

Amory Houghton's Bet on Fiber Optics Helped Save Corning

Fifth-generation member of founding family let it become dependent on TV tubes, then redeemed himself with wager on hair-thin strands of glass



Amory Houghton also served as a Republican Congressman representing the Southern Tier region of New York state.

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By

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When Amory Houghton became chief executive of Corning Glass Works in 1964, the company founded by his great-great grandfather was thriving. Known to the general public for Pyrex measuring cups and Corning Ware casseroles, it dominated the U.S. market for the glass used to encase TV tubes.

But the company, now known as [Corning](#) Inc., proved too reliant on those tubes, which accounted for as much as 75% of profit. In the mid-1970s, the company faced a recession and the loss of TV-related business as Japanese imports captured the U.S. market. Profits collapsed, and Mr.

Houghton had to chop costs, including at the headquarters in Corning, N.Y. The global workforce dropped by more than one-third.

Mr. Houghton, who died March 4 at age 93, said in a 1977 interview with *Forbes* that he should have been fired for letting the company drift into financial peril. “It was tough making these cuts,” he said, “particularly when you lived in a small town where you knew a lot of these people.”

Corning bounced back, unlike many other U.S. manufacturing giants. That was partly because Mr. Houghton made a long-term commitment to development of fiber optics. He correctly saw that hair-thin strands of glass would replace copper wire in transmissions of voice and data. “It’s our turf, with our patents,” he said.

By the late 1990s, optical fiber and related telecommunications products accounted for more than half of Corning’s operating profits.

After stepping down as CEO, Mr. Houghton served as a Republican Congressman representing the Southern Tier region of New York state. He had a self-deprecating sense of humor and a habit of laughing, loudly, at [his own quips](#). **“You know what politics is, don’t you?” he asked a Buffalo News reporter. “It’s theater for ugly people.”**

Amory Houghton Jr., known as Amo, was born Aug. 7, 1926, in Corning. His father, who served as U.S. ambassador to France during the Eisenhower administration, was the fourth-generation chairman of the company, which supplied glass casings for Thomas Edison’s lightbulbs in the 19th century. His mother, Laura Houghton, was a director of the Girl Scouts of America.

After graduating early from high school, Mr. Houghton enlisted in the Marines and served during the final year of World War II without seeing combat. He then enrolled at Harvard University, where he studied history and earned a bachelor’s degree, followed by an M.B.A. degree in 1952.

He considered becoming an Episcopal priest, a route later followed by one of his younger brothers. Instead, he joined Corning, where he served initially as an accountant and later as a manufacturing foreman and sales manager.

“I liked the manufacturing because that’s where the whoop and the roar of the company was,” he said later. “I loved selling because I’m a born huckster.”

He became president of the company in 1961 and succeeded his father as chairman and chief executive in 1964.

When Hurricane Agnes swamped the town of Corning in 1972, he rallied the community. “Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve been in a critical situation,” he said in a local radio broadcast. “We’re coming out of it, we’re going to win this battle with nature, and this is because of your united effort.”

In the mid-1970s, he was driving a decade-old [Volkswagen](#) and eating regularly at the company cafeteria. He warned shareholders of the costs of adopting cleaner manufacturing processes but added: “We cannot change, nor would we want to change, pollution legislation.”

After recovering in the late 1970s, Corning profits dropped again amid recession in the early 1980s. In 1983, at age 56, he gave up the top jobs at Corning, making way for his brother James, considered more hard-nosed and focused on profitability.

Amory Houghton traveled in Africa and considered becoming an Episcopal missionary in Zimbabwe. He dropped that idea when the Republican Party saw an opportunity to regain the congressional seat in his home district in 1986.

Campaign signs identified Mr. Houghton by his nickname, Amo. He campaigned by touring the district in what was dubbed his “Amobile,” a 31-foot motor home. “This has been the most humbling experience of my life,” he told a Wall Street Journal reporter. “There’s nothing in the world like putting your name on the line and asking the people to accept you.”

When he met people, rather than asking directly for their votes he typically said, “I just wanted to pay my respects.”

After winning the seat with more than 60% of the vote, he established himself as a centrist, eager to work with Democrats as well as Republicans.

In 2002, he was one of six House Republicans who voted against authorizing the use of U.S. troops to invade Iraq. “Why don’t we win the war against terrorism before we start another fight?” he asked.

In 2004, he completed 18 years in Congress after declining to seek another term and declaring his political record modest. He devoted part of his time to volunteering for the Episcopal Church.

He served as a director of [International Business Machines](#) Corp., Citicorp and [Procter & Gamble](#) Co., among others. He played the drums in a jazz band called the Swing Voters.

Mr. Houghton's first marriage ended in divorce. His second wife, the former Priscilla Blackett Dewey, died in 2012. His survivors include a brother, four children, and nine grandchildren and a great-grandson.

Stanley Lundine, a Democrat who preceded Mr. Houghton as the U.S. representative for their Southern Tier district, recalled attending a banquet in Corning when Mr. Houghton was CEO of Corning. Both men gave speeches. Afterward, Mr. Houghton popped into the kitchen to thank the food-service workers. "I thought, here I am a Congressman and I'm not thinking about that," Mr. Lundine said.