



# Shirley McKay Savage Knight

The Tampa Bay community lost a key contributor with the passing of Shirley McKay Savage Knight in September of last year.

A devoted wife, mother, resident and friend, Knight spent a great deal of her life serving the city that she loved – first as a teacher, then as a successful CEO, and later as a volunteer for several area nonprofits.

Yet, it is her family's history in the community that draws many to Knight's story.

The great-granddaughter of shipping pioneer Captain James McKay, Knight was a fourth-generation Tampa native – born at Tampa General Hospital on October 18, 1928. Her father, Kenneth I. McKay, was an attorney and partner at McKay, Macfarlane, Jackson & Ramsey (now Macfarlane, Ferguson, Allison & Kelly), where he represented his relatives at Lykes Bros. Shipping among others.

Both the McKay and Lykes families have a rich history in the city of Tampa. McKay is often credited as the individ-

ual who made Tampa a port city – first with a sailing ship running between Tampa, Mobile, Ala., and New Orleans, and then with two steamers transporting cattle to Cuba.

When the Civil War began, trade between the two countries halted, and McKay used his fleet to sneak through the Union blockade and bring arms, munitions and civilian goods into port for the South.

After the war, rancher Dr. Howell Tyson Lykes took over the McKay's shipping business and resumed cattle trade with Cuba. The business that was started by McKay grew to be one of the largest flagship shipping lines in the U.S.

"When my mother was growing up, there were always discussions of the family's history – McKay arriving in Tampa in 1846, their shipping business, and how their cousins, the Lykes, came into the business," said Knight's son, Arthur Savage.

These conversations, as well as her extensive travels with her husband, Bill, would

(Continued on page 14)



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(Continued from page 13)  
prepare Knight to take on her most challenging role - president of the Savage family's shipping business, A.R. Savage and Son. But that would not happen until years later. Growing up in Hyde Park, Knight often took the streetcar to see shows at the Tampa Theatre. She walked to school at Gorrie Elementary, then later Woodrow Wilson Middle School and, eventually, Plant High School. When the time came to leave for college, Knight packed up her things and moved to Tallahassee, where she attended Florida State College for Women, which became Florida State University during her time there.

## The Marriage of Two Shipping Families

After graduation, Knight moved back to Tampa, where she met William "Bill" Savage. The two fell in love and were married on March 5, 1952. At the time, Bill Savage was serving as a lieutenant in the Air Force. However, he would later take over his family's business, a ship agency serving the Port of Tampa.

During his tenure, Bill Savage expanded the compa-

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"My parents would regularly take the ferry to Cuba for both business and pleasure - up until the service was suspended due to the embargo," said Arthur Savage. "My mother said that Havana was one of the most beautiful cities she had ever seen, and the shows at the Tropicana were fantastic."

During one of their many trips, Knight and her husband were traveling aboard the Norwegian cruise ship the SS Viking Princess, when the ship caught fire in the middle of the night. Passengers were directed to the lifeboats, where they abandoned ship and made their way to safety at Guantanamo Bay.

"This was in the day when women and children still went first. So my father put her on the lifeboat and watched as she was lowered into the darkness," said Arthur Savage. Once on land, Knight searched for Bill Savage - unsure whether he had made it safely off the ship. "After a couple of hours, she was called to the Harbor master's office, where she found my father drinking rum with the Harbor master, who was apparently an old friend from the pre-embargo days," recalls Arthur Savage. "He said that he knew she was safe but being the good ship agent he was, he wanted to get everything arranged to get everyone back to the states. She was furious that he hadn't let her know that he was okay."

## Charting a New Course

Bill Savage served as the president of A.R. Savage and Son until his untimely

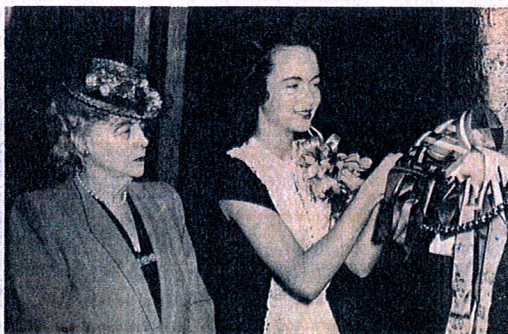
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Yet, when faced with the reality of selling the business, Knight couldn't bear to do it - it was a family-owned business and she wanted it to stay that way. She reasoned that she already knew the customers from her many years of entertaining them at her home, and she knew that the office was staffed with reliable, experienced people who were not only employees, but friends.

Taking over for Bill Savage proved to be a challenge at first, particularly when dealing with clients, as many were not accustomed to working with a woman.

"I recall one time that my mother and I were in a meeting, and the principal of the company spoke only to me because he wasn't used to speaking to a woman in business," said Arthur Savage. "It didn't take her too long to prove to these men that she was capable of the job."



Miss Shirley Louise (right) McKay christens the ship "Tillie Lykes" on June 10, 1944. The 12,700 ton ship was built at U.S. Steel Federal Shipyard in Kearny, N.J. It was delivered to Lykes Brothers Steamship Company. The ship's namesake, Mrs. D. Collins Gillett, formerly Miss Tillie Lykes, stands to the left.

of the agency, and adding the containerized cargo business. She also served as the Honorary Consul for Denmark and Norway and was knighted by both countries for Outstanding Service.

She was an active member of Port Tampa Bay and served on the national and local boards of the Propeller Club, an organization dedicated to the promotion of the maritime industry, commerce and global trade. In 1986 she was recognized by the local chapter for her contributions to the industry and named Maritime Person of the Year - an honor that no other woman had received before.

During her career, Knight served on the Board of Governors of the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce, chairing its Port Development Council for two terms, and the Tampa Convention Center Board. She was also a member of the University of Tampa Board of Trustees and the University of South Florida Foundation Board.

Yet, her service in the community continued long after her retirement in 1999. After handing over the reigns of the business to her son Arthur, Knight spent her time volunteering at organizations such as Meals on Wheels and Tampa General Hospital.

"Family, the city of Tampa, education and health-care were very important to her, and she believed in giving back to the city that was so good to her," said Arthur Savage.

These contributions to the community, as well as the shipping industry, will not soon be forgotten. Knight has left behind her a legacy of grace, compassion, elegance - and above all, strength.

Article by Kasey Coryn



Shirley McKay Savage at the port

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