John Knott's Cartoons Were Front Page Fixture of News

Some people called John Francis Knott a blunderer. Some called him a prophet. Both were right to some extent.

Once, when the longtime editorial cartoonist of The Dallas News drew three horses with a total of 13 legs, letters poured in. When he had a cow pony tied to a hitching post, cowboys thought him a boob. A good cow pony, they wrote, never had to be tied.

And when he showed horses standing knee deep in water in Big Spring, citizens of the drought-weary West Texas town gulped. Didn't that so-and-so cartoonist know Big Spring hadn't seen rain in weeks? But, before the day was out, Big Spring streets were flooded. It rains for five hours.

While he couldn't make it rain every time Big Spring or Texas was in a drought, Mr. Knott held commanding respect throughout the state for his Dallas News cartoons.

Editorial cartoonist of The News for half a century, Mr. Knott died Saturday after a long illness. He was 84.

His enthusiasm for Texas would have led most anyone to think he was born in the state; however, he was a native of Austria and came with his parents to Sioux City, Iowa, when he was five.

Mr. Knott came to Dallas in 1901 to work for an engraving plant. Four years later, The News offered him a job in its engraving plant. He accepted and began sketching harnesses, cotton-picking machines, buggies and the like from mail-order catalogues. All of this would servo him well in later years.

By 1910, Mr. Knott—and his employers—were not completely satisfied with his work. He and his bosses agreed he should attend the Royal Academy of Art in Munich, Germany, to brush up on his skill.

When Mr. Knott returned in 1912, he had improved amazingly. His cartoons became a front page fixture and remained there until 1927 when the cartoons were shifted to the inside editorial page.

The year of Woodrow Wilson's campaign gave him a chance to let loose on politics. When World War I came, Mr. Knott used his first-hand knowledge of the German militarists to portray the typical aristocratic Junker officer like nobody in the business.

His cartoons won him instant acclaim.

He came by his best-known character quite by accident.

The late James A. (Uncle Jimmy) Boyd of Lancaster was talking to the late Harry Lee Mariner, former staff poet of The News. Mr. Knott noticed Boyd's fine head and mustache. A few days later, Old Man Texas was born in a cartoon.

Old Man Texas had great dignity, a sense of humor and the sort of home-spun wisdom that is considered the underlying reason for Texas' greatness.

With a very few words and that certain expression on his face, the way he rode a horse, sat at his desk or officiated at some event, Old Man Texas conveyed a great sermon, gave a benediction, made a prophecy or pointed a moral with great power and force.

Knott's cartoons became a power in molding public opinion.

The late James A. Ferguson, former governor of Texas, once said that a Knott cartoon cost him the election in one of his campaigns. Another cartoon when the Klu Klux Klan issue was hot was said to have swung a Dallas school board election.

Mr. Knott had complete freedom in his cartoons. During the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, his cartoons occasionally ran counter to The News' editorial policy, but they ran just the same.

Among his colleagues he was best known as a procrastinator. Belongings he put in boxes when The News moved to its new building in 1949 were never completely unpacked when he retired in 1957.

As for cleaning his office, he had a simple system of orderliness—a soon as papers would pile so high on a table that they would slide off, he would sweep the whole mess off with one stroke of the hand. And the stuff was ready for the porter to throw away.

Painting oil portraits was a hobby of his, something he had done for many years and done exceedingly well. He preferred portraits to the daily grind of cartoons because there were no deadlines. His cartoons almost always were not ready until just before 2:30 p.m., the time they had to go to the engraver to be ready for the first editions.

Just as he procrastinated in his work, so he put off retirement. He was eligible at 65 in 1943 but he delayed retiring until 1957, although in later years he drew only two cartoons a week.

He was more or less his own boss. When he decided to go to Colorado—his favorite resort because he loved mountains—he just went.

Nobody, not even he, knew when he would be back until he returned. On one such trip, he said in each letter: "Am rushing back. Will be there shortly." He did come back, but in his own good time, about six weeks later.

For several years, he taught at the Dallas Public Evening School at Crozier Tech. A number of present News cartoonists including Bill McClannan, Glenn Moore and Ann Tommey studied under him.

In 1941, Mr. Knott was asked to go to Chicago to receive a National Safety Council award but he refused to make the trip. An appropriate ceremony was later arranged in The News building, and everyone came — except Mr. Knott. The citation was left on the knob of his locked office door.

This was typical of Mr. Knott, a reticent individual who never sought praise.

In 1939, he was honored at a testimonial dinner given at the Dallas Athletic Club. "It's sure nice of you fellows to do this for me," Mr. Knott said after listening to a long round of tributes.

At an employes' banquet, Mr. Knott was to receive a watch commemorating his 40 years at The News. Everyone showed up but Mr. Knott. It was not that he didn't want the watch or appreciate the honor. Public kudos were just not for him.

He retired in 1957 after 46 years as an editorial cartoonist. During that era, which spanned from Woodrow Wilson to Dwight Eisenhower, Mr. Knott contributed more than 13,000 cartoons.

His technique was always one of simplicity. Even in dealing with the most complex matters, he would find some way to get his point over.

His cartoons were widely reprinted in this country and abroad and frequently he was asked for the originals.

The most comprehensive collection of Mr. Knott's original cartoons, covering a 35-year period from 1911, is in the headquarters of the Dallas Historical Society in the Hall of State at Fair Park.

But Mr. Knott was never impressed with honors, his career or art.

"Every child," he once said, "at some period of life has the imitative instinct and wants to draw. Some of them grow up and get over it. They become normal people. The others turn into artists."

JOHN FRANCIS KNOTT