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# Remembering Sam Walton: A World Class Individual

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# **REMEMBERING SAM WALTON**

## **A World Class Individual**



### **A Profile in Enterprise**

by  
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Private Enterprise Education  
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## Remembering Sam Walton A World Class Individual

by  
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and  
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The longer we all live on this planet, the more we experience an enlarged sense of both sorrow and joy. Recently, we were saddened at another empty chair in our American Enterprise family circle. We have always known that the created order includes winter as well as spring, death as well as life.

It is right to have been made part of that creation. It has always been so. As William Cullen Bryant put it, *“All that tread the globe are but a handful to the tribes that slumber in its bosom.”*

Reminiscent of Samuel Moore Walton, one day in his eighth decade, John Quincy Adams was easing down a Boston street. There, he was greeted by a friend who said, *“And how is John Quincy Adams today?”* The former President of the United States replied graciously:

*Thank you, John Quincy Adams is well, sir, quite well. I thank you. But the house in which he lives at present is becoming dilapidated. It is tottering upon its foundations. Time and the seasons have nearly destroyed it. Its roof is pretty well worn out, its walls are much shattered, and it trembles with every wind. The old tenement is becoming almost uninhabitable, and I think John Quincy Adams will have to move out of it soon; but he himself is quite well, sir, quite well.*

And with this the venerable statesman, leaning heavily upon his cane, moved slowly down the street.

Mr. Walton knew that he would not always be with us. As he entered the evening of his years—a privilege denied to many—the last of life for which the first was made—he was able to look back and say, *“What a splendid day it has been!”*

### **A Time of Celebration**

Therefore, we pause to celebrate the life and achievements of Sam Walton, merchant and patriot, for his total commitment to nudge the American Incentive System to prove, once more, that free enterprise delivers the goods. Sam Walton went beyond committing the Golden Rule to memory. As a servant-leader, he committed it to life itself.

One reason this writer became interested in Mr. Walton’s brand of freedom of enterprise is that it solves the problems of society better than any other economic system known, because it solves the problems of the individual. Freedom of enterprise, as personified by Sam Walton, has been an attitude of responsibility, citizenship, pride, dignity, and decency. Most of all, freedom of enterprise, Sam Walton style, has been an attitude of thankfulness.

For too long, we who write and speak have mainly emphasized the free market’s advantages, when perhaps we should have been passing the word about its *“good news.”* In all of human history, only the free market has come to bear on solving the age-old problems of scarcity and poverty. Through the American Incentive System, Sam Walton developed a superb track record of doing things that benefit people.

The story of Sam Walton and the company he founded, Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., is really an examination of two sides of the same coin. Certainly Emerson must have had someone like Sam Walton in mind when he observed that *“an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man.”*

Mr. Walton will always be a symbol, an exemplar of American energy initiative. He will be remembered as a superb business strategist with a tremendous competitive spirit and a dedication to match. The dual fame of Sam Walton and Wal-Mart has neither been sudden, nor has it burst and faded. It remains fixed in the skies as a brightening star.

## Passing the Torch

Few leaders in commerce have understood so acutely the anatomy and physiology of the management function. And even fewer men in general merchandise retailing have done so much to make Wal-Mart management techniques the envy of the business world.

Mr. Walton possessed dynamic personal insights into creating and running a general merchandise discount retail company in today's tough, competitive climate. He assembled and disciplined a splendid and talented executive team of associate-partners.

They still share his servant-leader philosophy: dedication, assertiveness, hard work, enthusiasm, ability to interact well with people, willingness to take on challenges, and a sense of thriving on the pressures which come with great responsibility. Like his Executive Team, Mr. Walton never gave less than his best to Wal-Mart.

The Executive Team Mr. Walton selected and trained, the policies he instituted, the systems he developed, and the human relations skills he breathed into the organization—all continue to serve Wal-Mart Associates and customers well. Mr. Walton always found ways to get people, who thought were doing their best, to do better. Mr. Walton was always in the stores to question, question, question.

This writer is of the opinion that somewhere along life's journey, Mr. Walton was profoundly affected by the writings of Rudyard Kipling, who said, "*I had six honest serving men. They taught me all I knew. Their names were Where and What and When—And Why and How and Who.*"

Both creative and inquisitive, Mr. Walton was always ready to try new and better ways. He believed that organizations such as Wal-Mart must change with the times—that more can be achieved through teamwork than through close compliance to any inflexible book of rules.

A pragmatist of the first order, Mr. Walton had good judgement of organizational structures and systems, as well as of the men and women of Wal-Mart. His abundant energy became constructive impatience, and his boundless enthusiasm turned into startling immediacy. The activist in him said that problems were really opportunities, and they needed to be dealt with—now!

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*The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena—whose face is marred by dust, sweat and blood—a leader who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion and spends himself in a worthy cause---who, at best if he wins, knows the thrill of achievement—and if he fails, fails while doing greatly—so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat*

*Theodore Roosevelt*

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There will always be those who will say, “*What was Sam Walton really like? Why did he attempt so many things simultaneously? Why did he labor so long and hard? What really made him tick? What talents did he have that most others do not have?*” Scores of similar questions may be answered someday. But, Sam Walton will not be easily stereotyped.

From an early age, Mr. Walton developed an intense desire to succeed. He polished his tremendous powers of concentration. That, combined with unrelenting drive and experience along the way, helped him to capitalize on opportunities to prosper the lives of people whom he touched.

His entire life was action-oriented. “*Perpetual motion*” is the reaction of the Wal-Mart Associates who worked with Mr. Walton. He placed great faith in his Associates. He trusted them implicitly; they came to trust him completely.

## A Renaissance Man

Did Sam Walton change over the years? He most certainly did, although no man can ever be fully liberated from his past. It is as the writer, Tennyson, spoke through his character Ulysses, *“I am a part of all that I have met.”*

Sam Walton’s obsession was being the very best. He worked and dreamed for it in all quarters: his company, his Associates, his customers, himself. At work or on the tennis court, he enjoyed the reputation of being a fierce competitor.

An aggressive, highly competitive, resourceful entrepreneur with a near-unique talent for inspiring other people to perform better and better—it would be hard to imagine Mr. Walton in any other role than the one he developed so well at Wal-Mart. Mr. Walton immersed himself completely into whatever he tackled wholeheartedly, thoroughly, completely. Such is the nature of a Renaissance man.

In a recent interview, Mr. Walton was asked this question, *“How would you like to be regarded?”* His modest reply said it all:

*I would just like to be regarded as a good friend to most everyone whose life I’ve touched—as their friend, as someone who has maybe meant something to them and has helped them in some way. That, I guess, is important. I have such a strong feeling for the folks in our company; they have meant so much to me. I know they respect me. They have affection for me. I appreciate that, and I don’t know that I deserve it. I don’t think that I really deserve it, but it’s a tremendous feeling to know that you have that relationship with people throughout the company.*

Today, the general public can retrace Mr. Walton’s entrepreneurial adventure and the 30 years of Wal-Mart history free of charge at the new Wal-Mart Visitor’s Center, located in the original Walton Five and Ten store on the Square in downtown Bentonville,

Arkansas. In the first year after its Grand Opening in 1990, more than 50, 000 visitors toured the facility.

All of Mr. Walton's life focused on one primary objective—**servicing people**. Wal-mart's story is a legacy of what is right with and about America. Here is the way Chairman Walton put it: *"The key to success must be that we all truly embrace the philosophy that our sole reason for being is to serve, even spoil, those wonderful customers. To keep this focus on customer service, despite our continuous change, is just as critical today as it was in those dime stores decades ago!"*

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*Save all you can  
Give all you can  
Do all the good you can  
In all the ways you can  
With all the souls you can  
In every place you can  
At all the times you can  
With all the zeal you can  
As long as you ever can*

--John Wesley

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So, out in front and mentoring his Wal-Mart Associates was Mr. Sam Walton, a dynamic leader in American retailing who courageously stepped forward and asked all Americans to join him in preserving and spreading the word about the human side of free enterprise. Why? So that all of us who have been blessed so abundantly could also commit ourselves to leaving our country and our way of life a little bit better for the next generation than it was when we found it.

Once again, Chairman Walton provided closure on the subject:

*We live in such a great country, this land of ours, and I'm afraid we all take our freedoms, opportunities and many blessings for granted at times. All of us in our Wal-Mart family should count our blessings daily and do all we can to help others, both within our Company and outside, who are less fortunate and in need.*

To Mr. Walton, people were the key that unlocked countless doors and showered upon him, his customers, and his Associates the fruits of 30 years of labor in building his highly successful Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. As sincerely as the writer knows how to state it, it is a singular honor to pen this salute to him.

America stands today as the oldest living republic. The reader is reminded that the U.S. Constitution does not guarantee any of us a full life, a long life, a prosperous life, nor even a happy life. The Constitution merely guarantees the protection of life. We make of our lives what we will.

To Sam Walton, each new day was another opportunity to show people how to reinvent themselves, re-evaluate their priorities, redouble their efforts, and re-order their lives.

### **The Real Bottom Line**

It was Robert Frost who said it so well: *“All men are born free and equal—free at least in their right to be different. Some people want to homogenize society everywhere; I am against the homogenizers in art, politics, in every walk of life. I want the cream to rise.”*

In that regard, Mr. Walton was a wonderful role model from whom all of us can continue to learn more about our American Incentive System which can develop all the talents of all the people. Here, we are “free” to be anything we want, if we have the “enterprise” to do it.

Mr. Walton’s story is a legacy of what is right with and about America. And when the history of commerce is written, the name of Walton will most certainly be in the headlines. Truly, as long as men like Sam Walton walk our land, we can indeed be optimistic about our future.

Let us, therefore, diligently press on and pursue that noble task. By working together, we can further appreciate and fulfill the American Dream, personified so well by Sam Walton. It has been said that our Creator gave us memories so we could have roses in the winter. We do fondly remember to say, “*Thanks for the memories.*” Sam Walton lives.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Don Diffine is currently Professor of Economics at Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas, and Director of the Belden Center for Private Enterprise Education. Senior Research Associate of Harding's American Studies Institute, Dr. Diffine is listed in the Heritage Foundation's Guide to Public Policy Experts.

A member of the Governor's Council of Economic Advisors, Dr. Diffine has provided Congressional testimony on business problems, economic impact statements, and inflation-recession dilemmas. He has 10 books and 20 monographs in print and presently serves on the Board of Directors of the Arkansas Council on Economic Education.

The recipient of the \$7,500 Freedoms Foundation Principle Award for Excellence in Private Enterprise Education, Dr. Diffine has received 16 additional Freedoms Foundation awards in the categories of Non-profit Publications, Economic Education, Public Affairs-Advertising, Public Address, and Published Works. He is the faculty winner of a \$1,000 First Place prize in a national essay contest judged by Nobel Economist Milton Friedman.

In 2000, Diffine was inducted into the Samuel Moore Walton Free Enterprise Hall of Fame. He received the "Champion of Enterprise" award in 1995 from the Students In Free Enterprise Hall of Fame in Kansas City. The First Annual Distinguished Scholar Award was also presented in 1988 to Dr. Diffine in Cleveland, Ohio, by the Association of Private Enterprise Education. He is also the recipient of the New Constellation Award from the National Flag Foundation.

Dr. Diffine's wife, Dion, is from Kailua, Hawaii. She is a math teacher in the Searcy public schools. The Diffines have two children: David, a family practice physician in Kennett, MO; and Danielle, a senior financial analyst in Washington, D.C.