

Walter Knott dead at 91



Clay Miller/The Register

Walter Knott, in this photo taken Jan. 10, 1968, strolls like any of the millions of visitors through his world-famous Ghost Town.

Built business empire out of small berry farm

From The Register staff

Walter Knott, the shrewd entrepreneur who turned a 10-acre berry farm into a 100-acre, international symbol of American enterprise, is dead.

Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park was closed for the usual midweek holiday when its founder died at 3:25 p.m. Thursday. He was 91.

His death came in a mobile home on the grounds that he and his wife developed from a

rented, 10-acre dirt farm to the amusement park that today attracts nearly 5 million visitors annually.

Throughout his life he was described as a "rugged individualist" who made Knott's Berry Farm into a monument to hard work and his dedication to the American free-enterprise system.

Mr. Knott, known in Orange County for many years as "Mr. Republican," had been in declining health since the early 1960s with Parkinson's disease.

He had been in a coma the past week.

His mobile home was equipped like a miniature hospital. His three daughters and son gathered around his bed when monitoring equipment signaled his last moments.

Flags on public buildings throughout Buena Park were lowered to half-staff at the news of his death.

Civic business and government figures throughout the country and the state reacted with sorrow for his death and praise for his character and achievements.

He would have been 92 on Dec. 11.

"He simply wore out," said his son Ross Knott, in charge of administration at the park.

His wife, Corabelle, who hauled pies, made jam and jellies and served children in her wheelbarrow at a roadside stand to get her family through the Depression and start the success story, died April 22, 1974, at age 94.

Mr. Knott is survived by his son, three daughters, Virginia Knott Bender, Tina Knott

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Walter Knott Dies at His Famed Berry Farm at 91

By DAVID SHAW, Times Staff Writer

Walter Knott, who turned anickel-a-basket berry patch into a multimillion-dollar tourist attraction, died Thursday afternoon at Knott's Berry Farm. He was 91.

Knott, who was almost as well-known for his fierce patriotism and generous financial support of conservative political candidates as he was for the hundreds of shops, restaurants, rides and attractions at Knott's Berry Farm, had been in poor health for many years. Parkinson's disease ultimately destroyed his voice, and in 1974—the same year his wife died—he stopped taking an active role in management of the Buena Park amusement park.

He died where he had lived the last several years, in a mobile home located behind the chuckwagon dinner restaurant his wife opened 47 years ago.

At Knott's request, there will be no public or memorial service. Private graveside services for the im-

mediate family will be conducted Monday at Loara Vista Memorial Park in Fullerton.

Knott rented the original 10 acres for his berry farm in 1920, and by the time of his death, it had grown to 150 acres and had become second only to Disneyland among the state's tourist attractions. More

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KNOTT'S BERRY FARM



Walter Knott, who died Thursday, with wife Cordelia at Knott's Berry Farm. She died in 1976.

KNOTT: Tourist Mecca Developer, Conservative and Ardent Patriot

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over 50 million people visit Knott's Berry Farm annually—more than any other tourist attraction in the United States except Disney World.

In peak season, the farm employs 3,000 people.

A small, simple, humble man who often smoked his chunk of tobacco, Knott traced his lifelong philosophy of "good, fresh, pure, independence, family self-sufficiency" to his pioneer grandparents and parents.

His grandparents, born in Virginia, turned to Texas and the deserts of New Mexico and Arizona in the mid-1800s, moving from place to place in a covered wagon, hunting both the western and, often, unfriendly Indians.

Knott's mother married a Methodist minister who died when her son was 6, and for the time he was 8, the family was living in Pecos and he was delivering newspapers every morning and performing other chores.

"When I was a kid," he once said, "I dreamed all the time about having a big farm and some horses. I just loved farming. I always loved to watch things grow."

Knott ran school after the eighth grade to take a commercial course. Then got that job in rock catalogue in Mineral Valley and to farm in Quartzsite Valley. By the time he was 21, he was already distributing his stored financial assets—taking a midnight freight to Pavilions, San Bernardino and California each day to sell his produce directly to grocers rather than re-



Walter Knott in 1967

turn on a wholesale in Los Angeles market, where he became the California Valley's top man there.

"I remained the middleman," he later said—and in the summer of 1922, a recession year, while older, more experienced farmers were going broke, he showed a net profit of \$400.

"I came out pretty good," he said 60 years later, with characteristic modesty. "I had no real experience, but by chance or good judgment or hard work or thrif or fate or something—maybe a little bit of all of them—I managed it."

A year later, Knott returned to Pecos and married and married Cordelia Kennedy, who became his

wife and business partner for the next 25 years.

Seeking stability, Knott wanted work as a building contractor. But he quickly became restless. The Knotts and their first child moved to the Mojave Desert, hoping to farm there successfully. Conditions were so poor, however, that Mrs. Knott often said, "About the only thing we raised successfully in those first few years was children."

Knott himself would later say that going to the Mojave Desert was "the biggest fool thing in the world to do. I went out there with a team of horses, one cow, a few chickens and some tools. . . . But it was the three bad years of my life."

The Knotts had five children by the time they left the desert, and they had something else as well—the certainty that they could support themselves and be happy under even the most barren and demanding conditions.

They farmed in San Luis Obispo for three years, and—in 1930—brought a partnership of a 20-acre berry farm with a house in Santa Park, to make their mark. They sold the berries for the basket on the roadside—often fur as little as a nickel a basket.

In 1932, an oil boom sent land values skyrocketing, and the power of Knott's land decided to sell Knott's estate. Left, but Knott scraped together enough money to buy the 10-acre share. A year later, prices plummeted. Friends urged Knott to do what others were doing—default on his payments and buy adjacent land at the new, far lower price. Knott refused.

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KNOTT: Originator of Berry Farm

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"That's not the way a man does business," he told them.

Knott survived the Depression—barely—and one day in 1932, a federal agricultural inspector stopped by to inquire about a local farmer named Ralph Boyesen who had reportedly crossed a loganberry, a blackberry and a raspberry to produce a new kind of berry.

Intrigued, Knott traced Boyesen to Anaheim, convinced him to have his six scrawny, shankered plants replanted on Knott's land—and named the new strain the "boyenberry."

The plants flourished, and Mrs. Knott began using the berries in jams, jellies and pies she and her daughters sold at roadside stands.

The sales were a temporary measure, she told her husband—"just to bring in a little extra money until we get going."

"I absolutely will not go into the restaurant business," she insisted.

But customers who bought her pies kept trying to persuade her to cook a full meal. Finally, on a Sunday afternoon in 1934, she reluctantly agreed—serving a homemade chicken dinner on her wedding china...to eight guests.

A tradition, a business and a tourist attraction were born.

1 MILLION A YEAR

By 1940, the Knotts were serving more than 400,000 dinners a year. Now the annual figure invariably tops 1 million.

In 1940, Knott decided to develop a modern ghost town on his land—in part to give customers something to do while they waited in line for dinner, in part to honor the country's pioneer spirit.

The ghost town was such a grand success that Knott gradually began opening other attractions—a sheriff's office, a blacksmith shop, a jail, log cabins, an outdoor theater, a stagecoach, a variety of amusement rides. In 1959, he opened Fiesta Village, a tribute to the Spanish influence in early California. In 1975, the farm added a Roaring Twenties area and Airfield, doubling the size of the park and its annual attendance.

But Knott's own personal favorite among all the attractions at the farm was the \$1-million replica of Independence Hall and its 2,000-pound Liberty Bell. The bell was opened in 1966 to provide visitors with recreation in sight and sound of great moments in American history.

Knott, was, by his own admission,

a "fanatic" about patriotism, and his office at the farm often resembled a souvenir shop in Washington, D.C. It was filled with American flags, American eagles, Liberty Bells, Republican elephants, busts and photos of various Presidents and scores of patriotic books and paintings.

Knott's political philosophy was born of simplicity—"an unbelieveable parrot," in the words of one close friend.

He worked all his life, often against insuperable odds, and he became rich and famous. Everyone, he felt, could do the same thing in this country—without government assistance. He believed deeply in the essential goodness of his fellow man—"No man really wants to take advantage of another man," he said—to be opposed not only government assistance programs and all social legislation but labor unions as well.

Declined Checks

Not would Knott accept his own Social Security checks once he became eligible for those benefits.

"The government shouldn't force a man to join a retirement plan he doesn't want to join," Knott once said. "I screamed and cried and didn't sleep for two nights when I had to start paying."

"I'm not about to be a hypocrite and start accepting the money now..."

A chance meeting with a refugee from Hungary introduced Knott to what he came to call "the forces of godless communism," crystallizing his political views and igniting his often-controversial political activism.

By the early 1960s, he was being introduced as "Mr. Republican" throughout Orange County, and his blessing—ideological and financial—was often crucial to would-be Republican candidates.

He became a delegate to three Republican national conventions, served as national finance committee chairman in 1964 when Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) ran for President and actively supported—among others—Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, George Murphy, Max Rafferty and, in Orange County, the late Rep. James B. Unt and State Sen. John Schmidt.

His identification with the right-wing of the Republican Party frequently opened Knott to charges that he was a member of the John Birch Society. He steadfastly denied the charges, but he always said he agreed with most of the society's principles and tactics.

Although he professed "nothing

but respect and affection" for those society members he knew personally, he said that widespread public criticism of the society had persuaded him that "I'm more effective working outside it."

Knott was equally "effective" in a wide variety of religious and philanthropic organizations, but he always insisted—quietly—on doing things his own independent way.

Organizers of formal dinners always knew, for example, that it would be unwise to specify "black tie" on any invitation, no matter how important the occasion or the guests of honor.

"I'd just drop it in the waste basket," Knott said. "I don't like being told what to do. That's not the American way."

For all his success, Knott always remained a modest, thrifty man. He drove his first Model-T for 15 years, and drove second-hand Fords for most of his life—even when his wife bought a Mercedes. He rarely bought new clothes, and when he did, they were generally simple and inexpensive. He paid low wages, resisted vigorously all efforts to organize a labor union at the farm and insisted upon the most detailed and persuasive justification for any new expenditure.

As Knott's Berry Farm continued to flourish, the Knotts' own children took an increasingly active role in its management, thereby freeing Knott to pursue his political interests. Nevertheless, until both he and his wife began to suffer from ill health, he maintained a daily interest in the business of the farm, checking and charting attendance three times a day, writing letters, giving advice, even waiting in line with tourists for lunch each day.

Until Mrs. Knott's death in 1974, they lived in the same small, adobe house they first built in the center of the farm more than 50 years ago. In his final years, he lived in the mobile home on the park, and though unable to speak and too weak to personally supervise farm activities as he had done for years, he was generally kept informed of major decisions.

With him when he died were the children who now run his farm—his son, Russell, and his daughters, Mrs. Virginia Knott Bender, Mrs. Toni Knott Oliphant, and Mrs. Marion Knott Meisterert. Six of the nine Knott grandchildren also work on the farm.

Knott's Berry Farm remains, as it has always been, a Knott family enterprise.

'Dedicated and Honest'

Knott Is Praised for Way of Life, Politics

By LEO C. WOLINSKY, Times Staff Writer

From the halls of Congress to the Orange County Civic Center, accolades began pouring in for Walter Knott, who died Thursday at Knott's Berry Farm, the 20-acre berry patch he parlayed into a world-famous tourist attraction.

But the tributes were more for Knott's support of conservative political causes than for the entrepreneurship which built his dream into the country's third largest amusement park.

Called a 'Constant Force'

U.S. Sen. Barry Goldwater, who appointed Knott finance chairman of his unsuccessful presidential bid in 1964, characterized Knott as a constant force in his long political career.

"It is difficult for me to remember when I didn't know Mr. and Mrs. Knott," Goldwater, who is recovering from surgery, said through a spokesman. "It goes way back to my childhood days when my mother would stop our car on our way from Arizona to Santa

Monica and we would buy jams and pies from their roadside stand."

"He was one of the most dedicated, honest Americans I have ever known, and his example to those of us who followed will forever be in the best interests of our way of life."

Goldwater, an Arizona Republican, was only one of many nationally prominent Republicans who sought and received financial and political support from the man who locally was known as Orange County's "Mr. Republican." Among them were three U.S. Presidents — Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan.

Reagan has Thursday telephoned Frank White, a longtime administrative aide to Knott, to express his sympathy to Knott's family.

Private graveside services for Knott will be conducted Monday at Loma Vista Memorial Park in Fullerton.

While flags at Knott's were flying at half-staff Friday, Steve Speciet, a park spokesman, said that in keeping with Knott's request, there would be no special memorial service.

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KNOTT: Stream of Accolades

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Knott, who gave up his active role in running the park in 1984, the same year his wife died, had suffered from Pickleman's disease for many years. He died at 81 in the small mobile home where he had lived since the family farmhouse was converted into a chicken dinner restaurant.

The fact that he spent those years in such humble surroundings, despite amassing a personal fortune, was characteristic of his approach to life, according to some of his longtime friends.

"He was never a pretentious individual," said Colleen Moretz, who together with Knott founded the conservative Lincoln Club of Orange County. "He always lived there on his farm. He and his wife never felt it was necessary to go anywhere else."

He felt his life was so good, that he couldn't ask for more.

But particularly of the early days, the farm was part and parcel of Knott's political philosophy — one that stressed free enterprise and limited government. And nowhere was that more evident than in the replica of Independence Hall he built for \$1 million as a shrine to the American political system.

Bruce Neumann, a former state assemblyman and now 3rd District county supervisor, was the hall's

first director. Seven years later, Knott's backing launched him on his political career.

"He was the last of the real pioneers," Neumann said. "He came across the country in a covered wagon, worked in the mines in Calico and it all culminated in a deep love for America and its traditions and he brought that with him when he built Independence Hall."

A Republican Friend

But above all else, "he was a Republican first," Neumann said.

And to nearly all Orange County Republican hopefuls, he also was, in name and practice, the godfather of conservative politics.

"He was the guy to see when you ran for office," said state Sen. John Schmitz (R-Newport Beach). "He was not a wheeler-dealer. But if Walter Knott supported you, other people would support you."

State Sen. John Briggs (R-Fullerton) got a job picking berries on Knott's 20 acres of rented land when he was 10 years old. He considers Knott his "political mentor."

"He was one of my most important political backers when I first ran for office in 1982," Briggs said. "We called him Uncle Walter and when you would discuss political things, everyone always wanted to know what Uncle Walter thought."

Knott always exerted his influence in a quiet, behind-the-scenes fashion, he added. "He never

wanted to be chairman and never wanted to be a spokesman."

"But he was a very powerful presence, not because he threw his weight around, but because the natural force of gravity moved people toward Walter Knott."

Lou Lundberg, chairman of the Orange County Republican Party and a longtime friend of Knott, described him as a "giant in everything he did and loved dearly."

Politics Was His First Love

While he acknowledged that development of Knott's Berry Farm was a monumental achievement, she agreed with other acquaintances that his political activities seemed to overshadow even that vast business enterprise.

"He, of course, was Mr. Republican and no one else will ever hold that title," she said. "Much of the strength of the party today came about from things Mr. Knott did."

Fran White, Knott's chief aide for nearly 18 years, was perhaps closer to Knott than anyone outside his immediate family. "The main thing was that he was so humble and his door was open to everybody," White said.

But his patriotism and belief in the free enterprise system, he said, "was the one factor that permeated nearly every aspect of his life."

That philosophy even trickled down to his selection of favorite charities, White said. Among them

was Goodwill Industries, an organization he saw as reflecting the best qualities of free enterprise, he added.

"Goodwill was helping people help themselves to get off the tax rolls and pay taxes," White said. "He felt that was a much better experience for the individual than simply giving him money. That was always his philosophy."

As his last wish, Knott suggested that in lieu of flowers, contributions be made to Goodwill.