

*The Real Deal: The Life of Bill Knapp*, by William B. Friedrichs. Des Moines: Business Publications Corporation, 2013. xiv, 262 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, note on sources, index. \$20.00 paperback.

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A vivid portrait of Iowa realtor and philanthropist Bill Knapp emerges from the pages of *The Real Deal*, a well-documented and very readable biography by Simpson College history professor William B. Friedrichs. The author grounds Bill Knapp's story in a clear and concise interpretation of economic growth and cultural change in the decades following World War II. It is this, and the author's deft handling of diverse primary and secondary sources, that sharply differentiates *The Real Deal* from the conventional business biography.

Born in 1926, Bill Knapp grew up on a farm in Allerton, Iowa, during the prolonged agricultural depression of the 1920s and 1930s, an experience that convinced him he wanted nothing to do with farming ever again. In July 1944, just shy of his eighteenth birthday, Knapp enlisted in the U.S. Navy, taking part in the Battle of Okinawa in the spring of 1945. Once back home, Knapp married his high-school sweetheart and went to work cleaning machinery on the night shift at the Allerton Co-op Dairy—the first in a series of unsatisfying and short-term jobs—looking all the while for work that would give him a chance at economic independence and freedom from the uncertainties of the farm economy. Frustrated in his career search, Knapp completed a one-year certificate program at the American Institute of Business (AIB) in Des Moines and in 1949 took a bookkeeping job in the city's downtown business district—a modest start, but certainly a better vantage point for sizing up his employment options.

Within months, Knapp decided that his future was in real estate. Joining a small Des Moines agency, he was a quick study, finding immediate success as a sales agent and soon moving on to a larger agency. In 1952, at age 26, Knapp purchased the agency from his boss, changed its name to Iowa Realty, and began adding to its sales force. He chose his recruits with care, seeking those whose ambition matched his own. Real estate by tradition had been a business populated by older adults, often retirees. By contrast, Iowa Realty's agents early on typified the energy and values of Knapp's own generation and were dedicated to the fulfillment of "the American dream," a vision whose centerpiece—the single-family home—was Iowa Realty's principal stock in trade.

The author sets Bill Knapp's story in a lively narrative describing the economic surge spurred by the return of American troops from combat; by the impact of the ensuing baby boom on the character of

family life; and by the transformation of Des Moines from a provincial city to a commercial metropolis, soon to be linked to the rest of the nation by the interstate highway system. Strategically located at the crossroads of the system's principal east-west and north-south arteries, Iowa Realty would in time expand its operations to include commercial property sales; land development; apartment, motel, and restaurant management; and construction partnerships.

Iowa Realty also offered its clients innovative sales methods and customer services—including financing and insurance—and a relentless advertising presence. But the primary engine of the firm's growth, in the author's view, was Bill Knapp's entrepreneurial drive. It was his "intelligence and vision that led to great success," writes Friedrichs, for Knapp "could see suburban homes and shopping centers on present-day farm fields; gleaming office buildings where decaying structures stood; or commercial parks on vacant ground." And few rivaled Knapp's uncommon ability to "push ideas into reality by bringing people together and negotiating and closing deals" (xii-xiii).

Those talents have also marked Knapp's philanthropic activities and his service to the community. He has been a major player in the effort to revitalize downtown Des Moines that began in the late 1970s and has since transformed the city's image as a cultural and entertainment center. Stepping back some from the day-to-day operations of Iowa Realty in the 1980s, Knapp established long-term relationships with non-profits such as Evelyn Davis's Tiny Tots Childcare Center and the Door of Faith Mission; he later expanded his vision to include fundraising for Drake University, the Iowa Veterans Cemetery, and the Iowa State Fair, to name a few.

The author's sources include extensive interviews with Knapp, members of his family, business associates, and civic leaders. Friedrichs makes good use of that material, as much of his narrative is told in the voices of people with whom Knapp lived and worked over the years. Several dozen photographs, maps, and other illustrations add visual impact to the story. The overall result is an engaging chronicle of the personal and professional life of an extraordinary business leader. *The Real Deal* will appeal to general readers as well as to Iowa historians, students in Iowa history courses, and business professionals.