

Werner Knoop

Werner Knoop was a dominant force in the construction industry as well as in the City of Little Rock. He had a multifaceted career as a general contractor, civil engineer owner of a steel company and owner of a brick company in addition to serving as a community leader. In describing this great man, words like integrity, vision, capability and leadership come to mind.

Knoop was born in Iowa in 1902. He received a Bachelor of Science degree in engineering from the now Iowa State University. He and his wife Faith moved to Little Rock in 1929 where he began his business career as a part owner of Capitol Steel Company. In 1940 he became a consulting engineer and one of his many outstanding projects was the design of the old Veteran's Administration Building at Roosevelt Road and I-30 in Little Rock. During that period of time he served as president of Eureka Brick and Tile Company and vice president of Clarksville Machine Works in Clarksville.

In 1946 he, along with P.W. Baldwin and Olen Cates formed The Baldwin Company, which was the predecessor to Baldwin & Shell Construction Company. He was responsible for various building projects throughout the state such as the Murphy Oil office building, Warner Brown Hospital and Union County Hospital all located in El Dorado. Industrial plants for Alcoa, Reynolds and General Motors. Landmark buildings across the state such as the Pine Bluff Convention Center in Pine Bluff and the Rice Growers Corporation office building in Stuttgart. Buildings on college campuses included the University of Arkansas, Ouachita Baptist University, Hendrix College, Henderson State University, University of Central Arkansas, University of Arkansas at Little Rock and Lyon College. Some projects in Little Rock were Baptist Hospital, St. Vincent Hospital, Barton Coliseum, Orbit Valve, Hall High School, Westinghouse and Town & Country Shopping Center. Also, he was involved in the construction of a number of churches including First Baptist Church, Pulaski Heights Baptist Church and his own church, Second Presbyterian all in Little Rock.

Mr. Knoop was very active in the Associated General Contractors (AGC). He served as chairman on various committees and he was the chapter president in 1969. He was awarded the Arkansas chapter's Distinguished Service Award and he served on the board of directors of the AGC of America for several years.

As Gordon Wittenberg stated, "Mr. Knoop was the individual who created avenues for the AGC and the American Institute of Architects to work, plan and cooperate with each other. Many of those developments of that time are still in use today and have provided a better construction industry in Arkansas."

Mr. Knoop served for six years on the executive committee and finance committee of the National Safety Council, a position that no one from Arkansas has filled before or since. His time spent on the Safety Council inspired him to formulate for The Baldwin Company the first known written safety program in the state.

He was a member of the Rotary Club, served on various boards such as YMCA and Presbyterian Village. He served as president of the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce and he received the William F. Rector Award. He was also very active in the Second Presbyterian Church as an Elder and chairman of the building committee.

Perhaps his greatest public service was helping to form the Good Government Committee to replace the mayor-council form of government. He was one of six members of the Good Government Committee elected to the new city manager form of government. At the city board of director's first meeting, he was elected mayor for what would be one of two terms as mayor.

During the Central High School crisis he was a guiding force in bringing together different factions of the community. He displayed leadership by being able to create a calm atmosphere among diverse elements during stressful times. As mayor he hired the first city manager and created a businesslike city hall. Also, he established the master drainage plan and the Little Rock Port Authority that is responsible for the tremendous river traffic that the Little Rock area now enjoys. He worked with Representative Wilbur Mills in planning and beginning the Eighth Street Expressway, now known as Wilbur Mills Expressway or I-630. It has been stated that Representative Mills received the credit for I-630, but Mr. Knoop was the person with the vision who helped to make the expressway possible.

Early on, Mr. Knoop had joined with other community leaders to bring the Little Rock Air Force Base to Jacksonville. He served as president of the Little Rock Air Base Community Council and was very instrumental in the development of the community relationship between the Little Rock Air Force Base and the people of the greater Little Rock area.

He distinguished himself as a community leader by serving as president of the Little Rock School Board, president of the Junior College Board (now the University of Arkansas at Little Rock) and was instrumental in the purchase of the 80 acres of land that is now the home of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Additionally, he was responsible for establishing the Advertising and Promotion Committee, which operates the Little Rock Convention Center, and he was elected chairman of the Little Rock Parking Authority where he served for seventeen years until his death.

Gordon Wittenberg may have summarized the life of Werner Knoop best when he stated, "He always tried to do everything in the best possible way and the remarkable thing is he left so many things much better because of his involvement. He left better manufacturing, better building contracting and he left better government."