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Jimmy Lee Jr., Buffalo Rock chairman emeritus, dies

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Jimmy Lee Jr., who made an enduring mark on Birmingham and its business community as the leader of the Buffalo Rock Co., died late Saturday. The chairman emeritus and former chief executive of the bottling company was 89.

Mr. Lee's guidance helped Buffalo Rock expand to become a company with annual sales topping \$500 million and a network of bottling plants in Alabama, Georgia and Florida with 2,500 employees, including 800 in Birmingham.

One of his crowning achievements was building what was at the time the nation's most modern bottling plant on a 27-acre site on Oxmoor Road in 1966.

Under his leadership, Buffalo Rock became the largest private, single-family owned Pepsi-Cola operation in the country.

Mr. Lee also had a strong dedication to community service.

"He was just an amazing individual," Neal Berte, former president of Birmingham-Southern College, said Monday. "You could just count on him to do more than he was asked to do in any sort of leadership role."

Mr. Lee served in leadership roles on organizations such as the Birmingham-Southern Board of Trustees, Operation New Birmingham and the Birmingham Regional Chamber of Commerce. He served as chairman of the Metropolitan Development Board and as a director of the University of Alabama Health Services Foundation.

"Jimmy Lee was one of the true giants in civic affairs of this community," said MDB President Ted vonCannon.

Mr. Lee was born in Birmingham and attended Birmingham-Southern and Auburn University. World War II prompted him to leave college in 1943 to serve in the air force, rising from private to first lieutenant in the troop carrier command in England.

In May 1951, after his father died, Mr. Lee took over as president of Buffalo Rock, a company with beginnings in the late 1800s as the Alabama Grocery Co. that later moved into the soft drink business.

Mr. Lee soon bought the Pepsi-Cola Co. franchise and turned Buffalo Rock into a force that the Atlanta-based Coca-Cola Co. had to reckon with across the South.

Buffalo Rock added the Dr Pepper brand in 1962 and Seven-Up followed in 1967. Buffalo Rock became the first company to bottle all three brands under one roof.

Mr. Lee won many honors in his hometown and in the industry. He captured the Birmingham Service Award in 1983 and was inducted into the Alabama Academy of Honor in 1987. The Beverage Industry Hall of Fame tapped Mr. Lee in 1987, and the Alabama Business Hall of Fame did the same in 1999. In 2004, Pepsi awarded him a Lifetime Achievement Award, the first bottler to earn the award.

His children continue to work at Buffalo Rock, including his son, Jimmy Lee III, the company's chief executive since 2004.

"I always considered my dad 'Mr. Birmingham.' He had a love for the area," Jimmy Lee III said.

Visitation will be held at Johns Ridout's chapel in Homewood from 4 to 7 p.m. on Wednesday. A church service will be held at South Highland Presbyterian Church at 2 p.m. Thursday, followed by burial services at Elmwood Cemetery.

In lieu of flowers, the family has requested donations be made to Children's Hospital Foundation or to the Joseph S. and Theresa R. Bruno Cancer Center.