



Brother William Knudsen

Presented to Palestine Lodge No. 357 - March 5, 2020

Bro. Douglas Mooney, Historian

Worshipful Master,

I think every member of Palestine is aware of our connection to the auto industry. When Brother Henry Ford joined the lodge he was still working at the Edison Illuminating Company. Mass production was perfected here, through the hard work and intellect of a Palestiner.

It may surprise our brothers to learn that the Arsenal of Democracy, that essential display of industrial might that turned the tide of war and pushed darkness out of Europe and Asia, was also born here, for its architect was a Palestiner.

William Signius Knudsen was born in Denmark, where he was trained as a mechanic. In 1900 his brother was working for a Danish firm that had secured a meeting with Keim, an American bicycle manufacturer located in New York. William was asked to come along to act as an interpreter.

Keim was impressed with Knudsen, and offered him a job, which he accepted. He soon was making improvements to their processes and production methods. Around this time Keim started to supply some brass parts and stampings to the fledgling auto industry. Knudsen's improvements helped secure the largest contract Keim had seen, which was with the Ford Motor Company.

A few years later Ford bought Keim, a move that Henry Ford said was brought about by the desire to secure Knudsen's services. Knudsen soon moved to Detroit and was put to work on Ford's production systems.

The Northern Light, a Scottish Rite publication, reported that Ford induced Knudsen to join Palestine Lodge, where he was raised on November 13, 1914.

Knudsen was put in charge of the creation of the sprawling Ford Rouge complex, the most advanced production site in the world. But he soon was mired in company politics and internal battles over the project and elected to leave Ford. He joined a small supplier called Ireland and Matthews Manufacturing, where he developed a new muffler, which was sold to Chevrolet.

General Motors offered him a position, and soon he was running the Chevrolet division. At a dealer meeting he told them he wanted them to go "one for one" with Ford in sales, which was an audacious goal. Soon Chevrolet was beating the aging Model T in annual sales, and Knudsen worked his way up to being the President of General Motors.

Though he had left the Ford Motor Company, his friendship with Brother Ford remained steadfast. In 1938 Knudsen was the President of General Motors and spoke at Ford's 75th birthday party at the Masonic Temple, praising his humanitarian efforts.

In 1940 the world was sliding into widespread conflict and President Roosevelt was concerned about the state of the U.S. Military and our ability to support our allies. He called on Knudsen to leave GM and accept the job of Chairman of the Office of Production Management and also to become a member of the National Defense Advisory Commission. He left behind his \$200,000 salary, and accepted pay of \$1 per year. He also convinced other industrialists to join him in Washington at the same rate.

As the US was pulled into the war, politicians started to resent his power and started to criticize the time it took to re-tool factories, a process they did not understand. Roosevelt helped to alleviate this problem by commissioning Brother Knudsen as a Lieutenant General in the United States Army, and appointed him as Director of Production. This is the highest initial rank a civilian has ever been given upon entering the Army. The move by Roosevelt took Knudsen out of the political sphere, and gave him greater freedom to oversee U.S. military production.

Under his guidance the US total military aircraft production went from 3,000 to 300,000. Shipbuilding boomed. Manufacturers turned their focus to trucks, tanks, munitions, and other items needed in the war effort. Knudsen attributed the victory in World War II to “smothering our enemies with production.”

After the war he traveled to Europe to survey damage to General Motors plants. He stopped in Copenhagen, his hometown, and received an invitation to the Palace. King Christian X, who was also the head of Danish Masonry, pinned the Royal Order of Dannebrog on his uniform, the highest honor bestowed by Denmark and one that was said to give him the greatest pride.

General Motors had a strict retirement age and would not let him resume his old position at the conclusion of the war. Instead he joined the board, and after suffering a stroke in 1947, he passed away at his home in Detroit in 1948. Flags at 97 GM facilities and all American Ford plants were lowered to half-staff. GM halted production for two minutes during his funeral service. He was buried at Acacia Park in Beverly Hills.

Brother Knudsen was a 33rd degree Scottish Rite Mason, a Knight Templar in Detroit Commandery, and was a recipient of the Army's Distinguished Service Medal in 1944 and 1945.

On Thursday, October 25, 1945, Brother Knudsen presented Palestine life memberships to Brothers Harry E. Andrews and Archie McKay, and presented the new class of Master Masons with their Palestine member buttons during a third degree dinner in the Fountain Room here at the Detroit Temple.

For to us he is simply Brother William S. Knudsen, a man whose friend saw his promise, and brought him towards light. He must have listened well when he was presented with his apron, for though he'd been instrumental in a great military victory, he'd been lauded at home and abroad, and received high honors within the fraternity, he never forgot his mother lodge.

Lodge to Honor Leading Members

Palestine Lodge members, who have excelled in their fields, will be honored Thursday at a Third Degree dinner in the Masonic Temple's Fountain Room.

William S. Knudsen will present life memberships to Harry E. Andrews and Archie McKay. Palestine buttons will be presented to the newly raised class of Master Masons.



