

In Memoriam

Robert L. French



Robert L. French, 86, passed away on January 4, 2007 in Fort Wayne, IN. He was born in Albany in 1920 and was a U.S. Army World War II veteran.

French started out in the construction industry as the owner of French Construction, where he remained for ten years. In 1973 he founded Engineered Truss Co. in Fort Wayne. French worked there for over 30 years, up until his retirement in 2002.

French's long career in the industry yielded some humorous stories. "One of my grandfather's favorite stories was from the early days of Engineered Truss. It was back in the '70s when he received a contract to build 84' span trusses. It wasn't until after the first set of trusses was built that he realized they couldn't get them out of the building. They ended up having to cut a hole in the door in order to fit the peak and get the trusses out. We still laugh about that story to this day," shares grandson Bob Koorsen.

French will be remembered most for the unique relationship he shared with his employees. "His employees were family and that is how he treated them; he was just the kind of guy that would give you anything. One of the things he did each year was throw a holiday party and he was very generous with bonuses at Christmas," recalls Koorsen. When he retired there were four employees of over 20 years, and one of over 30 years. "He was very invested in his employees; he often hired relatives or friends of his employees."

Not only was French an avid Boston Red Sox and Indiana State University basketball fan, but he loved to spend time outside at his farm or in the garden. Koorsen recalls that "he would take off work at 3:30 every day to go home and tend to his farm, which was like a petting zoo with horses, dogs, cats, rabbits and chickens. We also used to make fun of him for how much he enjoyed mowing the lawn...he did it almost religiously, like he owned a golf course." He also loved spending quality time with his grandchildren.

French is survived by his wife of 63 years, Betty French; daughters, Jackie (Paul) Harmon, Vickie (Ron) Caccamo all of Fort Wayne; grandchildren, Debbie Harmon of Fort Wayne, Bob Koorsen of Grand Rapids, MI, Dan Harmon, Chris (Heidi) Caccamo, Kelly (Joe) Fyock, Erika (Andy) Adamonis all of Fort Wayne, Holly (Kris) Camarro of Honolulu, HI; eight great-grandchildren and several nieces and nephews. **SBC**

Thanks to Bob Koorsen and the Fort Wayne Newspapers for contributing to this piece.

Submissions to "In Memoriam" can be emailed to editor@sbcmag.info. Photos are encouraged and will run as space allows. Submissions may be edited for grammar, length and clarity.

Abraham Knepp



Abraham Knepp, 64, of Montgomery, IN, died January 2, 2007 in an airplane crash near the Daviess County Airport.

Knepp founded K & K Industries, a component manufacturing operation, 30 years ago with three employees, a small plant and one delivery truck. From the very beginning, he instilled a philosophy of honesty, fairness and quality. K & K was named Daviess County's Business of the Year in 2000.

A Mennonite minister, Knepp's strong faith played a role in his business. Knepp once said his business is run by "myself, the bank and the Lord, and the Lord is the chairman of the board. God plays a big part in this business because of the adversity overcome without destroying the corporation." K&K vice president Jerry Stoll said Knepp hated the term "boss." "He wanted to be a friend to every employee. He was a fine man," said Stoll, who worked next to Knepp for 31 years.

Knepp was known to be both generous and resilient. Knepp was known by locals as the man willing to donate his time and considerable resources for anyone in need. Jerry Harbstreit, Former Daviess Co. Sheriff, comments, "He's donated anything you'd ask him or he'd thought of. A situation like today [Tuesday], he would've been here to help."

Knepp's resilience was tested first in 1980 when a major fire burned K & K Industries to the ground. Competitors rallied together and helped him every way they could, which made it possible for the plant to be back up and running only 90 days after the devastating fire. Tragedy struck again in November of 2005 when a tornado flattened K & K. This time not only did local competitors step in, but people from around the nation pitched in as well, allowing Knepp to rebuild his business for the second time. The kindness demonstrated by his competitors wasn't the only thing that K & K had to be thankful for. Knepp had made a decision to send all of his employees home only 30 minutes before the tornado struck. Had he not taken that precaution, Knepp might have lost more than his facility.

Although his death was tragic, friends say he died doing what was his greatest passion. "I can smile and say Abe went doing one of the greatest loves in his life, and that was flying," agreed longtime friend Glen Graber of Graber Post Buildings.

"Abe's love was flying, and he always said God was his copilot," said Daviess County Sheriff Steve Cox, who has worked alongside Knepp since he started as jail chaplain almost 28 years ago.

Stoll says, "The company will carry on his spirit of giving and integrity. He would certainly want things to go on." K&K sent out a letter to their customers addressing Knepp's passing. "We here

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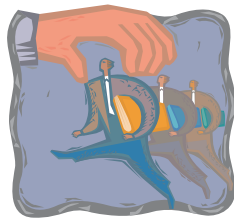
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at K&K Industries have been greatly affected by the death of our founder, owner and friend, Abe A. Knepp...The family and all the employees at K&K will strive to carry out Abe's will and wishes. We will continue to provide to you the best possible service, quality products and integrity as Abe's life mentored to us."

He is survived by wife, Viola; mother, Elizabeth; daughters, Sharon Wittmer and Darla Yoder; sons, Gary and Nelson; sisters, Leah and Wilma Wagler, Katherine Lengacher and Lorene Knepp; brothers, Leroy, Henry, Amos Jr. and Alva; and 15 grandchildren.

In 1985 Knepp founded a non-profit organization, the Fresh Start Rehabilitation and Training Center, where men can come for assistance in finding answers to spiritual and emotional problems and are encouraged to be responsible citizens. Memorial contributions in Abe's honor can be made to Fresh Start, 113 N Industrial Park Rd, Washington, IN 47501 (812/524-3399). **SBC**

Thanks to the *Washington Times Herald*, the *Evansville Courier & Press* and the *14wfe News* (www.14wfe.com) for contributing to this piece.

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