



## Robert Kearns, Inventor of Intermittent Windshield Wipers and Battled Car Companies, Dies at 77

DETROIT February 25, 2005; The AP reported that Robert Kearns, the inventor of intermittent windshield wipers who won multimillion-dollar judgments against [Ford](#) and Chrysler for using his idea, has died. He was 77.

Kearns died of cancer Feb. 9 at his home in suburban Baltimore, his family said.

Kearns, a onetime Wayne State University professor, received numerous patents in 1967 for his design for wipers that paused between swipes, making them useful in very light rain or mist. The invention allows the driver to set the interval at which the wiper sweeps the window.

He shopped his invention around to various automakers but did not reach a licensing deal with any of them. But carmakers eventually began offering intermittent wipers as standard or optional equipment.

Kearns sued [Ford Motor Co.](#) in 1978 and Chrysler in 1982, claiming patent infringement.

In 1990, a jury decided that Ford infringed on Kearns' patent, though it concluded the infringement was not deliberate. Ford had contended the patent was invalid because the windshield system contained no new concepts. But Kearns argued a new combination of parts made his invention unique.

That jury failed to reach agreement on how much he should be awarded, and another jury later ordered Ford to pay Kearns \$6.3 million, trimmed by a judge to \$5.2 million. To settle the case, the [car](#) giant later agreed to pay \$10.2 million and to drop all appeals.

Chrysler ended up being ordered to pay Kearns \$18.7 million plus interest. The Supreme Court rejected Chrysler's bid to overturn the award in 1995.

"I don't think the goal was the magnitude of the money," Kearns said when the Ford case was ended. "What I saw (as) my role was to defend the patent system. If I don't go further, there really isn't a patent system."

Later, though, Kearns' lawsuit against General Motors Corp. was dismissed, as were his lawsuits against foreign carmakers. Much of the money he was awarded went to legal expenses.

Kearns, who was acting as his own lawyer during parts of the long battle, was disappointed because the courts didn't bar the companies from continuing to use the wipers. He had hoped not just to collect royalties but make the devices himself.

U.S. District Judge Avern Cohn, who presided over five of Kearns' trials, said Kearns was frustrated because he wanted to be a major manufacturer.

"He was feisty, determined and he established the fact that he made a contribution to the auto industry that was unique," Cohn said. "His zeal got ahead of his judgment."

Maureen Kearns said her father's home was filled with legal files. After a point, she said, "his life was simply this battle."

Kearns was born in Gary, Ind., and grew up in suburban Detroit. He was a member of the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency, during World War II. After the war, he earned engineering degrees from the University of Detroit and Wayne State University and a doctorate from Case Western Reserve University.

Kearns is survived by two daughters, four sons, a brother and seven grandchildren.

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