

Museum News: McKnight Motor Company

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

McKnight Motor Company was an iconic business in Sanderson, Texas, still remembered by many folks. Its beginning, however, is shrouded in mystery. Not much is known except that it probably began life as a car dealership founded by Mr. Jim Casner of Alpine. He opened his car dealership in Alpine in 1924 and probably opened a subsidiary in Sanderson a few years later. The January 7, 1927 *Sanderson Times* announced that Mr. J. S. Nance had been hired as a representative for the Casner Motor Company, dealing in Buick, Chevrolet and Dodge automobiles.



McKnight Motor Company in the late 1930s after the addition of Ben's Café, aka Jimmy's Steak House. Photo: Alice Evans Downie

The company operated in Sanderson under the Casner name until 1928 when Clyde Vernon McKnight moved to town and became a partner, the name changing to Casner-McKnight Motor Company. McKnight, born in New Salem, Rusk County, Texas, in 1883, was married to Robbie Dunklin McKnight, but they had to move west for his wife's health, which required a dry climate. Shortly after moving to Sanderson her health vastly improved and they lived here for the next 14 years.

McKnight was a farm boy who stayed home and farmed with his father until he married at age 33. He came from a family of nine. His mother and father, Jay Gould and Susan McKnight, having been born and raised in Tennessee, moved to Rusk County shortly after their marriage and remained there for life on the family farm.

After leaving the family farm and marrying, C. V. spent his adult life in retail, clerking in various stores, until he became a partner with Casner in the auto dealership in Sanderson. The McKnights made many friends in Sanderson and had a good life here. After his wife's health recovered, they found time to have a child, Vivian, who was born in Sanderson in 1931 and started school here.

By 1929 Casner-McKnight had built a service department and leased out the garage portion to Ira Drago and Reuben Mussey. Mussey and his brother had just closed their garage down the street, as the new owner of the building, A. D. Brown, had plans to demolish it and put up a new theater. Both men had an excellent reputation as qualified mechanics and the work soon began to pour in.

During the early 30s a cafe was added to the east end of the service station/dealership, run by Ben Dawson, a local cafe man. It would eventually become Jimmy's Steak House. Shortly afterwards a motel was added to the property and its iconic look began to take shape.

It was in this period that McKnight bought out his partner, Jim Casner, and the business became McKnight Motor Company. It would remain under that name, even with subsequent purchases of the operations in the future.

By 1942, with the World War coming and a probable downturn in business with the demands of war, C. V. McKnight was ready to move on. Vivian was still in school, but they made a deal with Jimmy Hanson and sold their business. They moved to Burnet, Texas, where they lived until C. V. passed away in 1977. He was buried not far from his birthplace. Robbie McKnight had already passed in 1968 and they lie together in the Lakewood Memorial Park, Henderson, Rusk County, Texas.

E. J. "Jimmy" Hanson was born in Minnesota on September 24, 1897, to Carrie and Julian Hanson, Norwegian parents, the father having immigrated in 1861 from Telemark, Norway and the mother born in the US to Norwegian immigrants. He was the youngest of 11 children, nine of which survived to adulthood.

At age 13 Jimmy was left fatherless and decided to strike out on his own. He traveled around the country, learning soon that he had a knack for selling. He honed his skills and became a great salesman.

In the early 1930s he found himself selling cars in San Angelo, Texas. He married Frances Smith of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in January of 1938. She had taken nurses' training and was working as head of Central supply at her nursing school and did some private-duty nursing as well. In December their first child, Eddie was born.

In 1942 Jimmy and Frances had the opportunity to buy the McKnight Motor Company from owners C. V. and Robbie McKnight. They would not only own the dealership, but the garage, motel, cafe and body shop. Though World War II had just been declared and materials were in short supply, as well as new cars, they decided to take a chance and off to Sanderson they moved. In 1944 their daughter, Paula, was born and their family was complete.

Though it was a struggle running the business during the war years due to the shortages and rationing, they kept their business going. The town was full of people in those days, with troop trains passing through at all hours and many military convoys on the road. Business was good, and they managed to keep on top of the short supplies.

When the war was over McKnights began to take off. During the war those folks wanting new vehicles had to add their names to a list and wait for hostilities to cease and life to return to normal. Once it did, Hanson was swamped with orders. Cars and trucks were selling like hotcakes.

Not having to worry about their business any longer, the Hansons began to participate in town life to a greater degree. He was Post Commander of the American Legion, in part due to his service in France during World War I. His fine sales record with Chevrolet and GM products landed him a directorship of the Texas Automotive Dealers Association. It also won him many vacations and trips to various spots in the world through company promotions. He served as a deacon at First Presbyterian Church, where he and Frances had joined after moving to Sanderson. He was also a member of the Sanderson Rotary Club, the West Texas Boys' Ranch, the Cedar Grove Cemetery Association and the Texas Sheep and Goat Raiser's Association. Frances was a member of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Presbyterian Church, a member of the PTA and Health Chairman of that organization. She also was a member of the Junior Study Club and enjoyed the many bridge club activities that were available at the time.

They bought a beautiful home on East Kerr Street where they lived for the remainder of their lives.

The Hansons were great supporters of their children's school activities. Many hours were spent traveling and attending sporting and school events.

As age began to catch up with Jimmy Hanson, so did recurring health problems. In 1973 he was diagnosed with lung cancer. He passed away on January 16, 1974.

For some time, their son, Eddie, tried to keep McKnights open, but he also worked for the railroad and it was decided that he could not do both jobs. So, about 1975, McKnights was closed as a family business and sold.

Sadly, Jimmy and Frances' son, Eddie, was killed in a train accident in 1994.

A few years after Jimmy's death, Frances went to work as school nurse with Terrell County schools and continued in that position until retirement, and she, too, passed away on May 3, 2008. She served faithfully for 27 years. The Hansons are buried together at Cedar Grove Cemetery in Sanderson, Texas.

As for the McKnight building, it was sold or rented out to several businesses in the passing years, but the building gradually began to deteriorate. The main part of the building was converted to a restaurant, The Roundhouse, and kitchen facilities were remodeled and upgraded. A self-serve laundromat was opened as well. But, the general decline of business and population in Sanderson could not support the businesses.

After the Roundhouse closed other businesses came and went, and at present, the only grocery store in Sanderson has opened in the old space. There is still life in the old building. The folks who remember the McKnights and the Hansons, as well as the rest of the citizens of Sanderson and Terrell County, are hopeful that good fortune will smile on the newest reincarnation of the McKnight Motor Company.