

# COLORADO GOVERNORS

## William Lee Knous



### Scope and Content Note

The William Lee Knous collection comprises approximately 51 cubic feet of record material spanning his two terms from 1947-1950. Major record series included in the collection are the Executive Record; correspondence; reports; newspaper clippings; and administrative files. There is also a file entitled "Papers of Judge Knous" (1934-1946).

### Biography

William Lee Knous was born February 2, 1889 in Ouray, Colorado. His father, John F. Knous was of Pennsylvania Dutch origins. Coming west from Iowa in the early 1870's John became a freighter and wagon boss for a company that hauled mining supplies to the Leadville area using eight-mule teams. Following the mining boom in Leadville, he moved to Ouray on

the western slopes of Colorado where he mined and prospected, later serving as town marshal and undersheriff. John married Julia Bain and their first child was William Lee.

As William got older, he was able to work in the mines which, though hard work, paid better than other jobs. He was a talented baseball player and pitched on his company's team. Occasionally, he entered local boxing matches and during his college days actually considered becoming a professional boxer.

Although Knous was interested in studying engineering after high school, his family instead persuaded him to study law and in the fall of 1908 he entered the University of Colorado Law School. He graduated from college with honors at the age of twenty-two with his law degree. He then proceeded to practice law in Ouray from 1911 to 1916. While he was practicing in Ouray, the metals market sank to new lows and clients became infrequent. One year after he married Marie Grabow, they decided to move to Rochester, New York, where he joined a lawyer's co-operative publishing company. He remained at this position for a little over a year before moving back to Colorado and joining a Montrose law firm. As a member of the Moynihan-Hughes-Knous law firm he became an expert on irrigation and mining law.

While living in Montrose, he was selected the president of the Chamber of Commerce, then the mayor, city attorney, and deputy district attorney before moving on to the Colorado State Legislature as a representative in 1929. Two years later, he was elected to the state senate, where he served six years, four as Democratic floor leader and two as President Pro Tem, which was the highest office within that body. While a state legislator, he became acquainted with two other men who became his mentors, former Governors Billy Adams and "Big Ed" Johnson. During Johnson's two terms as governor from 1932 through 1936, Knous was the Democratic floor leader in the Senate. In this position, he rendered valuable assistance to Johnson which helped him later in his career.

Knous remained in Montrose until 1936 when his election as a Colorado Supreme Court Justice brought him to Denver with his wife and three sons, William, John and Robert. Knous was known for his keen analytical legal mind and handed down many renowned decisions as a Supreme Court Justice. During World War II, Judge Knous was appointed by the War Labor Board as representative of the ninth region. As panel member and co-chairman of the board, he was conciliator between the workers and management during the labor troubles which arose in the meat packing industry, and at the Geneva Steel plant in Provo, Utah. He also mediated other disputes that came under his jurisdiction.

By the time Knous left the Supreme Court, he was regarded as a wizard in parliamentary law which helped to get him elected Governor of Colorado in 1946. He was the first Democrat in 10 years to win the governorship. Running for reelection in 1948, Knous won every county except Washington. He became the only man in the state ever to have occupied the highest seat in the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government.

As governor, Knous got along well with both Democrats and Republicans. He was able to get both parties to agree on major legislation. He compromised and did not try to push through legislation that he knew would not receive enough votes to pass. He could also anticipate public reaction to major issues which helped him to get public support when he needed it. His terms were generally uncontroversial except for a running feud with the State Highway Engineer, Mark U. Watrous, about how the State Highway Department was organized. While he was governor, the state system of accounts and controls was revised and improved, the Highway Department was reorganized, and the surplus in the state's general fund increased substantially. During Knous' two terms, state aid to schools and workman's compensation funds were also increased and he cited a need to raise the pay levels of the lower salaried employees of the state.

In 1950, Knous seemed to be the only logical Democratic candidate to run against Senator Eugene Millikin for the United States Senate. Knous was reluctant to do so because of his great admiration for Millikin. U.S. Senator Ed Johnson also did not want Knous to run against Millikin because the two senators had developed a close working relationship. Instead, Johnson was able to influence President Harry S. Truman to appoint Knous to a U.S. District Judgeship, which was a life-time term. On April 15, 1950 Knous resigned the governorship and was sworn in as U.S. District Judge of Colorado. Beneath his somber robes, he wore his characteristic bow tie.

William Lee Knous died on December 11, 1959 of a heart attack at the age of seventy. He is entombed at the Fairmount Mausoleum in Denver.

## **Bibliography - William Lee Knous**

### **Books and Manuscripts**

- Hafen, LeRoy R. Colorado and Its People. New York, Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc., 1927.
- Kobs, Kathryn M. The Political Career of William Lee Knous. Master's Thesis. University of Colorado, 1972.
- Ubbelohde, Carl, Benson, Maxine, and Smith, Duane. Colorado History. Boulder, CO, Pruett Publishing Co., 1972.
- Public Records Collections
- Colorado State Archives. Records of the Office of the Governor, William Lee Knous, 1947-1950.
- Denver Public Library Western History. Newspaper Files of William Lee Knous.

## **Periodicals**

- Denver Post. November 6, 1946, p. 5.
- Denver Post. December 13, 1959, p. 6.
- Rocky Mountain Empire Magazine in Denver Post. October 10, 1948, p. 2.
- Rocky Mountain News. June 27, 1955.
- Rocky Mountain News. January 12, 1947, p. 4.
- Rocky Mountain News. December 12, 1959, p. 5.

## **Series Descriptions**

### **Administrative Files**

This series consists of 24 cubic feet of subject files concerning various agencies, boards, colleges, and institutions.

### **Executive Record**

The Executive Record contains executive orders; appointments; legislative messages; pardons; extraditions and requisitions; honorary citations; and proclamations which were issued by Governor Knous during his term of office from 1947-1950.

### **Correspondence**

There are 2 cubic feet of legislative correspondence and 17 cubic feet of other correspondence in the collection. Subjects include labor issues, campaign material, the Alva B. Adams Tunnel, and the state highway system. There is also correspondence from Knous' years as Supreme Court Justice.

### **Reports**

This series consists primarily of annual and biennial reports to the Governor from state agencies and commissions.

### **Newspaper Clippings**

The collection includes 4 cubic feet of newspaper clippings.