

Kaufman Thuma Keller

(1885-1966)

Of all Chrysler Corporation's top management during Walter P. Chrysler's lifetime, K. T. Keller brought work experiences closest to those of Chrysler himself. Born on a farm in Mt. Joy, Pennsylvania, east of Harrisburg, he graduated from high school at age 16, attended Wade Business College in nearby Lancaster and served as a traveling secretary to a Baptist missionary in England from 1904 to 1906. He began working as a clerk at the Westinghouse Machine Company in East Pittsburgh but left that job (and took a cut in pay) for an apprenticeship in the company's machine shop. While at Westinghouse (1906-1910), he became an assistant superintendent in the department that made engines for the Chalmers-Detroit Motor Company.

Keller moved to Detroit in 1910 and began a lifelong career in the automobile industry. He held various jobs including laborer, foreman and inspector for several companies, including the Detroit Metal Products Company (automobile axles), Metzger Motor Car Company, Hudson Motor Company and Maxwell Motor Company. He joined General Motors in 1911 and was general superintendent of Northway Motors Company, a GM subsidiary from 1912 to 1916. Keller served as general master mechanic for the Buick Motor Company from 1917 to 1920 after Chrysler recruited him for the position. He remained at General Motors after Chrysler departed, was in charge of manufacturing at Chevrolet Motor Company from 1921 to 1924 and then was general manager of GM's Canadian operations from 1924 to 1926.

Walter Chrysler brought Keller to the Chrysler Corporation as vice-president in April 1926 to manage the Company's rapidly expanding manufacturing operations. Keller held that post until 1928 when he became general manager and then president of the Dodge Division of Chrysler. Keller remained in this position until July 22, 1935, when he succeeded Walter Chrysler as president of the Chrysler Corporation. Keller served as president of Chrysler until 1950, when he turned over the reins to L. L. "Tex" Colbert and became chairman of the board, a position he held until his retirement in 1956.

Keller, much like Walter Chrysler, was a self-made man who was more a "doer" than a "thinker." He was forceful, hard working, ambitious and, at least in earlier years, a risk-taker. At several points in his life, he accepted pay cuts in order to take a new job that he thought would offer better long-term opportunities. Long after he had achieved great success, Keller continued to say, "I am a machinist by trade." *Fortune* described him in 1935 as "heavy, hearty, two-fisted, go-getting." Keller spent his working hours touring the plants or the engineering laboratories. Work was his life, and his life was his work. In the 11 years ending in 1939, Keller took only three vacations, all of them to go fishing. He had given up figure skating and playing bridge because he had no time for such hobbies. Keller also gave up alcohol in 1927. He would relax by tinkering in his basement machine shop.

K. T. Keller - A Personal Look

Bruce Thomas retired Chrysler Engineer, Oral History Interview:

K. T. Keller was a hands-on kind of guy. He was gruff, but at the same time he wrote beautiful letters to people who wrote to him asking about his secrets to success. He was very patriotic – patriotic to a fault. He got a phone call one day, and the next day, we're building a tank plant and building tanks. He was the old-school, rough, tough, "I'm running the show" kind of man. He was the guy who was running the Company and the buck stopped there. That's it.