“Being a millionaire is a tough row to hoe.” The late Winthrop Rockefeller was fond of saying that. He almost always said “road” instead of “row.” His staff would correct him, explaining that the metaphor had to do with chopping cotton, which had a lot of grass growing between the stalks. It was obviously something that he wasn’t too familiar with, but he would nod in understanding, then most likely say it again at the next stop.
Staff would also sometimes explain to him that everybody within the sound of his voice — without exception and including his staff — would trade places with him so fast it would make your head swim. They’d hand over all their worldly possessions in exchange for his wallet (and its contents) without even having to think about it. They’d also throw in their hound dog, if they had one.

At this point, if there was time, Rockefeller would patiently explain what he meant; and if you watched him and paid attention when he was engaging in the philanthropic activity that took so much of his time, you could see that it made sense. It really was tough being wealthy if you had the obligation, the responsibility pounded into you since birth, to be a good steward of the money passed on to you, to make the lives of others better with it, to cause good things to happen that would benefit even those you most likely would never see or know.

The people of Arkansas didn’t know how to take this man, so rich and so unapproachable (they thought), and with a legendary name that connoted vast wealth and remoteness from the day-to-day matters that occupied their own lives. Even his generosity was treated at first with a degree of caution.

Why was he giving his money to this cause or that? What was his motivation? Was this some part of a strategy to take advantage of them? The questions were appropriate. Pretty much all the experience with wealthy people in Arkansas before Rockefeller involved those rich folks trying to make more bucks, trying to manage the affairs of government to enrich them even further by protecting and supporting their business practices. Here was a man who was not trying to make money, he was giving it away!

This was difficult for Arkansans to comprehend. Detractors tried to make his wealth a sin, an immoral thing, somehow. The late James “Uncle Mac” MacKrell ran as a Republican against Rockefeller in the 1970 primary (losing miserably) by trying to claim the high moral ground and to offer to help people understand “How to Be Richerrockyfela,” as he put it with his signs. Of course, by then, the people trusted When members of the Junior League of Little Rock approached Rockefeller about helping fund a community center of the arts, he decided if he was going to help fund an arts center, it would be for the entire state. The Arkansas Arts Center was born.
considering sites to locate their new industries. He convened hundreds of meetings at Winrock to discuss various problems besetting the state. As chair of the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission he is credited with helping to attract some 600 new industries employing some 90,000 people to Arkansas during the nine years he served in that post.

He supplemented salaries of state officials in order to attract real professionals after he became governor, and before that he helped pay the salaries of top-notch doctors who would come to the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences to work and teach. He paid lawyers — many of them through the years — to do all kinds of research into insurance scams, prison practices, the death penalty, and voting practices.

Rockefeller gave away in a direct and personal sort of way some $20 million during his lifetime, a good bit of it after he got to Arkansas. Those were dollars he could claim on his tax forms. There was a great deal that could not be claimed, but which nevertheless was charity in the best sense of the word and which swelled his charitable giving to perhaps twice the amount claimed.

He loaned his airplanes for trips to sometimes distant places to plead Arkansas’ case before industrial leaders considering sites to locate their new industries. He convened hundreds of meetings at Winrock to discuss various problems besetting the state. As chair of the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission he is credited with helping to attract some 600 new industries employing some 90,000 people to Arkansas during the nine years he served in that post.

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The Charitable Trust has continued to make grants of money from his remaining assets to the tune of $165 million since his death in 1973. And the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation has distributed some $65 million since it was organized not long after his death. It began with assets provided from the Trust and has continued to grow its asset base on its own. The Arkansas Community Foundation also owes its beginnings to Rockefeller, as do a number of other less visible entities throughout the state.

He felt a great responsibility, hammered into him from the day he was born, to do good things with what he had, and he continued until his death. Rockefeller explained in a letter to his son, Win Paul, written when the latter was just a baby, that “we were born to wealth but from my earliest recollection we were taught to respect the value of the dollar and to recognize that inherited wealth was in a sense given to us in trust — that we were stewards — that while we would live comfortably with that which we inherited and earned, we had the responsibility to see that these resources were also used wisely in the service of our fellow man. I am proud that as a family we learned the lesson of service and in humility have attempted to follow the example of our parents.”

According to his son, now Arkansas’ lieutenant governor, Rockefeller didn’t just write out a check and wait for the next person to come through the door.

“It was a real tangible sort of activity in which one engaged on a momentary, hourly, daily basis … something that was visceral more than merely cerebral,” Rockefeller said.

Anne and Bruce Bartley, children of Rockefeller’s second wife, Jeannette, were also there to observe Rockefeller practicing his philanthropy. Bruce noted, “He was taught from the very beginning that his obligation, his duty, was to give back. I think he felt that almost to a fault. So on any given day, when I would go by the office, he would as likely be involved in some sort of philanthropic or charitable effort as he would be in business or politics. Most likely, he would be doing some sort of good work contributing his time, not just his money.”

Marion Burton, who worked with...
Rockefeller through most of his years in Arkansas and continues on as a trustee of his estate, was always “surprised and impressed” that Rockefeller had such a great sense of dedication to Arkansas and the development of the state.

“We have some other people in the state,” Burton said, “who had resources too, but they weren’t willing to take the risk or make the commitment to do many of the things that he did.”

So yes, being rich was a tough row to hoe, if you were inclined to charity to the extent Rockefeller was. It consumed much of his time and emotions, his energy, and a great deal of his wealth. He went “over” his limit of the amount he could give away on a number of occasions when he just couldn’t say “no” to this cause or that one. He was a soft touch for blacks, in particular, and tried from the day he arrived in Arkansas to make things more equitable. This involved gifts of money to causes that he thought would help in this, but it also meant that as governor he would see to it that blacks found better jobs in government, that all state facilities were desegregated, and that “empowerment” would be spread out to everybody even before that became a buzzword.

One program he initiated was dubbed “Furniture for Families.” Rockefeller got the idea right after he became governor that black people in particular were in need of furniture for their homes. Indeed, many were clamoring for just that kind of help, or that’s how Rockefeller interpreted it. So he proposed a program for them to help themselves. He brought in a man who was an expert in building furniture out of scrap lumber and other discarded items, rented a warehouse to set up the program, and then proceeded to have constructed items of furniture that could be built by the persons in need themselves.

The program bombed, of course. The staff explained to Rockefeller that the people didn’t actually want or care to know how to build their own furniture, even if the raw material and know-how were available. What they wanted, the staff pointed out, was the money to buy their own stuff, ready made. Rockefeller threw in the towel early on that, sent the furniture maker on his way and never mentioned “Furniture for Families” again.
So Rockefeller wasn’t always successful with his charitable efforts or for that matter in convincing other rich Arkansans to participate with him in doing good. He had come from New York with the experience of raising lots of money in the Greater New York Fund effort, and also leading the merger of New York University and Bellevue Medical Center. He helped raise millions of dollars to enable that to happen.

It was in dramatic contrast when Rockefeller set about to establish a health clinic in Perry County, Arkansas. He had noted that the county had no medical services, not even one doctor, and he wanted to do something about it. He got it all organized, helped the county raise money — they came up with $13,000, which was a considerable sum in those days and from a county where the poverty level was quite high — and put up all the other money himself that was needed to build the clinic and staff it with a physician and other health service personnel. It was quite a difference in scale from New York to Perryville, but Rockefeller was not impressed so much with that as with the opportunity to take ideas developed back east and apply them in rural Arkansas.

The clinic did fine for a while, but doctors came and went and nearby Morrilton (which upgraded its hospital and medical services) and Conway weren’t that far away in terms of driving distance. As more people bought automobiles, the clinic that Rockefeller had imagined serving for many years went into a permanent state of decline. Today it has withered away to just a shell. The patient rooms are no longer used, all the health personnel are long since gone, and one doctor, Dr. Ben Hyatt, just uses an office in the clinic for his private practice on a part-time basis. He doesn’t know what will happen when he retires. All the board of directors are deceased; no one was ever replaced.

This can only be described as a failure. The dream was not realized. The charity did not “take.” There were other failures in Rockefeller’s life of philanthropy, but there were remarkable successes as well. One example is the Arkansas Arts Center. The Junior League of Little Rock came to Mr. and Mrs. Rockefeller with a plan to raise $250,000 to develop a community center of the arts in Little Rock.

In an interview published in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette in 2000, Jeanne Hamilton remembers she and several colleagues, who were pushing the pro-
ject with her, had lunch with the Rockefellers. He responded to their entreaty, "Well, girls (most assuredly not politically correct now and probably not then, either) if we’re going to build an arts center, let’s do it right." Ms. Hamilton said that opened whole new vistas and they made an executive decision right then and there not to build a Little Rock Arts Center but an Arkansas Arts Center.

In a letter some time afterward, Rockefeller explained to a New York friend, referring to himself and his wife, “we felt that their sights were too low and essentially would only produce disappointment.” Mr. and Mrs. Rockefeller had agreed to help if a statewide campaign were organized. It was, and the Rockefellers stumped the state, raising money and increasing the interest of Arkansans in something of great and enduring quality that would enhance the cultural life and understanding of them and their children and grandchildren.

Rockefeller contributed $432,426 through that year and would contribute another $1.6 million before his death, with more to come from the Charitable Trust afterward. Mrs. Rockefeller also financially supported the Arts Center and served as both a trustee and then president. A great deal of the credit for the success of the Arkansas Arts Center must also go to Townsend Wolfe, the director for many years, who was a rare combination of excellent artistic taste and talent and impressive organizational skills. He made the Rockefeller’s money go beyond anything even imagined by his predecessors.

In 1982, when the Winthrop Rockefeller Gallery was added, Wolfe pointed out that it had no Rockefeller money in it at all. “We did not approach any member of the family, the Charitable Trust, or the Foundation. It was a way in which I wanted this community indeed to honor someone who had done so much for us.”

So did Rockefeller change Arkansas with his philanthropy? When you combine that with his leadership in other areas — business and politics in particular — you have to agree that he did. Arkansas after Rockefeller is clearly not the same as the Arkansas he found when he arrived. His own life of philanthropy and leadership did indeed change Arkansas.