from the government. As a result, the company reached a wartime annual peak of \$42 million in sales of products to the armed services. It came out of the war period with \$2 million in net profits.

During the war years, Siragusa consolidated his business by acquiring Radio Products Corp. in December 1942 and formally adopting the name of Admiral Corporation in November 1943. In April 1944, Admiral received an "Excellence" award from the U.S. government for its production efforts during the war.

Again planning for the future, Siragusa had the foresight to realize that new appliances would be in great demand after the war. He also knew that he would not be able to sign up top distributors unless he could offer them more to sell than just radios and phonographs. As early as 1942, he began laying the groundwork for a new, greatly expanded postwar business, which would include the production and sales of "white goods."

To get into the appliance business, he used a three-pronged approach: national consumer advertising to gain name recognition for Admiral and to whet the public's appetite for the products that were



to come; trade advertising and distributor-dealer sign up programs; and investment for the needed equipment to deliver the products he was promising.

To implement the expansion he envisioned, Siragusa acquired new executive talent and 68 new distributors. He also bought patents from Stewart-Warner for a refrigerator that was redesigned to become Admiral's Dual Temp, and purchased a range business.

With all these pieces in place, including \$1.8 million in additional working capital raised through the sale of stock, Admiral emerged from World War II as a new business. It was mass producing combination radio-phonographs, AM and FM radios, was gaining a place in the home appliance business, and had acquired good distribution, dealers, and more public recognition.

In 1946, Admiral opened a plant in Toronto, Canada, to sell products directly to Canadians. The Canadian plant, later followed by plants in Mexico, Italy, and Taiwan, was the beginning of Admiral's international business.



Admiral Takes Flight With Television

Television stations came on the air in 1947, and the public began to buy sets. This was Admiral's chance to join the big league. "My father rolled the dice, took the plunge, and went into television in a big way," says Ross, Jr. "Admiral came out with good designs at a much lower cost than its competition."

While the rest of the industry was selling bulky, high-priced receivers, Admiral offered a small, low-priced table model in a molded plastic cabinet. The seven-inch screen, also an innovation in plastics, was molded of clear Plexiglas. It became the forerunner of the millions of plastic screens used by the industry. In 1948, Admiral's television sales were \$25,200,000, almost 40 percent of its total sales. Siragusa had accurately foreseen the importance of television.

With the trend in television to larger picture tubes, Admiral developed its famous "Consolette" model, which was introduced in 1949. It had a 10-inch screen in a one-piece molded phenolic cabinet 32 1/4 inches high. By using plastic instead of wood, Admiral was able to retail the set for \$249.95, approximately \$100 less than any comparable set on the market. The public bought and bought, and by the end of the year, the company had produced close to 400,000 sets. Sales soared to \$112 million for 1949 and to \$230 million for 1950. Admiral also was one of the first major advertisers on television, sponsoring Sid Caesar's "Show of Shows," "Lights Out," Bishop Fulton Sheen, and Notre Dame football games.



Admiral continued to be a pioneer in the appliance-electronics industry. In 1952, it introduced the first plastic crisper and in 1960, the first all-plastic food compartment liner for a refrigerator and freezer. Vacuum-formed from high-impact, low temperature polystyrene, the liner was a major breakthrough in the industry. Although the company was initially known for its strength in the radio and television market, appliance sales continued to grow during the '50s and '60s until it became the fifth largest appliance manufacturer in the U.S.

In a feature article on Admiral in its April 1966 issue, Appliance Manufacturer made the following statement: The appliance-electronics business is a ruthlessly-competitive battle. For most companies, it takes all the ingenuity and resourcefulness they can muster just to keep pace with the competition. To be a leader requires imagination, foresight, and the ability to innovate and style ahead of the industry. Admiral has never played "follow the leader;" it likes to be first.

Throughout its history, Admiral introduced more than 75 innovations in the design, production, and marketing of appliances, radios, and television sets. Among the many Admiral 'firsts' are the use of printed circuits in radio and TV sets; elimination of dry storage space at the bottom of refrigerators in favor of cold clear to the floor; the use of infinite temperature controls in electric ranges; and the first to offer a variety of new rectangular portable TV tube sizes.

It developed the first remote control unit (SON-R), which performed 11 functions on a hi-fi, TV-radio-phonograph combination and the first TV-Stereo combination in the industry.



Additionally, it took the lead in larger TV screens with a wide-angle 19-inch screen in 1960 and a 27-inch wide-angle screen with optic filter safety glass in 1961. “I believe 98 percent of the ideas for the new products came from Ross,” says George Driscoll, who was Admiral’s vice president of finance.

Admiral Corp. and Ross Siragusa were so closely intertwined that it is difficult to think of the company without thinking of its founder and leader. Siragusa was both chairman of the board of directors and president until Vincent Barecca assumed the latter position in the early ‘60s. Siragusa readily acknowledged the significant contributions his business colleagues had made in Admiral’s success. “We have been very fortunate to build a great team here,”ⁱ he said in an interview for the *Appliance Manufacturer* article. “The real credit goes to a dedicated group of men who are doing a fine job.”



Setting High Standards

“Ross had high standards and a performance to go along with them,” says Al Medica, who held various executive positions at Admiral for 17 years. When Medica first joined Admiral in 1953, an acquaintance told him about a sales meeting held at the Eighth Street Theater in Chicago to introduce Admiral’s new products to its distributors.

During the rehearsal on the night before the show, Siragusa came into the theater accompanied by his vice presidents of sales and advertising. The three men inspected the surroundings and at midnight ended up in the theater rest rooms, where the walls were covered with graffiti. “This has to be cleaned up,” Siragusa demanded. Although his colleagues noted the lateness of the hour and the impossibility of getting painters to do the work in time, Siragusa insisted that the walls be cleaned. By nine o’clock the following morning, all the rest room walls had a coat of fresh paint.

Ross Siragusa ran a tight operation at the executive offices in Admiral’s Cortland Street plant to keep overhead low and stay competitive “We realize that we must work longer and harder and accept more responsibility. Large staffs of assistants and assistant-to-assistants are a luxury that Admiral cannot afford,”ⁱⁱ Siragusa said.

While Admiral executives did not enjoy a lot of frills, they were given a great deal of responsibility. “I have never worked for a company where executives have more authority than those at Admiral,”ⁱⁱⁱ said William L. Hullsieck, vice president of appliance sales. “Admiral’s ability to lead is due to the fact that the entire management team, from the



chairman of the board down, is available at any time. In a matter of five minutes a meeting can be called to make a decision involving millions of dollars.”

“Ross expected his business colleagues to do their homework and come in to see him prepared. You learned that you should never make a statement to him off the top of your head—one that you couldn’t back up with facts,” says Melvyn Schneider, who began his association with Siragusa in 1960 as a junior accountant working on Admiral’s corporate taxes while representing S. D. Leidesdorf. Schneider continued to have a working relationship with Siragusa throughout the following years, later serving as the accountant for R & A Distributing and The Siragusa Foundation.

“Ross had a very quick mind and would get impatient with rambling statements,” Schneider continues. “He always said, ‘Get to the bottom line.’ You also learned to say what you meant within the first couple of lines of a letter or you would lose him.

“He was extremely honest, extremely reputable. He also was a tough businessman and never gave anything away, but the distributors and dealers all liked and admired him.

“I started working for him when I was 23 years old. He always reached out with warmth toward me. I felt as though he was training me. I learned a great deal from him about business, especially in terms of how to negotiate.”



Record Sales With Color TV

Color television became the hot new product in 1965 and '66, and Admiral's sales reached record highs of \$306 million and \$414 million. The company's profit of \$10 million for 1966 was one of its highest up to that time. By 1966, Admiral employed 14,000 people and marketed its products in 110 countries.

When Ross, Jr. was named president of Admiral in 1969, Vincent Barreca became chairman of Admiral International Enterprises Corporation, a spin-off company formed to raise capital. AIE Corp. ran all of Admiral's international business, which sold products back to the parent company.

Although Siragusa began to take a less active role in the company by the early 1970s, he still was involved with and concerned about the business he had started. Because he and Ross, Jr. did not agree on how the business should be run, Siragusa suggested selling Admiral if a good offer came along.

Rockwell International Corporation approached Admiral with an offer in the summer of 1973. The buyout was announced in October, and the deal was closed in April 1974, with Rockwell acquiring Admiral for \$79 million. Ross, Jr. stayed on as Admiral's president for a year and then joined Rockwell's Board of Directors.

Despite its eagerness to buy Admiral, Rockwell was unable to profit from its new acquisition. "They never learned to understand the business," Barreca says. Within five years, Rockwell sold Admiral's international television business and liquidated its domestic television operations. Magic Chef acquired the appliance business.



The Years After Admiral

Although Ross Siragusa was 68 years old when Admiral Corporation was sold in 1974, he was not ready to retire from the business world. “I’ll never be a coupon clipper,” he told Melvyn Schneider. In 1976, he and Al Medica bought an RCA distributorship, which they called R & A Distributing. The business sold television sets, television parts, VCRs, and tapes throughout metropolitan Chicago and lower Wisconsin. Siragusa served as Chairman of the Board, and Medica was president.

“Ross liked working with younger people. He liked their fresh ideas. This always was an advantage for me,” Medica says.

“It was an active, thriving business.” When we acquired the distributorship, annual sales were \$16 million. When we sold it back to RCA in 1983, sales had reached \$50 million a year. The introduction of VCRs gave us a big boost.”

RCA was changing their distributorship structure. They wanted to distribute their products themselves. “When he sold R & A back to RCA, Ross held out for the price he wanted. He was a great negotiator,” Schneider says.

After they gave up R & A Distributing, Siragusa and Medica looked around for some time for another business to buy but were unable to find one they liked. Instead, Siragusa turned his attention to developing The Siragusa Foundation. “He was not really ready to retire,” Schneider says.



PERSONAL LIFE

Some men with a strong drive to succeed and dedication to their work do not take much time to enjoy more leisurely pursuits, but Ross D. Siragusa worked and played with equal enthusiasm. He enjoyed his family life and a number of warm personal relationships, some of them with prominent people. He loved to entertain his friends and did so with style. He also was an avid hunter and fisherman.

Siragusa married Irene O'Brien in 1929 when he was 22. The couple had four children: Ross, Jr., John, Richard, and Mary Irene, nicknamed Suzi. They lived in various places in and near Chicago, finally ending up in Evanston, where they stayed until the end of World War II. A farm in Hebron, Illinois, which the family used on weekends and in the summer, supplemented their home in Evanston.

In 1945, Siragusa purchased a farm in Barrington, Illinois, known as Spring Creek Farm, and sold the other two properties. He also acquired the adjacent farm, giving him a total of 600 acres, and remodeled the existing house extensively adding an outdoor barbecue, where he enjoyed cooking and entertaining. The farm included a pond stocked with bass and was home to horses and a variety of dogs. Ross, Jr. remembers his father spending a lot of his free time weeding and maintaining the property. His sons often unwillingly pitched in on the work.

"He lived his life in a very intense, focused way. He never did anything in moderation," says John Siragusa, the second oldest son,



who is known as Jack by family and friends. “When he played the piano, he would practice one passage of a piece 20 or 30 times until he had mastered it. He was a real perfectionist.

“My mother was the person who smoothed over any rough spots. Her calmness and caring provided a balance to my father’s intensity. She was the glue holding the family together.”

In addition to hunting, fishing, and playing the piano, Siragusa loved playing gin rummy and sought games wherever he could find them-on the commuter train and at Arlington Race Track, where he took his wife but usually played gin rummy instead of betting on the horses. Although he was not interested in most forms of gambling, he did bet on gin rummy, according to his sons.

Spring Creek Farm, and a later farm on County Line Road, became the family gathering places. When the children had grown up, married, and had children of their own, family members came to Barrington on numerous occasions. Thanksgivings and Christmases in Barrington were special occasions, and Irene Siragusa always contributed her special warmth and graciousness to these gatherings.

Several of Siragusa’s grandchildren recounted happy memories of times spent with their grandfather. “Poppy really loved his grandchildren,” says Ross III (Ross, Jr.’s son). “He made me feel proud of who I was and proud of my Italian ancestry.

“He seemed larger than life. When I was nine or ten and he was in his early 60s, several of us would arm wrestle with him at once. Three or four of us would pile on top of him, and he was still able to beat us.”



John Siragusa, Jack's son, remembers spending the night at Spring Creek Farm with his cousin Ross when he was nine years old. "Poppy brought us milk and cookies and told us a story before we went to sleep. He was a wonderful storyteller and loved to tell us stories about his hunting and fishing adventures."

"I remember Poppy crawling around on his hands and knees, happily playing with my little sister Jennifer when she was a toddler," John Hicks recalls. "Once when I was in serious trouble with my mother, she sent me over to see Poppy for a dressing down. Instead of a lecture, Poppy gave me a movie camera."

"He loved showing the farm to visitors. He always took them down to the barn to show off his automatic milking machines. He often took cracked corn from the barn, put it outside a large window in the house and watched the wild animals feed at night."

Susan Hicks remembers supplementing her allowance by cleaning leaves off the bottom of her grandfather's pool. "He paid us a quarter for every leaf we brought up. We thought it was such a good deal that we put additional leaves in the pool when he wasn't looking," she says.

Siragusa also had a very positive influence on at least three of his grandchildren. "He taught me the importance of working hard," Irene Phelps says. "I have always been very proud to be his granddaughter." Her sister, Alisa Perotte, says it was her grandfather who persuaded her to attend college. "In my teens I was rebellious and didn't want to go to college. Poppy told me that his life would have been so much easier if he had been able to go to college. He talked me into it," she says.



“Poppy taught me the importance of negotiating a deal, and it was a lesson I never will forget,” Ross III says. “He persuaded me and a friend of mine to clear the rocks from a small field on the farm, telling us that he would pay us Taiwanese wages. It never occurred to us to ask what Taiwanese wages were. After working for four hours, we found out. They were four cents an hour. After we had swallowed our disappointment, he did throw in a few extra gifts.”

Irene Phelps remembers a trip she took to Italy with her grandmother and grandfather. “Poppy was such a dynamic person. He made me feel special. He took control of everything we did, but in a nice way. I had a marvelous time.”

In 1969, Siragusa suffered a major blow when his lovely wife Irene died. Four years later he remarried. His wedding to Martha Peace Reibman took place on August 28, 1973 in the Chapel of the Chorus at St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome, with his close friend Bishop Paul Marcinkus officiating. The following day, he and Martha, along with family members who had flown over for the ceremony, had a private audience with Pope Paul VI. Siragusa was a dedicated Catholic and had been recognized for his support of the Catholic Church by his election to membership in the Knights of Malta.



The Sportsman

Hunting and fishing were two of Siragusa's favorite ways of relaxing. He sought a challenge more than a trophy and became unwilling to go after his game with odds on the side of the hunter or angler. "This is what makes him truly an American sportsman," said Tom Paugh in an article written for *Sports Afield*, September 1958.

Although an excellent shot with a rifle, Siragusa decided to put down his rifle and use only a bow and arrow when hunting big game. He started learning to use a bow in the late 1930s, with instruction and encouragement from a neighbor in Evanston. He practiced target shooting in his back yard and taught Ross, Jr. how to do it too. He became a friend with Fred Baer, the foremost bow designer at the time. For hunting, Siragusa used an 80-pound bow, which only men in excellent condition can pull.

He first went after game with a bow while hunting javelina in Nogales, Arizona in 1945. These animals are very elusive and hard to kill, even with a rifle. The method Siragusa and his friend, Tom Imler, planned to use was to track the javelina on horseback until they came close enough. The men would dismount and fire their arrows. After days of riding and searching, the men finally jumped two boar and came back to camp with the only two javelina killed that season.^{iv}

Another memorable hunt with his bow occurred in 1951, when Siragusa went after mountain goat in the Yukon. Even with a rifle, hunting mountain goat is not easy. "In fact, the goat ranks as one of this continent's toughest trophies. Ten years ago, most sportsmen



would have laughed if you said you were going to get one with a bow and arrow. The odds are fantastically on the side of the animal,” said Paugh.”

Two months before departing for the Yukon, Siragusa began a regime to get himself into excellent physical condition. He first gave up cigar and cigar cigarette smoking, and alcohol. On his way to work in Chicago, he walked to and from the railroad station (four to five miles a day). His daily workout also included bicycle riding, horseback riding, and swimming a quarter of a mile (half a mile a day on weekends). At the end of eight weeks, he felt he was in shape to go.

Siragusa spent two weeks searching the mountains for a goat. On the last day, he finally spotted a goat 400 yards below him on the mountain peak. He figured that with his bow, his maximum shot would be approximately 25 yards. He was able to climb down toward it without being detected and to fire a lethal shot when he was within 19 yards of his prey.

A fishing trip to Wisconsin when he was 16 years old sparked Siragusa’s lifelong interest in fishing. After buying a second home in Cat Cay in 1949, he did most of his salt water fishing in the Bahamas. Siragusa was very interested in ecology and the conservation of natural resources. These interests led him to help set up a program of studying the migration habits of fish with the Miami School of Oceanography. For years he did tag and release fishing through the School of Oceanography.

Siragusa pioneered the use of unusually light tackle in going after bonefish. During the 1950s, he repeatedly broke world records, using



six-pound-test monofilament to catch bonefish weighing over 11 pounds. He also landed a 38 1/2 pound wahoo on 12-pound-test and a 50 1/2-pound amberjack on line of the same weight.^{vi}

Siragusa also was one of the first anglers to go out and spot bonefish on the flats in the Bahamas. Bonefish are difficult to spot and are easily spooked. Most bonefish anglers rely on native guides to tell them in which direction to cast. After years of training Siragusa learned to distinguish the fish beneath surface shadows on the water. And he went after only the larger fish. He became as skilled as a native guide in spotting and casting for bonefish.

He landed approximately 600 bonefish and released most of them, keeping only a few to mount for family members and friends. He finally decided permit were more of a challenge. By 1958, he had caught several of them with similarly light tackle-none under 30 pounds.

In 1949, Siragusa won the annual Bahamas tuna tournament, competing with several well-known anglers. His son Jack related a story about this event. In a Calcutta Auction Pool, the movie star Lana Turner bid for and won a ticket on Siragusa for \$5,000. Her husband Dan Topping learned of her bet and became upset about her betting on an unknown angler. He sold Lana's ticket to Siragusa's wife Irene, without telling Lana that he had done so. After the tournament was over and Irene had won \$30,000, it was Lana Turner's turn to be upset. She repeatedly scolded Topping during the tournament banquet dinner.

Almost all adult Siragusa family members learned to love fishing in the Bahamas. Unfortunately, Siragusa's wife injured her back in 1954 during a 3 1/2-hour battle with a tuna, estimated at 400



pounds, and gave up deep sea fishing afterwards. However, the year before, Irene had set an International Game Fish Association record, landing a 46-pound amberjack on 12-pound-test line. His daughter-in-law Alison (Ross, Jr.'s wife) also set a woman's world record for bonefish in 1953.

A photograph shows Siragusa beside a magnificent trophy, 593-pound blue marlin. Another memorial to his prowess as an angler is mounted over Booth No. One in the Cape Cod Room of the Drake Hotel in Chicago-a kingfish caught off Key West, which was a record at the time.



Warm Friendships

When entertaining friends, Siragusa always went first class, according to Al Medica. “He had impeccable taste and gave wonderful parties. He had a great deal of charisma. Women thought he was charming.”

Medica was told the story of a day in Rome that Ray O’Keefe, Jr. and his wife spent with Ross and Irene, whom they had run into by chance. Siragusa offered to show the O’Keefes the city, which was new to them. He took the couple to the finest restaurants, where all the waiters and maitre d’s were acquainted with him. The evening ended at the Excelsior Hotel with Siragusa entertaining his friends by playing the piano for two hours. “It was an evening I will never forget,” O’Keefe had said.

Among the prominent people who were Siragusa’s close friends were Joseph Kennedy, President Jack Kennedy’s father; President Lyndon Johnson and his wife, Lady Bird; Otto Kerner, former governor of Illinois; and the first Richard Daley, Mayor of Chicago.

Once when Joe Kennedy was hospitalized in Chicago, Medica remembers Siragusa removing a portable television from the display case in Admiral’s Cortland Avenue headquarters to take as a present to his sick friend. When the elder Kennedy died, Senator Edward Kennedy sent Siragusa a telegram informing him of the death and thanking him for his warm friendship with his father. He received several letters from others members of the Kennedy family thanking him for contributions to the Kennedy Library and for his support of public television. He also received one from Jackie Kennedy in 1965



to thank him for arranging to have audio speakers installed in her New York City apartment.

Siragusa had a close relationship with Lyndon Johnson and his family. He and Martha were invited to the White House on five occasions for receptions, dinners, and the President's Inaugural Ball in 1965. Johnson appointed Siragusa to the Board of Directors of the U.S. Air Force Academy. The President also appointed him to be on the Committee on Financial Business Problems. In addition, Siragusa served as Chairman of the Board of Directors of General Alanine & Film, a large chemical company taken over from Germany after World War II. He was responsible for finding a new C.E.O. and selling the company to private industry.

Lady Bird Johnson appointed Siragusa to the Advisory Board of the National Wildflower Research Center in November 1982, and he subsequently made a number of contributions to the center. He also served as a member of the National Committee of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Memorial Grove on the Potomac.

Otto Kerner, who was Governor of Illinois from 1960 – '68, was another close friend. Kerner was the first Illinois governor to instigate trade missions abroad, and Siragusa was involved in some of them, according to Aton Kerner, Otto's son. Kerner served a short term in prison in 1974 for allegations that he had given Arlington Race Track favorable racing dates when he was governor in return for stock purchased at a discount. Siragusa wrote a letter to the parole board, assuring them that Kerner would have a job waiting for him when he was released from prison. Kerner was grateful for the offer, but ended up working on prison reform.



Siragusa's kindness and generosity to others did not depend on their social or economic status. "He was a people-oriented person. He knew a lot of the factory workers at the Cortland Street plant by name," says his son Jack.

Al Medica remembers a trip to downtown Chicago with Siragusa in the Admiral car. "We had stopped at a red light when Ross saw a blind man having trouble crossing the street. He told the driver to stop and jumped out of the car to help the man," Medica says.

Siragusa's generosity to others also was expressed in contributions to many worthwhile causes and in his establishment of The Siragusa Foundation. After selling R & A distributing in 1983, Siragusa and his wife Martha also gave up the second farm on County Line Road in Barrington and moved to an apartment in the Drake Towers in Chicago to be near The Foundation office. He spent most of his days when he was in Chicago working at The Siragusa Foundation.

Siragusa died on March 30, 1996 at the age of 89. He was survived by his second wife, three sons, 12 grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren. After his death, The City of Chicago presented his family with a commemorative resolution praising his outstanding business and civic contributions.



PHILANTHROPIST

The most significant memorial to the life and hard work of Ross D. Siragusa is The Siragusa Foundation, which has touched and improved life for so many through its charitable donations. Siragusa set up the Foundation in 1950 before foundations had become a socially accepted method of giving to charity. The Siragusa Foundation has given more than \$10 million to charitable causes over the years.

Long before he established the foundation, Siragusa had made a habit of giving. His sons remember him helping to raise money for their Evanston church, St. Athanasius, in the 1930s. Another major recipient of his generosity over the years was the Illinois Institute of Technology, which supplied Admiral and its competitors with many of their engineers. IIT received gifts worth more than \$1.5 million from Admiral Corporation, directly from Siragusa and his wife, and from The Foundation.

He served as a Board member of Goodwill Industries and offered that organization his business expertise and helpful financial support. Siragusa also was an early supporter of WTTW, Chicago's public television station, which received \$96,000 in grants from The Foundation over the years to sponsor popular shows such as "Wild Wild World of Animals" and "Profiles of Nature". He actively supported the National Conference of Christians and Jews and served as chairman of a large dinner sponsored by the organization in the 1960s. His love of



music led him to accept a position on the Board of Directors of the Lyric Opera of Chicago during its formative years and to make generous contributions to support the Lyric's operations and growth.

Siragusa's areas of special interest were child development, educational, medical, religious and cultural endeavors. Other major recipients of Foundation grants have included: The Northwestern Memorial Foundation, Children's Memorial Foundation, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago, The Field Museum, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Northwestern University, and the University of Chicago. Today, Siragusa's descendants run The Foundation, and its grants continue to reflect the interests of its founder.

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- i *Appliance Manufacturer, April 1966*
 - ii *Ibid.*
 - iii *Ibid.*
 - iv *Sports Field, September 1958*
 - v *Ibid.*
 - vi *Ibid.*



