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## CHAPTER 2

# A New Life

**I**N 1956 COOKE DIVERSIFIED HIS BUSINESSES BY ACQUIRING two Ontario plastics factories and an aluminum foundry. But these seemed purely business propositions, a prudent but otherwise uninspiring investment strategy. He was more excited about expanding in the businesses he already had chosen, ones that put him in a direct relationship with the public—publishing, baseball, and broadcasting. He made a bid to buy two Toronto newspapers, the *Telegram* and the *Globe and Mail*. He especially wanted the latter paper, which was, and is, as important in Canada as the *New York Times* is in the United States. It was put up for auction in 1955 after the death of owner C. George McCullagh. Cooke carefully researched the *Globe and Mail*'s finances to determine what would likely be a high bid for the paper, then he bid even higher. Confident of winning, he spent days and weeks planning how he would change the paper with new departments and features. “I’m paying too much,” he confided to an acquaintance, “but I want that paper.”<sup>1</sup>

But the highest bid didn’t belong to Cooke. Instead, the paper went to Montreal financier R. Howard Webster. Cooke was severely disappointed but, characteristically, he kept his spirits up by turning to other challenges. In baseball there were two: persuading Toronto to buy land on which he then would build a new stadium and parking facility, and bringing major league professional baseball to the city.

The two goals, of course, were related. Cooke's success in drawing fans to Maple Leafs' games already had proven that professional baseball would prosper in Toronto, a growing metropolitan area with a population of nearly 1.5 million. But no city could win a major league franchise if it couldn't provide a sizeable stadium. The Maple Leafs' thirty-three-year-old structure seated 19,000—a competitive major-league stadium would have to accommodate twice that many fans.

But Toronto's city fathers just didn't seem interested in bringing big-league baseball to town. When the Maple Leafs won the International League pennant in 1956, Mayor Nathan Phillips invited the players to City Hall for a perfunctory celebration. He kept them waiting outside city council chambers for ten minutes before ushering them inside to stand while he read his congratulations. Said sports-writer Frank Fowler, "There was no organization, no schedule—it was simply a piece of civic business that had to be done and nobody appeared to be too enthusiastic about doing it."<sup>2</sup>



Officers of the new, Continental Baseball League gather on January 29, 1960, in New York. (L to R) Reginald Taylor, League President Branch Rickey, J.W. Bateson, League Vice President Jack Kent Cooke, and Donald Grant.

Cooke demonstrated his interest in a major-league franchise by bidding for Bill Veeck's St. Louis Browns and the Detroit Tigers when those teams went on the market in the mid-1950s. He got neither team (the Browns emerged in Baltimore as the Orioles), but showed that he was willing to pay—\$5 million for the Tigers and \$7 million for a new stadium. But Cooke could do little to overcome Toronto's reluctance to give up the land. A sports stadium was a job for private capital and not an appropriate project for public funding, said the mayor and the city council chair. Cooke's hopes for major-league baseball in his hometown languished through the end of the decade.

Adding to the problem was a major conflict within professional baseball over the issue of expansion *at all*, let alone into a Canadian city. Some club owners saw every new expansion franchise not as a vehicle for the growth of baseball as a whole but as a reduction in their share of the professional baseball pie. In 1959 the famous New York *Herald Tribune* sportswriter Red Smith penned his frustration while covering a baseball owners' meeting in Washington, D.C. "The little band of willful men who own baseball," he wrote, "is assembled to see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil about the business they have not yet managed to strangle to death."<sup>3</sup>

But not all baseball executives were so conservative or shortsighted. Pittsburgh's venerable Branch Rickey was among those who joined an effort organized by New York attorney William A. Shea, chair of Mayor Robert Wagner's baseball committee and later of Shea Stadium fame, to shake up the American League-National League expansion stalemate. The plan called for organizing another league, the Continental League, with member teams initially in New York, Houston, Denver, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Toronto, then in additional cities like Atlanta, Miami, Dallas-Ft. Worth, and San Diego. The Continental League threw down a gauntlet to the two established leagues. If they refused to expand, then the Continental League would do it for them—and reap the rewards.

At a news conference called in New York on July 28, 1959, to announce the new league's formation, Cooke predicted confidently that a Continental team would reach the World Series in five years. His enthu-

siasm and his impressive record with the Maple Leafs convinced Rickey, the seventy-eight-year-old president of the Continental League, that both Cooke and Toronto were vital to the new league's success. "I must have this man," he said, and then pointed to his cane. "I lean on my cane, but it might break. I must not lose this man."<sup>4</sup> Cooke was elected the Continental League's vice president, a position he also held in the International League. He had won the promise of a major league team for Toronto. But the franchise still hinged on persuading city officials that it was in the public's interest to provide land for a new stadium.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in August 1960 the American and National Leagues finally succumbed to the pressure created by the Continental League and decided to expand. The Continental League quickly expired, just one year after its creation, though not without having placed a wake-up call to some hidebound executives in professional baseball. Two months later, in October 1960, American and National League officials announced the new franchise winners—New York and Houston for the National, and Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles for the American. The then-Washington Senators were permitted to move to Minneapolis-St. Paul, giving that city its desired franchise while opening up an opportunity for a new team in the nation's capital.

Two weeks later, when the proposed new Los Angeles franchise proved controversial (the city already had the Dodgers), the American League told Cooke that Toronto might yet get an American League team. But the American League's terms proved almost impossible to meet. Improvements to the Maple Leafs' stadium, agreements for radio and television rights, and basic organization of team management and personnel could not possibly be accomplished in time for the next season's opening, if at all. Even more prohibitively, though, the American League set excessively narrow limits on the new team's ability to recruit players, demanding that Toronto select only from a pool composed of current AL players, many of them older men, and pay a set fee of \$75,000 for each. Cooke saw a formula for frustration and failure, and rejected it.<sup>5</sup>

Publishing and professional sports, two of the three main fields in which Jack Kent Cooke had planted his hopes and ambitions, now looked far less fertile than he had wished. But broadcasting still looked

promising. Even though Canadian authorities had limited his expansion in radio, Cooke held out some hope for acquiring a television station in Toronto. He had tried once, unsuccessfully, in 1949. Appearing before the Canadian Broadcasting Commission, Cooke had declared, brashly but accurately, that television soon would eclipse radio as a popular and influential communications medium; that radio station owners should be given precedence in the granting of TV station licenses; and that Canada's state-subsidized Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) television operation was unfairly hindering open competition among broadcasters. Cooke's statement was a triumph of honesty over diplomacy, but it probably served to reduce his already slim chances at gaining the approval of the conservative commission.

In June 1956 Cooke appeared before another official group, the Fowler Commission, which was studying Canadian broadcasting policies with an eye toward protecting Canadian culture from the powerful influences of its next-door neighbor, the United States. Cooke fielded questions about "culture" and about his ability and willingness to use television in the interests of furthering the arts and letters in Canada. Many of these questions came from persons who regarded Cooke as a *nouveau riche* upstart whose baseball promotion events and pop music radio programming at CKEY were *prima facie* reasons for denying him a television license. Such a man should not be allowed much control over the content of the public airwaves, they believed.

Cooke was aware of the commissioners' biases, but rather than trying to conciliate he met them head-on. He cited poet T. S. Eliot's enjoyment of popular music halls and radio, and argued that even Shakespeare had written with crowd-pleasing and commercial aims in mind. He established his own cultural credentials by lecturing the commission on arcane words, stating that he studied the dictionary carefully and tried to learn ten new words every day. Using the word "publish" as an example, Cooke argued that publishing wasn't just restricted to print media but had to do with making information public. To demonstrate his point, Cooke told Robert Fowler, the commission's head, "I'm publishing right now!" Fowler's shot back sourly, "You're also broadcasting."

Late that year Cooke indulged in an adventurous diversion from such frustrations. He purchased a sleek, twenty-year-old, German-built racing yacht and had it brought into Toronto harbor via the Erie Canal. It was a magnificent sailing craft, a yawl nearly 55 feet long and 13 feet wide, with steel beams, teak decks, mahogany planking, and stainless steel rigging that lofted 1,200 square feet of sails. Cooke named her *Pompadour* after Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, Madame de Pompadour, a talented artist and musician who, as King Louis XV's mistress, enlivened the eighteenth-century French court—and, of course, the King. *Pompadour* would bring some freshness and distraction into Cooke's life and help relieve his many business cares. When spring thawed the harbor ice and *Pompadour* had been suitably outfitted and polished, Cooke and his eleven-person crew, including his two young sons, Ralph and John, signed up at the Royal Canadian Yacht Club for some first-class Great Lakes racing.

Both *Pompadour* and Cooke lived up to their reputations, including Cooke's penchant for surprising doubters. The yawl was a veteran racer and Cooke relied on the skill of experienced yachtsmen. In the summer of 1957, *Pompadour* placed second in a starting fleet of seventy-five in the annual 230-mile race up Lake Huron from Port Huron, Michigan, to Mackinac Island. Only one member of Cooke's crew had ever been in those waters before. Shortly afterwards, *Pompadour* won first place among a starting fleet of thirty in the 120-mile Charles Freeman Cup race on Lake Ontario, then followed the victory with a third-place finish in the 213-mile Barrows Trophy race from Rochester, New York, to Toronto. Cooke enjoyed sailing's consuming challenges for two more years, winning the Royal Canadian Yacht Club championship in 1959. Then he put the yacht up for sale and retired from racing.

In March 1959 Cooke was back in front of yet another group of officials. This time it was the CBC board of governors, summoning him to explain why his station was broadcasting so much recorded music. What they meant was "U.S. rock 'n' roll." "It's the music of the American continent!" was Cooke's exuberant, and provocative, reply.<sup>6</sup> The CBC's dour rejoinder was to place CKEY and a competitor pop station, CHUM, on a year's probation.

One year later Cooke was one of nine applicants, and the only individual—all the others were groups, including the comedy team Wayne & Schuster—appearing before the Board of Broadcast Governors to make a pitch for receiving one available TV license. Once again, Cooke’s allegiance to Canadian high culture was an issue, and once more Cooke refused to apologize for or back down from what he regarded as his legitimate right to make decisions about CKEY’s programming, based on its appeal to listeners. Quite apart from his own feelings about repetitive rock ’n’ roll, he simply stated that “CKEY is mine—good, bad, or indifferent, it’s mine.” For the second time, Cooke’s TV bid was rejected. Frustrated, he decided to leave Canada and relocate to the United States.

It may not be entirely fair to say that conservative Canadian officials or cultural Yankee-phobes drove Jack Kent Cooke into the open arms of the United States. After all, Cooke’s own business visions had never stopped at the border. His baseball interests had been overtly international, and he was no chauvinist or nationalist when it came to giving audiences what he thought they, not government officials, wanted. But regulations governing broadcasting, both in Canada and in the United States, complicated matters. Because of the semi-public nature of broadcasting, in which private individuals could own the station and transmitter but not the airways themselves, government was intimately involved in the broadcasting communications business, citing the need to look out for “the public interest” through licensing and regulation. Only Canadian citizens could hold broadcast licenses in Canada, as only U.S. citizens could hold such licenses in the United States. If Cooke were to remain in the business, he had to make a choice. In the end, his decision was neither pro-United States nor anti-Canadian; it was simply pro-growth. Cooke naturally moved toward growth, which meant that in the spring of 1960 he went south of the border.

But there was a hitch. It took five years to become a U.S. citizen, and until that happened, Cooke was restricted to no greater than a 20 percent interest in any U.S. radio or TV station. Cooke’s business plans didn’t include a lengthy wait for citizenship, so some of his many friends in the United States explored the alternatives. The solution they proposed was impressive. With the support of U.S. Representative Francis E. Walter of

Pennsylvania, Congress took the highly unusual step of passing a special bill “for the relief of Jack Kent Cooke,” effective September 14, 1960. The legislation declared that Cooke should be considered as a permanent resident of the United States since September 28, 1950. With his permanent residency backdated ten years, he would be able to apply for citizenship after a sixty-day wait instead of the usual five years.

Several weeks later, Cooke took his citizenship oath in New York City. With Jean, his friend and attorney William Shea, and Shea’s wife, Norrie, Cooke celebrated his new life in style. Shea’s son-in-law, Admiral Robert J. Stroh, hosted the group for lunch in his quarters aboard the giant aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Saratoga*, which happened to be anchored nearby.

Cooke not only landed on his feet in the United States, he landed on the air, too. U.S. citizenship made him immediately eligible for a license to own and operate a U.S. broadcast station. With Jack’s financial help, his brother Don, who had emigrated to the United States in 1946, had purchased KXLA, a country-Western radio station in Los Angeles, in December 1958. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was cautious about the degree of Jack’s involvement in the station, for at the time he had not yet become a U.S. citizen. With the advice of his attorneys, therefore, Jack had set up a company, Broadcast Equipment Co., that purchased the KXLA property and then leased it to Don’s Eleven Ten Broadcasting Corporation (named after KXLA’s 1,110 kilowatts of power). In March 1959 the FCC granted Don, who by this time was a U.S. citizen, a broadcast license.

Don and Jack re-christened the station KRLA and made plans for operating around-the-clock with the same block programming and Top 40 music format that had worked so well at CKEY. The new format was scheduled to begin on September 3. Starting September 1, KRLA broadcast a couple of attention-grabbing publicity contests, masterminded by Jack. Both involved large cash prizes—\$10,000 for finding the new disc jockey that KRLA had hired, Perry Allen, and \$50,000 for finding a buried “golden key” to the new transmitter. Clues describing Allen and his whereabouts in the L.A. area, and hinting at the location of the golden key, were given over the air, with the prize amount

decreasing as additional clues were broadcast over the next several days.

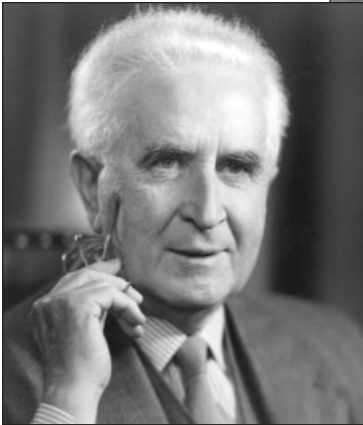
But Jack had injected too much “Barnum” into the contests. Hired at the last minute when Jack had rejected several disc jockeys that KRLA’s program director had approved, Perry Allen wasn’t even in Los Angeles at the time; he was finishing out his contract with a Buffalo, New York, station. The clues could not possibly have led any KRLA listeners to him. The golden key clues were equally impossible at first. Only when the prize amount had dropped from \$50,000 to \$5,000 did the clues actually make it possible to locate the key and award the prize. When the owners of a rival radio station heard about the “Find Perry Allen” contest, they sent an employee to Buffalo to find Allen and claim the reward. It was a major embarrassment for the Cookes and for KRLA, which had to pay out \$10,000 in prize money. More damaging, however, was the FCC’s renewed interest in what was going on at Don Cooke’s new station.

Jack’s U.S. citizenship, acquired in the middle of the FCC’s investigations, allayed some of the commission’s concerns, but serious reservations remained about whether Don or Jack had operated the station prior to September 1960, and about the station’s promotion stunts, which clearly had been Jack’s ideas. In April 1962 the FCC took away the Cookes’ radio broadcast license at KRLA. But all was not lost. Attorney Ed Holtz of the Hogan & Hartson law firm in Washington, D.C., persuaded Jack to hold onto the station equipment and property and lease it to a consortium of potential license holders while the FCC figured out which of them would be the eventual new license holder. Holtz knew well the ways of Washington. It took the FCC nearly ten years to complete what were known as “comparative hearings” and select a final licensee, during which time leasing the valuable KRLA property brought Cooke a hefty return on his investment.

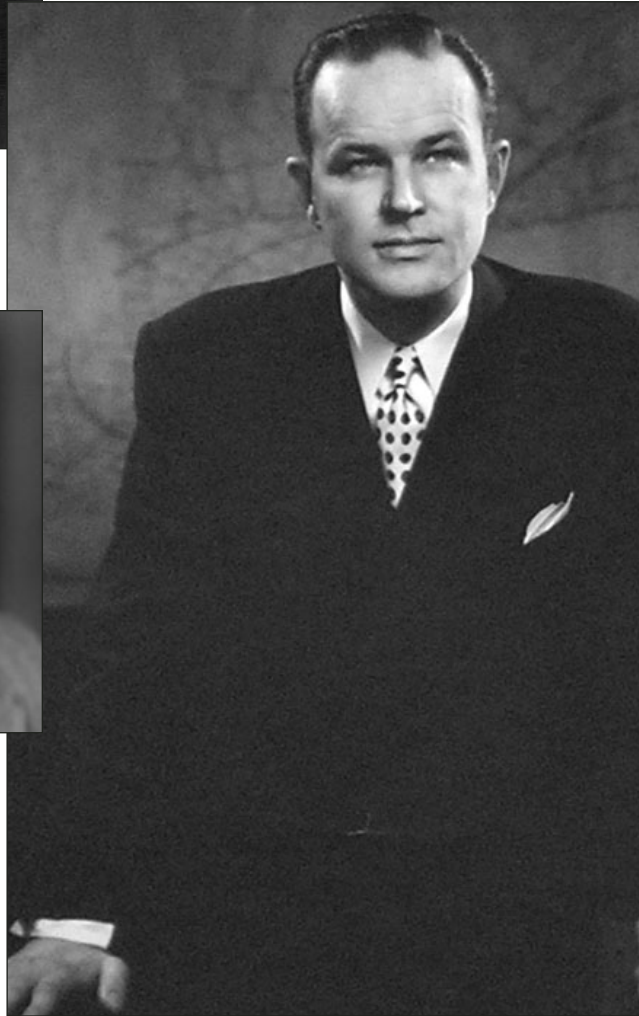
While the FCC was considering Cooke’s activities at KRLA, attorney William Shea, who had worked with Cooke on establishing the Continental Baseball League, called to say that two hundred shares in the Washington Redskins pro football team had just become available. Was Cooke interested? He certainly was. After gaining the approval of majority owner and Redskins president George Preston Marshall, Cooke pur-



Nancy Marion Jacobs Cooke, Jack's mother, was his guiding light and inspiration. "My mother had an intuitive sense of what was right and wrong, what would succeed and what would fail," he said in 1984, eight years after her death. "My mother was a paragon, a nonpareil person. She was the best."



Ralph Ercil Cooke, Jack's father, was a salesman and a dapper dresser who passed on many business insights and values to his son. Jack described him as "a very quiet, very decent man, but he was second to my mother in running things."





In 1934 Jack Cooke married Barbara Jean Carnegie of Toronto, shown here in a 1960 photo. Jean,” or “Jeannie,” as friends called her, was highly regarded for her beauty, graciousness and devotion to her husband and her two sons, Ralph and John.



Cooke's sons, John and Ralph, following the Redskins' victory over the Minnesota Vikings in Super Bowl XXVI, January 26, 1992.

A portrait of Jack Kent Cooke c.1950 by internationally renowned photographer Yousuf Karsh. Karsh's other portrait subjects include Dwight Eisenhower, Eleanor Roosevelt, Pope Pius XII, Frank Lloyd Wright, Ernest Hemingway, Albert Einstein, and Winston Churchill.

chased the stock with Shea and Edward Bennett Williams in April 1961. Cooke and the Redskins were three thousand miles apart with many years to go before that distance closed, but the 1961 stock purchase laid a foundation for what later would become one of the most successful owner-team relationships in National Football League history.

In 1962 Jack Kent Cooke was just fifty years old. He had sold his Canadian broadcasting and industrial businesses when he came to the United States but still owned a majority interest in the Toronto Maple Leafs baseball club, as well as the KRLA assets, Strand Records in New York, and one-quarter of the Redskins franchise. Many in his position could have kept busy managing their portfolios between rounds at the golf course. Cooke tried it, maintaining an office next to the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Los Angeles and working on his golf game at Pebble Beach. But it didn't work. Later he referred to those months in 1961-1962 as his attempt at "retirement," calling it a "dopey idea" and a "disastrous decision." "It taught me never to do that again," he told one reporter.<sup>7</sup> "I was bored to the point of petrification," he told another.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, Cooke's attempt at retirement had failed; however, daily golfing at Pebble Beach gave him time to consider his next business venture.

Indeed, retirement for Jack Kent Cooke was not retirement as most might envision it. During this time Cooke made a serious attempt to purchase Pacific Southwest Airlines. All the necessary audits had been conducted and the deal was ready to go through, but at the last minute, Cooke canceled the deal. Jim Lacher, a thirty-year colleague who started as Cooke's accountant and ended as his treasurer, recalled that Cooke "got cold feet because he was afraid a plane would go down and he would feel terrible guilt and responsibility. So he backed away from that, and that's how he got into cable TV."<sup>9</sup>

One day, while Cooke was watching television at a rented home at Pebble Beach, the screen went blank. Apparently, the landlord had paid the bill for a certain number of months' service and the time had run out. With that coincidence, Cooke discovered it was cable TV he had been watching, and that subscribers paid a monthly fee to hook up. Cooke was intrigued by this new business and asked his banking acquaintances about it. They put him in touch with cable TV pioneer

Bill Daniels, in Denver. Daniels and Cooke, both outgoing and enthusiastic men, hit it off, and soon Cooke had a list of people to contact—and something to do with the \$11 million he had earned from the sale of his Canadian assets.<sup>10</sup>

Cooke formed a new company, American Cablevision, and bought several local CATV (“community antenna television”) systems in remote parts of California, Texas, and New Hampshire for \$4.6 million. He always had believed that a certain amount of luck was involved in business success, but his entry into cable television was perfectly timed to take advantage of an emerging technology and a large public appetite for better television reception. Within a year Cooke had added several more systems to American Cablevision, in fourteen states from California through the Midwest and on to the Atlantic seaboard. He believed cable was the future of television and persuaded his son John to abandon television production in favor of cable. John eventually became vice president of American Cablevision, having learned the business from the ground up installing cable systems in Barstow, California, and managing the La Crosse, Wisconsin, systems.

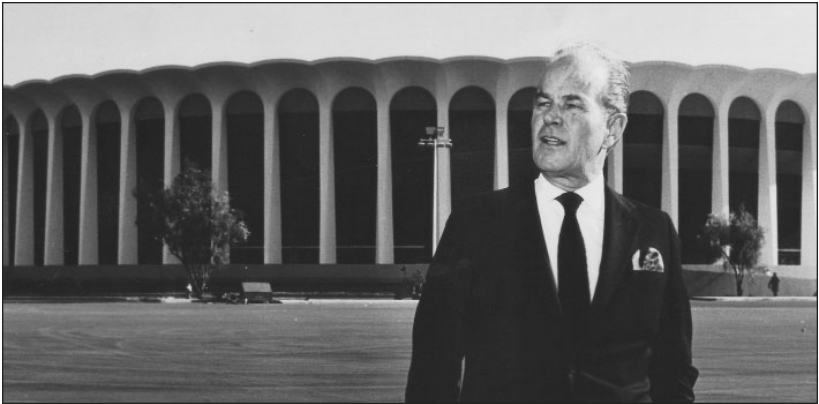
Cooke’s expanding cable business required hiring new executives and managers, and by 1965 Cooke had developed some definite ideas about the ideal employee in any of his enterprises. The foremost qualification was a willingness to work long and hard—not necessarily for its own sake, for Cooke recognized that few people (he was one of them) simply preferred working to any other activity, but for as long as it took to do the best job possible. A person also must be competent—not perfect, but competent—as well as honest and completely forthright with Cooke. When Cooke and his wife, Jean, decided to redo the interior of their home in the Bel Air section of Los Angeles, they interviewed several designers and rejected them all. Then Gerald Miller showed up for an interview. In the middle of his tour through the home, Miller, a quiet and mild-mannered man, suddenly turned to Cooke and declared, “Someone has greatly misinformed you about that chair you call Chippendale; it is Hepplewhite.” “You are absolutely right,” said a smiling Cooke. He had known all along and was only waiting for someone confident enough to contradict him with the truth.<sup>11</sup>

Cooke's employees had to be completely loyal to their boss, as Cooke was loyal to them, and they had to be willing to learn—perhaps especially willing to learn from Cooke, who was proud of his grasp of any topic he undertook to master. Employees who thought they knew more than Cooke, or who felt that advanced educational credentials gave them some source of authority independent of what Cooke thought they merited, did not last long in his businesses.

Bill Bresnan was made-to-order for Cooke and American Cablevision, which by 1965 had become the largest privately owned CATV system in the world. A radio engineer who also had sold subscriptions for cable TV systems in his home state of Minnesota, Bresnan was working as chief engineer for a system in Rochester, Minnesota, when Cooke purchased it in 1965. Shortly afterwards Cooke called Bresnan up and asked him to fly out to Los Angeles for an interview. "I hear you're a pretty good engineer," he told the surprised Minnesotan. "I want to meet you."<sup>12</sup>

Bresnan, who described himself as "a farm boy from Minnesota," was met at the airport by Cooke's chauffeured Bentley for an elegant ride to the Cooke office, which adjoined Baron Hilton's office on the grounds of the Beverly Hilton Hotel. "I was a little bit taken aback," Bresnan admitted. He had arrived late in the afternoon, so after about an hour of interviewing, Cooke took him up to the hotel's Escoffier Room for dinner. During the meal Bresnan started to feel restless. There was something he needed to tell Cooke. He waited for the right time, then said, "Jack, there's something you've got to know about me." Cooke, sensing his guest's nervousness, leaned across the table and asked quietly, "What's that?" Said Bresnan, "I don't have a college degree." "Good!" Cooke pronounced. "I don't either." Then he added one of his favorite statements, for good measure. "Most people are educated beyond their intelligence. You know that, don't you?" he said.

Cooke admired education but he had no patience with those who put on airs. He also admired competence and knowledge, however it had been acquired. But most of all he appreciated honesty, and after some additional talk about Bresnan's family and background, he not only offered Bresnan a job but told him he should also call his brother Pat in



Cooke built the Los Angeles Forum in 1966 to host Lakers and Kings games, and to provide a year-round venue for performance and entertainment events. The building was widely praised for its clean, classical lines.

Minnesota and ask him to come to California, too, to work on marketing. “But Jack,” exclaimed Bresnan, “you don’t even know me!” “I know you, I know people, I can judge people,” Cooke answered. Pat and his family soon joined Bill Bresnan and Cooke in Los Angeles and subsequently enjoyed a long and successful career in the cable TV business.<sup>13</sup>

Jack Kent Cooke had built his business world in Canada on the two central pillars of communications and sports. In the United States he was doing the same, at first with radio, then cable television, and then with the Washington Redskins. In September 1965 he added the National Basketball Association’s Los Angeles Lakers to his interests, purchasing the former Minneapolis team (hence the “Lakers” name) for \$5.175 million from Bob Short. Cooke so readily agreed to Short’s asking price, which far exceeded the \$3 million price that the Boston Celtics recently had fetched, that Short was emboldened to ask for cash. Cooke agreed to that, too. After guards pushed the money on a cart through an underground tunnel connecting Cooke’s New York Bank with Short’s, and twelve bank vice presidents finished counting it, Cooke became the Lakers’ new owner.<sup>14</sup> But the Lakers were just a beginning.

Five months later, after the National Hockey League doubled its size by awarding six new franchises to U.S. cities, including Los Angeles,

Cooke became the proud owner of the Los Angeles Kings for \$2 million, edging out a strong rival by promising to build an \$11 million arena at his own expense. The new franchises extended NHL hockey coast-to-coast across the United States for the first time. “It’s every Canadian boy’s dream to play big-league hockey,” he told a reporter. “This is the only way I could make it.”<sup>15</sup>

As if football, basketball, and hockey weren’t enough, Cooke founded the United States Soccer Association and spent \$500,000 to import a professional soccer team from England, the Wolverhampton Wolverines, which, re-christened as the Los Angeles Wolves in a new league, the United Soccer Association, won the national championship in 1967. The following year, the association merged with a rival league, the fledgling National Professional Soccer League, to form the North American Soccer League, the forerunner to today’s Major League Soccer. Cooke organized California Sports Incorporated as the entity owning the three teams and the arena to be constructed in Inglewood.

In July 1966 ground was broken for Cooke’s new sports arena in the Inglewood area of Los Angeles, near the Hollywood Park Race Track. Cooke helped design the circular structure, whose classic columns and grand dimensions recalled the famous Coliseum of ancient Rome, but whose trim, graceful lines placed it squarely in modern times. The Lakers and the Kings played their early season games in the old Los Angeles Sports Arena, but on December 30, 1967, Cooke gave them, and all Los Angeles sports and concert fans, a stunning holiday present when he opened the Los Angeles Forum for what became an L.A. Kings hockey victory over the Philadelphia Flyers. Cooke’s friend, Lord Thomson, was there for the nationally televised game, as was actor Lorne Greene, who had once read the news at Cooke’s radio station in Toronto.

By the time it was finished the Forum, including the land beneath it, had cost Cooke \$16 million, but the expense in no way dampened his jubilation. When veteran Lakers game announcer Chick Hearn dubbed the structure “the Fabulous Forum,” the fifty-five-year-old Cooke gleefully adopted it as the Forum’s semi-official name. Hearn may not have known it, but “fabulous” always had been one of Cooke’s

favorite expressions of exuberance. Cooke declared the Forum to be “not only one of the most beautiful buildings in America but in all the world,” and moved his corporate offices there. His son John went to work as vice president, overseeing the Forum’s advertising, promotion, and scheduling of events. Son Ralph handled the Forum’s advertising through the Ralph Kent Cooke Advertising Agency.

In the winter of 1971 Cooke combined his sports and communications know-how by organizing and financing an event that grabbed the world’s attention like no other ever had before. He put up nearly \$4.5 million to stage a heavyweight boxing extravaganza between Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali. Cooke got involved only after the event’s promoter, Jerry Perenchio, had been turned down by dozens of other backers. Perenchio was manager and controlling partner of Chartwell Artists, an L.A.-based talent agency and concert promotion company that boasted clients such as Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor, Andy Williams, and Elton John. Perenchio had never done a boxing match before, but when he was approached by a friend of Muhammad Ali he immediately agreed. “This fight transcends boxing,” Perenchio said, because each fighter seemed to reflect deep divisions in America at the time. Frazier, cast as a Bible-believing champion of the working class, faced the flamboyant Ali, who had joined the Nation of Islam and was appealing a draft evasion conviction to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Perenchio needed to round up some financial backers. He wanted a 50/50 profit split but the best he could get was a 65/35 offer from Warner Brothers. It was, in fact, all he could get until he decided to call Cooke. The two met for lunch. Cooke made an indelible impression on Perenchio, who was no stranger to unique personalities. “I have to put him down as one of the most unforgettable people you would ever meet,” he said years later. “He was the greatest salesman I ever knew. He epitomized a positive attitude. There was nothing that couldn’t be done if you work hard enough and believe. He had supreme self confidence.”<sup>16</sup>

Cooke wanted the fight to take place in his Fabulous Forum, but Frazier had a detached retina and couldn’t get a California boxing license, so the fight was scheduled for New York City’s Madison Square

Garden, where Frazier felt more comfortable. But the afternoon before Ali and Frazier were to sign their contracts, Alvin Cooperman and William Irish from Madison Square Garden showed up at Perenchio's hotel room with a last-minute demand. Jack Kent Cooke's signature on the deal was not good enough, they announced. "The Garden" would need an irrevocable letter of credit for \$4.3 million. Madison Square Garden, like many others, had wanted the rights to promote the fight and had reason to make things difficult for Cooke and Perenchio.

Cooke was furious when Perenchio called him in California to tell him the news. Suddenly the stakes for Cooke had grown vastly higher and he didn't know whether he could proceed. He told Perenchio he would sleep on it and call him in the morning. At 6:00 a.m. Perenchio picked up the phone. "Jerry," said Cooke, "we're going to do this thing. They can shove it up their smokestacks. We'll show them how the West was won!" He instructed Jim Lacher to go to the Chase Manhattan Bank and get the letter of credit, which he secured by putting up his cable television stock as collateral. Despite widespread skepticism, Cooke and Perenchio figured the fight would be a financial winner. But even they were surprised by the intensity and extent of the public's response, which spread to thirty-five countries around the world. When tickets went on sale for this first, closed-circuit, pay-for-view sports event in history, projected gross revenues passed \$20 million. Perenchio proclaimed, "It looks like we could sell tickets if we were showing it on the wall of a supermarket."<sup>17</sup>

A week before the fight Cooke and Jean moved into the Cole Porter suite at the Waldorf Astoria, a suite so large that it was easy to overlook the extra-large, twelve-foot grand piano Cooke used to entertain the many friends he had invited to New York for the event. One evening after dinner, Cooke took Perenchio and his girlfriend back to the suite, sat down at the piano, and started playing several Cole Porter and Broadway standard tunes. "His chording was awful," Perenchio chuckled, "and he played so heavy-handedly that the best my girlfriend and I could do was to smile and try not to wince and laugh, but he had a jolly good time, which was all that was important."<sup>18</sup>



Cooke's company, California Sports Incorporated, paid Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier \$2.5 million each for their efforts during "the fight of the century" at Madison Square Garden on March 8, 1971. It was more than any athlete ever had earned for a single performance.

On March 8, 1971, 20,455 fans at Madison Square Garden and an estimated 300 million closed-circuit TV watchers worldwide witnessed a grueling fifteen-round battle between the two evenly matched and undefeated boxing titans. The fight was especially heated because of the conflicts about race and Vietnam that surrounded it and that Ali appropriated to goad Frazier. At one point he stooped to calling the champion an "Uncle Tom." Ali later won his Supreme Court appeal, but he lost what many still call "the fight of the century" in a unanimous decision by the three judges. Each fighter had pushed the other to the limits of endurance, and when it was all over each walked away with \$2.5 million. Cooke's after-tax share of the profits was \$450,000.

Not long afterwards Cooke had another fight on his hands, one far less enjoyable than the Madison Square Garden bout. In 1968 he had merged his American Cablevision Company with H&B American Corporation, forming H&B American Cablevision with Bill Bresnan as the new company's president. With 125,000 subscribers, H&B American already was the largest cable TV company in the country. American Cablevision's additional 110,000 subscribers made the new entity a towering presence in the industry. But two years later Cooke answered the siren call of merger once more, this time joining with Irving Kahn's New York-based TelePrompTer Corporation.

Kahn had started TelePrompTer with Hubert J. “Hub” Schlafly, inventor of the electrical prompting device that helped TV actors and politicians get through their lines without having to look down at notes. The device got its first major boost when former U.S. President Herbert Hoover used it at the 1952 Republican convention in Chicago. When Hoover departed from his speech to ad lib for a moment, the prompting device stopped, too, as it was designed to do. Not realizing that it would pick up again automatically when he resumed his prepared lines, Hoover called out before the entire convention and the attending press corps, “Go ahead, teleprompter, go ahead.”<sup>19</sup> The company couldn’t have paid for a more effective advertisement, and sales soared. By 1970 TelePrompTer had sold its prompting business and diversified into cable television, concentrating not on remote locations but on lucrative urban markets.

Kahn wanted to be first in those markets, but his business plan got ahead of his technology. Urban viewers had no trouble getting access to the three major broadcast networks, which was the usual reason for subscribing to cable TV, and as yet no one had figured out how to put anything else on the air for paying subscribers. The major breakthrough in satellite transmission was still a few years away. To Bill Bresnan it looked like a wild scheme, but to Cooke it looked like a good gamble and he merged H&B American Cablevision with TelePrompTer. Bresnan took little satisfaction when, two months later, he and Cooke learned that Irving Kahn was facing criminal charges for having bribed officials in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in 1966 in order to secure the local cable franchise for TelePrompTer. TelePrompTer now had to answer to the FCC, which was threatening to intervene in Johnstown’s franchising process. The company also had to persuade Johnstown to stay with it, despite all the embarrassment both parties had experienced over the franchise. The ensuing battle for control of the company and for its very survival consumed much of Cooke’s attention for the next two years. But beyond that struggle, another new beginning awaited.