

Berkshire Hathaway Letter 1972

To the Stockholders of Berkshire Hathaway Inc.:

Operating earnings of Berkshire Hathaway during 1972 amounted to a highly satisfactory 19.8% of beginning shareholders' equity. Significant improvement was recorded in all of our major lines of business, but the most dramatic gains were in insurance underwriting profit. Due to an unusual convergence of favorable factors—diminishing auto accident frequency, moderating accident severity, and an absence of major catastrophes—underwriting profit margins achieved a level far above averages of the past or expectations of the future.

While we anticipate a modest decrease in operating earnings during 1973, it seems clear that our diversification moves of recent years have established a significantly higher base of normal earning power. Your present management assumed policy control of the company in May, 1965. Eight years later, our 1972 operating earnings of \$11,116,256 represent a return many-fold higher than would have been produced had we continued to devote our resources entirely to the textile business. At the end of the 1964 fiscal year, shareholders' equity totaled \$22,138,753. Since that time, no additional equity capital has been introduced into the business, either through cash sale or through merger. On the contrary, some stock has been reacquired, reducing outstanding shares by 14%. The increase in book value per share from \$19.46 at fiscal year-end 1964 to \$69.72 at 1972 year-end amounts to about 16.5% compounded annually.

Our three major acquisitions of recent years have all worked out exceptionally well—from both the financial and human standpoints. In all three cases, the founders were major sellers and received significant proceeds in cash—and, in all three cases, the same individuals, Jack Ringwalt, Gene Abegg and Vic Raab, have continued to run the businesses with undiminished energy and imagination which have resulted in further improvement of the fine records previously established.

We will continue to search for logical extensions of our present operations, and also for new operations which will allow us to continue to employ our capital effectively.

Textile Operations

As predicted in last year's annual report, the textile industry experienced a pickup in 1972. In recent years, Ken Chace and Ralph Rigby have developed an outstanding sales organization enjoying a growing reputation for service and reliability. Manufacturing capabilities have been restructured to complement our sales strengths.

Helped by the industry recovery, we experienced some payoff from these efforts in 1972. Inventories were controlled, minimizing close-out losses in addition to minimizing capital requirements; product mix was greatly improved. While the general level of profitability of the industry will always be the primary factor in determining the level of our textile earnings, we believe that our relative position within the industry has noticeably improved. The outlook for 1973 is good.

Insurance Underwriting

Our exceptional underwriting profits during 1972 in the large traditional area of our insurance business at National Indemnity present a paradox. They served to swell substantially total corporate profits for 1972, but the factors which produced such profits induced exceptional amounts of new competition at what we believe to be a non-compensatory level of rates. Overall, we probably would have retained better prospects for the next five years if profits had not risen so dramatically this year.

Substantial new competition was forecast in our annual report for last year and we experienced in 1972 the decline in premium volume that we stated such competition implied. Our belief is that industry underwriting profit margins will narrow substantially in 1973 or 1974 and, in time, this may produce an environment in which our historical growth can be resumed. Unfortunately, there is a lag between deterioration of underwriting results and tempering of competition. During this period we expect to continue to have negative volume comparisons in our traditional operation. Our seasoned management, headed by Jack Ringwalt and Phil Liesche, will continue to underwrite to produce a profit, although not at the level of 1972, and base our rates on long-term expectations rather than short-term hopes. Although this approach has meant dips in volume from time to time in the past, it has produced excellent long-term results.

Also as predicted in last year's report, our reinsurance division experienced many of the same competitive factors in 1972. A multitude of new organizations entered what has historically been a rather small field, and rates were often cut substantially, and we believe unsoundly, particularly in the catastrophe area. The past year turned out to be unusually free of catastrophes and our underwriting experience was good.

George Young has built a substantial and profitable reinsurance operation in just a few years. In the longer term we plan to be a very major factor in the reinsurance field, but an immediate expansion of volume is not sensible against a background of deteriorating rates. In our view, underwriting exposures are greater than ever. When the loss potential inherent in such exposures becomes an actuality, repricing will take place which should give us a chance to expand significantly.

In the "home state" operation, our oldest and largest such company, Cornhusker Casualty Company, operating in Nebraska only, achieved good underwriting results. In the second full year, the home state marketing appeal has been proven with the attainment of volume on the order of one-third of that achieved by "old line" giants who have operated in the state for many decades.

Our two smaller companies, in Minnesota and Texas, had unsatisfactory loss ratios on very small volume. The home state managements understand that underwriting profitably is the yardstick of success and that operations can only be expanded significantly when it is clear that we are doing the right job in the underwriting area. Expense ratios at the new companies are also high, but that is to be expected when they are in the development stage.

John Ringwalt has done an excellent job of launching this operation, and plans to expand into at least one additional state during 1973. While there is much work yet to be done, the home state operation appears to have major long-range potential.

Last year it was reported that we had acquired Home and Automobile Insurance Company of Chicago. We felt good about the acquisition at the time, and we feel even better now. Led by Vic Raab, this company continued its excellent record in 1972. During 1973 we expect to enter the Florida (Dade County) and California (Los Angeles) markets with the same sort of specialized urban auto coverage which Home and Auto has practiced so successfully in Cook County. Vic has the managerial capacity to run a much larger operation. Our expectation is that Home and Auto will expand significantly within a few years.

Insurance Investment Results

We were most fortunate to experience dramatic gains in premium volume from 1969 to 1971 coincidental with virtually record-high interest rates. Large amounts of investable funds were thus received at a time when they could be put to highly advantageous use. Most of these funds were placed in tax-exempt bonds and our investment income, which has increased from \$2,025,201 in 1969 to \$6,755,242 in 1972, is subject to a low effective tax rate.

Our bond portfolio possesses unusually good call protection, and we will benefit for many years to come from the high average yield of the present portfolio. The lack of current premium growth, however, will moderate substantially the growth in investment income during the next several years.

Banking Operations

Our banking subsidiary, The Illinois Bank and Trust Co. of Rockford, maintained its position of industry leadership in profitability. After-tax earnings of 2.2% on average deposits in 1972 are the more remarkable when evaluated against such moderating factors as: (1) a mix of 50% time deposits heavily weighted toward consumer savings instruments, all paying the maximum rates permitted by law; (2) an unvaryingly strong liquid position and avoidance of money-market borrowings; (3) a loan policy which has produced a net charge-off ratio in the last two years of about 5% of that of the average commercial bank. This record is a direct tribute to the leadership of Gene Abegg and Bob Kline who run a bank where the owners and the depositors can both eat well and sleep well.

During 1972, interest paid to depositors was double the amount paid in 1969. We have aggressively sought consumer time deposits, but have not pushed for large "money market" certificates of deposit although, during the past several years, they have generally been a less costly source of time funds.

During the past year, loans to our customers expanded approximately 38%. This is considerably more than indicated by the enclosed balance sheet which includes \$10.9 million in short-term commercial paper in the 1971 loan total, but which has no such paper included at the end of 1972.

Our position as “Rockford’s Leading Bank” was enhanced during 1972. Present rate structures, a decrease in investable funds due to new Federal Reserve collection procedures, and a probable increase in already substantial non-federal taxes make it unlikely that Illinois National will be able to increase its earnings during 1973.

Financial

On March 15, 1973, Berkshire Hathaway borrowed \$20 million at 8% from twenty institutional lenders. This loan is due March 1, 1993, with principal repayments beginning March 1, 1979. From the proceeds, \$9 million was used to repay our bank loan and the balance is being invested in insurance subsidiaries. Periodically, we expect that there will be opportunities to achieve significant expansion in our insurance business and we intend to have the financial resources available to maximize such opportunities.

Our subsidiaries in banking and insurance have major fiduciary responsibilities to their customers. In these operations we maintain capital strength far above industry norms, but still achieve a good level of profitability on such capital. We will continue to adhere to the former objective and make every effort to continue to maintain the latter.

Warren E. Buffett
Chairman of the Board
March 16, 1973