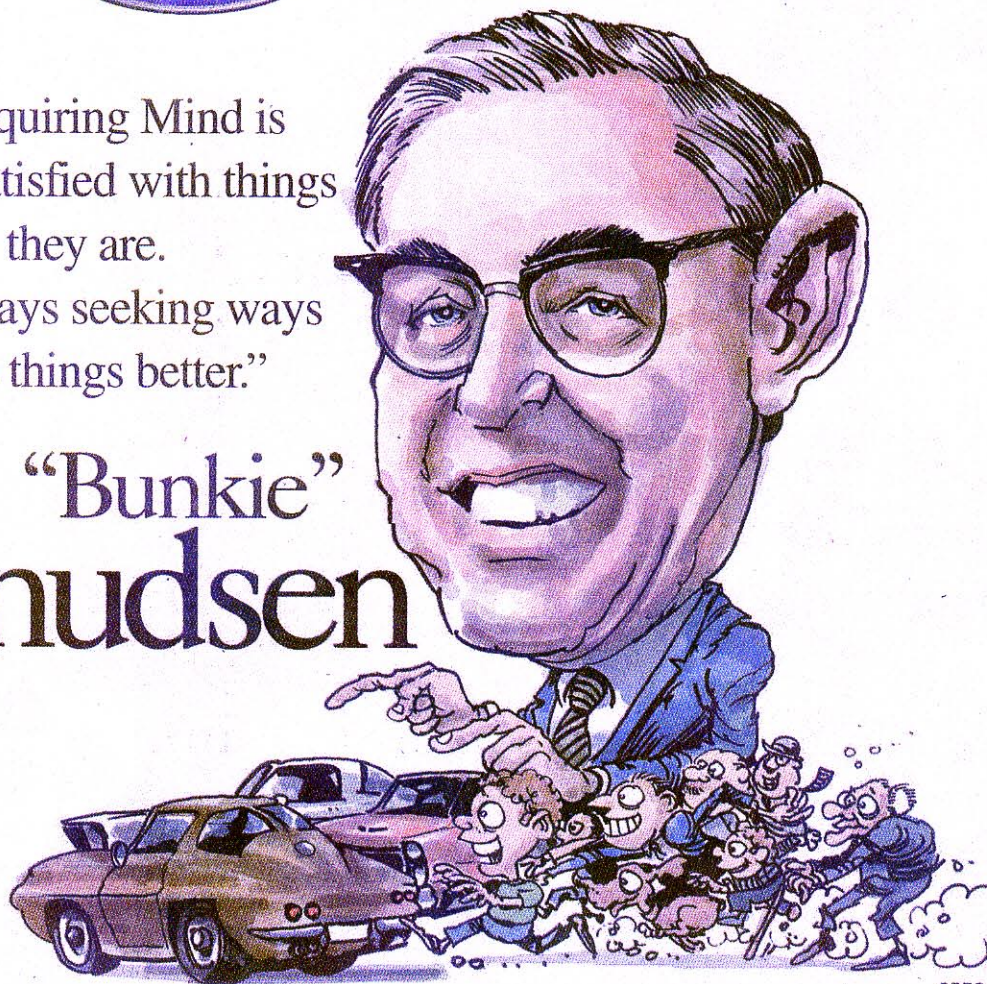


“The Inquiring Mind is never satisfied with things the way they are. It is always seeking ways to make things better.”

“Bunkie” Knudsen



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The man lived by one motto, a message so neatly summed up in one sentence that Semon E. “Bunkie” Knudsen should have had it engraved on his tombstone.

“You can sell a young man’s car to an old man,” he once said, in the springtime of a colorful automotive lifetime, “but you’ll never sell an old man’s car to a young man.”

With that philosophy, a new generation was born, a mindset was created and a division was saved.

During his days as an executive at General Motors — and for a short time at Ford — Knudsen helped create a generation of muscle-car madness, an era where horsepower became a calling card and one man rose to the top of the automotive heap using every cubic inch under the hood to his advantage.

How influential was “Bunkie” Knudsen in Detroit’s culture?

When news of his move from GM to Ford hit in the 1960s, some called it the biggest job change in automotive history.

Simply, Knudsen was a visionary, someone who would be remembered by one-word nameplates such as GTO, as in Pontiac,

and “Boss,” as in Ford Mustang.

Some might say Knudsen was born to create dynamic vehicles and exhilarating rides. He came by his work naturally.

Born in 1913, Bunkie was the son of William S. Knudsen, an emigrant from Denmark who would eventually rise through the ranks and become president of General Motors in the late 1930s.

Bunkie inherited his father’s passion for the automotive business and followed a similar path.

When Bunkie was just 14, his father gave him a car ... in hundreds of pieces. Working out of his Michigan garage, Bunkie would eventually figure out how to assemble and drive it by himself. His father was stunned.

Three years after attending the prestigious MIT — Massachusetts Institute of Technology — his father’s connections would get Bunkie in the door at GM, but from there he would put his own stamp on everything he touched.

Within 15 years, Knudsen would rise through the ranks, all the way to general manager of Detroit Diesel Engine Division. By July of 1956 he was a GM vice president, the youngest general manager (age 43) in Pontiac history.

His timing couldn’t have been better.

At the time, Pontiac was stuck in sixth place in overall U.S. sales, attracting mainly older buyers. Knudsen had limitless amounts of energy and he had a plan.

“In this business,” the elder Knudsen once told his son, “competition is so tough that if you keep running, they’ll still bite you. But if you stand still, they’ll swallow you.”

Bunkie ran hard. He knew Pontiac’s “plumber’s car” image had to be changed so he hired top-notch talent away from other manufacturers — the legendary E.M. (Pete) Estes

and John DeLorean — and decided a new formula was in order: big motors in little cars equals performance.

Immediately, Estes and Knudsen would hold round-the-clock conferences with their engineering staff, altering the process of manufacturing and helping change morale at the dealer level.

Pontiac would become more involved on the race track through secretive development programs in NASCAR stock-car racing. But Knudsen’s biggest

move was ushering in the era of the GTO sports car and, in 1963, introducing models that included the famed 1963 Corvette.

Knudsen jazzed up the lineup by juicing up the Pontiac power and the division eventually dropped its age-old tagline, “Pontiac, the 100,000-mile car.”

Two years later, Knudsen was named an executive vice president and a member of the board of directors.

Although he made his mark at GM, he left in 1968 after being passed over for the company’s presidency.

Miffed that the job had gone to Edward Cole, the 55-year-old Knudsen was wooed away by Henry Ford II after a secret meeting between the two men at Ford’s mansion in Bingham Farms, Michigan, near Detroit. Bunkie would be named president of Ford and would bring the designer Larry Shinoda with him.

At Ford, the speed continued. Knudsen was responsible for the fast Fords of the late 1960s, including the Boss 302 and Boss 429 Mustangs (Shinoda named the cars after his “Boss” Knudsen). But it would be short-lived.

Eighteen months later, Knudsen lost out in an internal power struggle with another Ford man who was also trying to quickly



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