



Frank A. Knittel

Photo from *Spectrum Magazine*, 2015.

## Knittel, Frank (1927–2015)

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### DENNIS PETTIBONE

Dennis Pettibone, Ph.D. (University of California, Riverside), is professor emeritus of history at Southern Adventist University. He and his first wife, Carol Jean Nelson Pettibone (now deceased) have two grown daughters. He is now married to the former Rebecca Aufderhar. His published writings include *A Century of Challenge: the Story of Southern College* and the second half of *His Story in Our Time*.

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Frank Knittel served the Seventh-day Adventist educational system on the elementary, secondary, and collegiate levels, most notably as a president of Southern Missionary College. He was born in Dinuba, California,<sup>1</sup> on September 30, 1927, and was the son of Julius J. and Emma I. Knittel.<sup>2</sup>

He began his formal education at the age of three, participating in an experimental program. By the time the students in his group completed the fourth grade, they were all reading at the high school and even at the collegiate level. He graduated from Southwestern Junior College at the age of 17. His teaching career began that year in a one-room church school in Louisiana. After teaching there for one year, he resumed his education,

attending Union College with an English and a history major. While there, he edited the school paper and the school annual and played on the school baseball team. He graduated in 1947, whereupon he became both an English teacher<sup>3</sup> and boys' dean at Enterprise Academy in Oregon.<sup>4</sup>

Drafted into the armed forces in 1951, Knittel rose to the rank of first lieutenant. After completing his two years of military service,<sup>5</sup> he became dean of boys at Campion Academy from 1953 to 1955. While at Campion, he attended the University of Colorado at Boulder, earning his M.A. degree in English. He then completed his Ph.D. at Boulder while serving as a graduate assistant men's dean.<sup>6</sup> In 1956, when he was 28 years old, he married Helen Dean.<sup>7</sup>

In 1959, he joined the faculty of Emanuel Missionary College, soon known as Andrews University, where he taught English and served as vice president of student affairs. He left Andrews in 1967 to become academic dean at Southern Missionary College, now Southern Adventist University. In 1971, he became president of Southern.<sup>8</sup>

As president, Knittel told faculty that each class should reflect Seventh-day Adventist ethics. Declaring that SMC had "no justification" for its existence unless it maintained Adventist "distinctiveness," he said. "This philosophy should be clearly stated in the syllabus for each class in each discipline."<sup>9</sup>

As enrollment grew, Knittel launched a massive building program. Additions to the dormitories provided room for 116 young men and 252 young women. In addition, a new music building was completed, and construction of Brock Hall was begun. Brock Hall would house the Business, English, History, Journalism, and Art departments. They seemed to be needed at the time, but before these buildings were completed, SMC had begun experiencing a precipitous enrollment decline. Although the operating budgets were generally balanced during the Knittel years, this new construction saddled the college with a large debt.<sup>10</sup>

The Knittel administration saw greater student representation on faculty committees. The previous administration had 25 students appointed by the college president serving on eight of these committees. Under Knittel there were 78 students appointed by the student association president serving on 16 faculty committees.<sup>11</sup>

Southern Missionary College began divesting itself of its campus industries during the Knittel years. Business Manager Charles Fleming, who had done so much to create these commercial enterprises to provide work opportunities for students, came to the reluctant conclusion that this was necessary because of changing tax laws as well as the General Conference limitations on institutional debt. Knittel agreed, saying it was almost impossible "for an industry to generate as much cash profit as could be realized through interest if the industry was sold."<sup>12</sup>

While Knittel was president of Southern Missionary College, some of the faculty at Andrews University were dissatisfied with some of the decisions the denomination's leadership was making. Knittel was sympathetic and invited them to meet with him in Atlanta, where they drew up a statement on this subject.<sup>13</sup>

Probably no other Southern president was at the same time so highly admired and yet so extremely controversial. He was greatly appreciated by the majority of the students and perhaps most of the faculty. They praised his manageable style, saying he was decisive and approachable. They applauded his support of freedom of expression for faculty members and the intellectual stimulation, vitality, and “the search for excellence” experienced during the Knittel administration. One former professor reflected, “Those were the golden years of the school, a time when Southern was making a serious bid to becoming the premier undergraduate college of the Adventist system, a time of progressive enlightenment and of upgrading the faculty: bringing in people with a cosmopolitan view of things”.<sup>14</sup>

After he passed away, one of Southern's former teachers spoke of his “brilliance, administrative prowess,” and humor as well as “his humanity,” saying she appreciated his “integrity and courage” and the fact that he “stood up for his faculty” when faced by “political pressure.” One former student said she “was always amazed at his public speaking ability” while another said he “opened that dopamine facet in [his] brain and kept it flowing all through college.” Another former student, who had been a member of the SMC orchestra, spoke of his “gift for making each of us feel important and valued.”<sup>15</sup>

However, many of his immediate subordinates—vice presidents and other administrators—did not share this admiration. Although agreeing with his admirers that he was intelligent and outgoing, a gifted and popular speaker, and an excellent teacher, they were annoyed by his alleged favoritism: granting certain privileges to personal friends that were denied to others. Perhaps more seriously, they felt that they were being undermined by his tendency to disregard the regular channels of authority, and they saw his management style as arbitrary and impulsive.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, despite his popularity, these immediate subordinates recommended to the college board that a change in leadership was desirable.<sup>17</sup>

After leaving Southern, Knittel became an English professor at La Sierra University in California, serving part of the time as chair of the English Department and later, while still teaching English, as head of the school's Liberal Studies program. Simultaneously with this, he operated a Kawasaki motorcycle dealership and, for a dollar a year, worked at the Riverside Seventh-day Adventist Church as its senior pastor.<sup>18</sup>

In 2013, after retirement, he and Helen moved back to Collegedale,<sup>19</sup> where he joined the Collegedale Community Seventh-day Adventist Church. He passed away on February 18, 2015. His memorial service was held on March 28, 2015, at the Collegedale University Seventh-day Adventist Church. He was survived by his wife; a son, Jeff Knittel; a daughter, Sherry Knittel Drew; and five grandchildren.<sup>20</sup>

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3. Dennis Pettibone, *A Century of Challenge: The Story of Southern College, 1892-1992* (Collegedale TN: The College Press, 1992), 271.
4. Gardner, 267.
5. Pettibone, 271.
6. Gardner, 267.
7. Pettibone, 271.
8. Ibid.; Gardner, 267.
9. Pettibone, 271-272.
10. Ibid., 268, 273, 287, 291, 292.
11. Ibid., 278.
12. Ibid., 199.

13. "Frank A. Knittel Passes Away," *Spectrum Magazine*, February 20, 2015, accessed May 18, 2021.  
<https://spectrummagazine.org/article/2015/02/20/frank-knittel-passes-away..>
  14. Pettibone, 272.
  15. "Frank A. Knittel," obituary, *Dignity Memorial*.
  16. Pettibone, 272.
  17. Author's recollection of an interview with former Academic Dean Lawrence Hanson.
  18. Ronald Graybill, "Where Are They Now? The Movers, the Shakers, and the Shaken," *Spectrum*, December 1991, 22.
  19. Stephen Ruf, email to author, June 9, 2021.
  20. "Knittel, Frank A.," *Chattanooga.com*. February 19, 2015, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://www.chattanooga.com/2015/2/19/294453/Knittel-Frank-A..aspx>.
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