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Joseph Burke Knapp: "A Barnacle on the Ship of Progress"

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JOSEPH BURKE KNAPP:
“A BARNACLE ON THE SHIP
OF PROGRESS”



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ALMOST ALL OF US face challenging times. Whether it is losing a loved one, being involved in a war, or going bankrupt, the unifying factor that defines us is how we rise from these tragedies. It seems that there are so many stories of people giving up when times get rough, and not enough about someone who rose above to triumph over the troubling times. Joseph Knapp did just that. While Joe might have seemed like a normal family man and businessperson, his life was filled with tragedies that would have stopped many people from moving on. The defining characteristic of this man was his drive for success. His family remembers him as a

man who would never say no, who stayed true to his word, and who would fight for what he wanted. He never let tragedies stop him from becoming the successful man he knew he wanted to be. This is Joseph Knapp's story, his rise from tragedy to triumph.

Joseph Burke Knapp was born on October 3, 1880, in Evansville, Indiana, to Mary and Dr. Emil Knapp.¹ His father was a well-known dental surgeon of the town and was credited with taking graduate courses each year to stay in tune with the evolving profession.² Joe went on to attend the local high school and made quite a name for himself in athletics.³ He was even the captain of his high school's football team.⁴

He started a promising career at Purdue in 1900. With a nickname of "Joeie" and an "Evansville *Morning Courier* in his hand," he spent his freshman year acquiring many friends, all the while being known for his shy nature.⁵ He soon joined the Sigma Nu fraternity, the class baseball team, the football team, the basketball team, and the athletic association, of which he was vice president during his freshman year. While Joe was an outstanding student, what really made him a cut above was his involvement in athletics, and his scrapbook from his years at Purdue records his athletic achievement in detail. This old but sturdy scrapbook compiled during his college years is stuffed with nu-

merous articles about his athletic games and Purdue's victories. Articles about Purdue's basketball team state that Joe earned the title of team captain during his freshman year.⁶ He and his team even went on to win the national championship in 1901.⁷ Joe was also very prominent in football at Purdue. He was known as being "fast on his feet" and was a very good halfback.⁸ Through his time at Purdue, he helped his team win many games in both football and basketball.⁹ His love for athletics was prominent in his activities and everyday life. Unfortunately, at the start of his senior year he hurt his knee and was not allowed to play football.¹⁰ Though he did not know it at the time, his ability to play athletics would soon end for the rest of his life.

On October 31, 1903, Joe boarded a train with his football team and many other students on their way to an exciting game against Indiana University. As the train was arriving in Indianapolis, something went terribly wrong and the train collided head-on with a freight engine. Joe was in the head car along with his teammates, and they went straight into the collision. Throughout the entire wreck, he never lost consciousness. He recalled that when the front end of the car gave way, he instantly grasped the severity of the situation and braced himself for impact, folding his arms and placing them around his knees. He was thrown

from the car, hit the ground, and rolled until he landed in a ditch. He was dazed and confused, but was soon carried to a doctor for treatment. His right knee was badly injured, the same knee that was already hurt before the accident. The bones in his knee had been “forced apart,” his ligaments torn, and shin bone broken. In an article pasted in his scrapbook, Joe told a reporter that he was hopeful that he would soon be able to walk on crutches, but had not fully recovered mentally from the terrible accident.¹¹ He said that “the sound of the terrible crash” rang in his ears, and we can imagine the sorrow he felt at losing so many teammates and friends.¹² A total of seventeen lives were lost in the wreck, fourteen of whom were Purdue football players.¹³ He stayed at his family’s home in Evansville while he recovered. An article describing Joe’s recovery mentions that his family was overjoyed that their son was safe and not badly injured. While recovering, he received numerous letters from friends, family, and his fraternity.¹⁴

He returned to Purdue in January of 1904,¹⁵ but sadly he was not able to return to Purdue athletics.¹⁶ Though the train wreck was a major setback both academically and emotionally, he did not let it stop him from graduating in June 1904 with a degree in civil engineering. His speedy recovery from the train wreck

seemed to be a defining moment for the character of Joe himself; even though he had endured a great tragedy, he made the best of it and kept going on with his life, never losing his drive for success.

After graduation, he went to work for the Department of Agriculture in the Division of Forestry. Though the jump from civil engineering to forestry seems confusing, Joe used his knowledge of engineering to help pioneer a new technology involving wood and the transportation of food. Joe's studies from Purdue helped him think creatively, and he pursued a career outside of his civil engineering degree. In the early 1900s, professionals trained in forestry were very scarce in the United States. While forestry was popular in other parts of the world, the United States did not have a forestry department until 1876, and the department's main concern in its early years was the preservation of forests.¹⁷ Historian Harold T. Pinkett explains that the US Forest Service progressed in 1905 when control over federal forests was handed to the Department of Agriculture, which had a "growing staff of foresters" who truly had knowledge about forests.¹⁸ Along with the adjustment of control in the department came a great expansion of federal forests, and in return more room for testing and preservation of precious trees and timber. This expansion was even

supported by Theodore Roosevelt in a White House conference in 1908.¹⁹

This expansion of the department could not have come at a better time for Joe. Critical tests were being performed throughout the nation, including at Purdue, on the strength and manufacturing properties of wood.²⁰ Joe's expertise on the durability of different woods is shown through his government publications, such as *Fire Killed Douglas Fir*, in which he explains the properties of deterioration rates of Douglas fir trees and the length of time fire-killed timber remains marketable.²¹ Another publication by Joe and McGarvey Cline is entitled *Properties and Uses of Douglas Fir*. It contains two parts that explain the mechanical properties of Douglas fir and also the commercial uses of the timber.²² In 1913 Joe wrote an article, "Reasons Why Government Should Not Compete in Manufacture of Lumber," for the December 1 issue of the *West Coast Lumberman*. At this time, the United States government was arguing that ownership of timber should not be concentrated in the hands of a few private owners in fear that they would form a de facto monopoly. Joe was clearly on the side of private businesses, arguing that a "certain concentration of ownership is essential." In his article, he explains that lumber had contributed more to the economic wealth of the nation, at that

time, than any other industry. Through this article, and his government publications, we can see not only the passion he had for his profession, but also his political and economic interests in forestry.

While Joe was starting his career, he married Cornelia Pinkham in 1911 and soon had two sons, Joseph Burke, Jr. and Robert.²³ Not long after, however, tragedy struck once again. In 1916, Cornelia became ill with tuberculosis. She was sent to California in hopes of recovering, but her health took a turn for the worse after a month in treatment. Joe was notified immediately of her deteriorating condition and left Portland to be by her side in California. Unfortunately, he did not make it in time, for she died before he was able to comfort her.²⁴ Through this truly tragic time in which other people might give up and mourn, Joe did not stop his fast-paced life. His children were sent to live with Cornelia's family while he moved to Bend, Oregon, to work for the Shevlin-Hixon Company. While it may seem Joe abandoned his children for his job so soon after their mother's death, this was not the case. Joe was a very hardworking man who always wanted to provide and do what was best for his children. His departure and eventual reunion with his children should be seen as a testament for his desire to be a "family man," for he always wanted to provide for his children.

While in the Shevlin-Hixon Company, Joe researched the manufacture of box shook, a new technology that became very important for the transportation of food.²⁵ In the early nineteenth century, food was mainly packaged and distributed through tin cans.²⁶

Joe helped take manufacturing crates for food distribution to the next level. With the new development of box shook, food crates were manufactured with small holes in them that allowed for proper ventilation of the food the crates were carrying. These small holes were made possible by interweaving the wooden slats of the crates. This allowed food to be transported for longer distances, because the interweaving of the wood kept rodents out and ensured that the food would not rot.²⁷ During the time that box shook technology was being produced, World War I began. Joe fought the battle at home and was deeply involved with the efforts of the US Food Administration, which was tasked with the manufacturing and



FIGURE 1. JOE KNAPP.
COURTESY OF HIATT KNAPP.

processing of wood packaging, something that was vital to the US troops for the shipment of fresh food and other supplies.²⁸ Joe's effort in introducing the new box shook technology and its use for the production of crates and the transportation of food could have been the most important part of our success in the war. If it were not for Joe and the US Food Administration's expertise and knowledge of box shook technology, fresh food might not have been successfully transported to our troops and they, in turn, could have starved. It is at this point in his life that we again see Joe's astonishing ability to turn tragic events into progressive action. He seemed to never back down or say no to a fight. Along with many other men across the nation, whether fighting in the war or helping the war efforts at home, he worked as hard as he could to help the country in need.

After the success of the manufacturing of box shook crates for World War I, Joe utilized his extensive knowledge about the strength and durability of wood to create his own company, the Joseph B. Knapp Company, in 1920. The company was based in Portland, Oregon, and he was able to have his children back with him. The same year, he married Helene Dalrymple, who gave birth to a daughter, Mary Caroline, in 1921. Joe's life seemed to be full again. With a strong family and children by his side, it seemed that nothing could

go wrong. His company sold to a variety of people in a range of places. Its distribution of boxes spread from fruit growers and packers here in America, all the way to Germany, Belgium, and the United Kingdom.²⁹

Unfortunately, tragedy struck not only Joe's life, but that of many other Americans as well in 1929. The Great Depression took quite a toll on Joe's company, driving him into bankruptcy. He was forced to sell his elegant house in Portland and move into a very small apartment. Joe had to borrow money from people to stay afloat during this tough time.³⁰ Perhaps the most telling thing about his attitude is what he did after the Depression, when he was back on his feet financially. He took trains from Portland and sought out the people he had borrowed money from to pay them back fully in cash. Even if the people had passed away, he gave the money to their families.³¹ Joe would never let tragedy or hard times stop him from keeping his word, and his pursuit to pay back those who helped him in a time of need shows this aspect of his personality.

While Joe survived tragedy after tragedy in his life, he never stopped fighting for his success. He would always rise up to the challenge in front of him, and in the midst of World War II, he did just that for yet another time in his life. During World War II, Joe fought on the home front again on the logistical side of the

fight. His job was to calculate the proper quantities of wood for the manufacture of box shoo crates, arrange for saw mills to cut the trees to the proper size, and then arrange for the wood grain to be sent to the right places at the right time all around the West Coast. Joe's company achieved national recognition during World War II for his work with the army and navy by supplying ammunition containers and lumber supplies for military trucks.³² Though he did not receive any awards for his tremendous efforts to aid the war, Joe gained a deep personal satisfaction for his work. It was yet again that he rose to greatness during tragic times.³³ Joe's very successful life came to an end soon after the war. Purdue's graduating class of 1904 celebrated



their fiftieth anniversary in 1954, and though he was too sick to attend, the class paid him tribute by telephoning him on a loud speaker for all to hear so he could still feel the love of his past classmates and Purdue.³⁴

FIGURE 2. JOE KNAPP.
COURTESY OF HIATT KNAPP.

On July 9, 1954, Joseph Knapp's life came to an end after battling with a year-long illness.

Looking back on Joe's life, it seemed that with every tragedy he faced he came out stronger in the end. From his wife passing away, to going bankrupt, to enduring not just one but two world wars, he would not withdraw from the fight. It is easy to see his work ethic through times such as World War I and II, when he helped create a food packaging technology that allowed for US troops to be fed. Through this light, we can look at him as a hero, as someone who always kept his word, and fought to make his life a successful one while remaining humble. As remembered by his grandson, Joe's stock line when receiving a compliment was, "I'm just a barnacle on the ship of progress."³⁵ From Joseph's Knapp's tragedies and triumphs, anyone can learn that no matter what you face, if you work hard you can always rise to the top.

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