

Berkshire Hathaway Letter 1975

To the Stockholders of Berkshire Hathaway Inc.:

Last year, when discussing the prospects for 1975, we stated “the outlook for 1975 is not encouraging.” This forecast proved to be distressingly accurate. Our operating earnings for 1975 were \$6,713,592, or \$6.85 per share, producing a return on beginning shareholders’ equity of 7.6%. This is the lowest return on equity experienced since 1967. Furthermore, as explained later in this letter, a large segment of these earnings resulted from Federal income tax refunds which will not be available to assist performance in 1976.

On balance, however, current trends indicate a somewhat brighter 1976. Operations and prospects will be discussed in greater detail below, under specific industry titles. Our expectation is that significantly better results in textiles, earnings added from recent acquisitions, an increase in equity in earnings of Blue Chip Stamps resulting from an enlarged ownership interest, and at least a moderate improvement in insurance underwriting results will more than offset other possible negatives to produce greater earnings in 1976. The major variable—and by far the most difficult to predict with any feeling of confidence—is the insurance underwriting result. Present *very tentative* indications are that underwriting improvement is in prospect. If such improvement is moderate, our overall gain in earnings in 1976 likewise will prove moderate. More significant underwriting improvement could give us a major gain in earnings.

Textile Operations

During the first half of 1975 sales of textile products were extremely depressed, resulting in major production curtailments. Operations ran at a significant loss, with employment down as much as 53% from a year earlier.

In contrast with previous cyclical slumps, however, most textile producers quickly reduced production to match incoming orders, thus preventing massive industry-wide accumulation of inventories. Such cutbacks caused quite prompt reflection at the mill operating level when demand revived at retail. As a result, beginning about midyear business rebounded at a fairly rapid rate. This “V” shaped textile depression, while one of the sharpest on record, also became one of the shortest ones in our experience. The fourth quarter produced an excellent profit for our textile division, bringing results for the year into the black.

On April 28, 1975 we acquired Waumbec Mills Incorporated and Waumbec Dyeing and Finishing Co., Inc. located in Manchester, New Hampshire. These companies have long sold woven goods into the drapery and apparel trade. Such drapery materials complement and extend the line already marketed through the Home Fabrics Division of Berkshire Hathaway. In the period prior to our acquisition, the company had run at a very substantial loss, with only about 55% of looms in operation and the finishing plant operating at about 50% of capacity. Losses continued on a reduced basis for a few months after acquisition. Outstanding efforts by our manufacturing, administrative and sales people now have produced major improvements, which, coupled with the general revival in textiles, have moved Waumbec into a significant profit position.

We expect a good level of profits from textiles in 1976. Continued progress is being made in the movement of Waumbec goods into areas of traditional marketing strength of Berkshire Hathaway, productivity should improve in both the weaving and finishing areas at Manchester, and textile demand continues to firm at decent prices.

We have great confidence in the ability of Ken Chace and his team to maximize our strengths in textiles. Therefore, we continue to look for ways to increase further our scale of operations while avoiding major capital investment in new fixed assets which we consider unwise, considering the relatively low returns historically earned on large scale investment in new textile equipment.

Insurance Underwriting

The property and casualty insurance industry had its worst year in history during 1975. We did our share—unfortunately, even somewhat more. Really disastrous results were concentrated in auto and long-tail (contracts where settlement of loss usually occurs long after the loss event) lines.

Economic inflation, with the increase in cost of repairing humans and property far outstripping the general rate of inflation, produced ultimate loss costs which soared beyond premium levels established in a different cost environment. “Social” inflation caused the liability concept to be expanded continuously, far beyond limits contemplated when rates were established—in effect, adding coverage beyond what was paid for. Such social inflation increased significantly both the propensity to sue and the possibility of collecting mammoth jury awards for events not previously considered statistically significant in the establishment of rates. Furthermore, losses to policyholders which otherwise would result from mushrooming insolvencies of companies inadequately reacting to these problems are divided through Guaranty Funds among remaining solvent insurers. These trends will continue, and should moderate any optimism which otherwise might be justified by the sharply increased rates now taking effect.

Berkshire Hathaway’s insurance subsidiaries have a disproportionate concentration of business in precisely the lines which produced the worst underwriting results in 1975. Such lines produce unusually high investment income and, therefore, have been particularly attractive to us under previous underwriting conditions. However, our “mix” has been very disadvantageous during the past two years and it well may be that we will remain positioned in the more difficult part of the insurance spectrum during the inflationary years ahead.

The only segment to show improved results for us during 1975 was the “home state” operation, which has made continuous progress under the leadership of John Ringwalt. Although still operating at a significant underwriting loss, the combined ratio improved from 1974. Adjusted for excess costs attributable to operations still in the start-up phase, underwriting results are satisfactory. Texas United Insurance Company, a major problem a few years ago, has made outstanding progress since George Billing has assumed command. With an almost totally new agency force, Texas United was the winner of the “Chairman’s Cup” for achievement of the lowest loss ratio among the home state companies. Cornhusker Casualty Company, oldest and largest of the home state companies, continues its outstanding operation with major gains in premium volume and a combined ratio slightly under 100. Substantial premium growth is

expected at the home state operation during 1976; the measurement of success, however, will continue to be the achievement of a low combined ratio.

Our traditional business at National Indemnity Company, representing well over half of our insurance volume, had an extraordinarily bad underwriting year in 1975. Although rates were increased frequently and significantly, they continually lagged loss experience throughout the year. Several special programs instituted in the early 1970s have caused significant losses, as well as a heavy drain on managerial time and energies. Present indications are that premium volume will show a major increase in 1976, and we hope that underwriting results will improve.

Reinsurance suffered the same problems as our direct business during 1975. The same remedial efforts were attempted. Because reinsurance contract settlements lag those of direct business, it well may be that any upturn in results from our direct insurance business will precede those of the reinsurance segment.

At our Home and Automobile Insurance Company subsidiary, now writing auto business only in the Cook County area of Illinois, experience continued very bad in 1975 resulting in a management change in October. John Seward was made President at that time, and has energetically and imaginatively implemented a completely revamped underwriting approach.

Overall, our insurance operation will produce a substantial gain in premium volume during 1976. Much of this will reflect increased rates rather than more policies. Under normal circumstances such a gain in volume would be welcome, but our emotions are mixed at present. Underwriting experience *should* improve—and we expect it to—but our confidence level is not high. While our efforts will be devoted to obtaining a combined ratio below 100, it is unlikely to be attained during 1976.

Insurance Investments

Gains in investment income were moderate during 1975 because premium volume remained flat and underwriting losses reduced funds available for investment. Invested assets, measured at cost at yearend, were close to identical with the level at the beginning of the year.

At the end of 1974 the net unrealized loss in the stock section of our portfolio amounted to about \$17 million, but we expressed the opinion, nevertheless, that this portfolio overall represented good value at its carrying value of cost. During 1975 a net capital loss of \$2,888,000 before tax credits was realized, but our present expectation is that 1976 will be a year of realized capital gain. On March 31, 1976 our net unrealized gains applicable to equities amounted to about \$15 million. Our equity investments are heavily concentrated in a few companies which are selected based on favorable economic characteristics, competent and honest management, and a purchase price attractive when measured against the yardstick of value to a private owner.

When such criteria are maintained, our intention is to hold for a long time; indeed, our largest equity investment is 467,150 shares of Washington Post “B” stock with a cost of \$10.6 million, which we expect to hold permanently.

With this approach, stock market fluctuations are of little importance to us—except as they may provide buying opportunities—but business performance is of major importance. On this score we have been delighted with progress made by practically all of the companies in which we now have significant investments.

We have continued to maintain a strong liquid position in our insurance companies. In last year's annual report we explained how variations of 1/10 of 1% in interest rates result in million dollar swings in market value of our bonds. We consider such market fluctuation of minor importance as our liquidity and general financial strength make it highly improbable that bonds will have to be sold at times other than those of our choice.

Banking

It is difficult to find adjectives to describe the performance of Eugene Abegg, Chief Executive of Illinois National Bank and Trust of Rockford, Illinois, our banking subsidiary.

In a year when many banking operations experienced major troubles, Illinois National continued its outstanding record. Against average loans of about \$65 million, net loan losses were \$24,000, or .04%. Unusually high liquidity is maintained with obligations of the U. S. Government and its agencies, all due within one year, at yearend amounting to about 75% of demand deposits. Maximum rates of interest are paid on all consumer savings instruments which make up more than \$2 million, it consistently has generated favorable earnings. Positioned as we now are with respect to income taxes, the addition of a solid source of taxable income is particularly welcome.

General Review

Your present management assumed responsibility at Berkshire Hathaway in May, 1965. At the end of the prior fiscal year (September, 1964) the net worth of the Company was \$22.1 million, and 1,137,778 common shares were outstanding, with a resulting book value of \$19.46 per share. Ten years earlier, Berkshire Hathaway's net worth had been \$53.4 million. Dividends and stock repurchases accounted for over \$21 million of the decline in company net worth, but aggregate net losses of \$9.8 million had been incurred on sales of \$595 million during the decade.

In 1965, two New England textile mills were the company's only sources of earning power and, before Ken Chace assumed responsibility for the operation, textile earnings had been erratic and, cumulatively, something less than zero subsequent to the merger of Berkshire Fine Spinning and Hathaway Manufacturing. Since 1964, net worth has been built to \$92.9 million, or \$94.92 per share. We have acquired total, or virtually total ownership of six businesses through negotiated purchases for cash (or cash and notes) from private owners, started four others, purchased a 31.5% interest in a large affiliate enterprise and reduced the number of outstanding shares of Berkshire Hathaway to 979,569. Overall, equity per share has compounded at an annual rate of slightly over 15%.

While 1975 was a major disappointment, efforts will continue to develop growing and diversified sources of earnings. Our objective is a conservatively financed and highly liquid business—possessing extra margins of balance sheet strength consistent with the fiduciary

obligations inherent in the banking and insurance industries—which will produce a long term rate of return on equity capital exceeding that of American industry as a whole.

Warren E. Buffett, Chairman