

# Meet Alfred Knobler

by Susan Holt, Graduate Student

Alfred E. Knobler made several generous donations to Virginia Tech for the creation of Knobler scholarships and fellowships. These opportunities are for both undergraduate and graduate students in the Departments of Materials Science and Engineering and English. The purpose of these scholarships is to foster communication and exchange of ideas and skills between these two departments.

Alfred Knobler was born in the Bronx, New York City, in 1915. His mother emigrated from Hungary in 1888, and his father emigrated from Poland in 1882. When Mr. Knobler was five, his father lost his job. During the Depression, Mr. Knobler saw men and women on the street corners selling apples. Mr.

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Knobler stated, "As we made our way into the 1930s, for poor people, and for most people, desperation was the grim reality." However, he and his family persevered, and in 1934, Mr. Knobler entered Virginia Tech, then called Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI). At this time, Julian A. Burruss was the university president, Earle Norris was the dean of engineering, and John Whittemore was the head of the Department of Ceramic Engineering.



An important event which would significantly influence Mr. Knobler occurred between 1920 and 1927. Two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were arrested in 1920 on the charge of two counts of murder. Nicolo Sacco was a shoe worker around Boston, and Bartolomeo Vanzetti was a restaurant worker and laborer, and when he settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts, he eventually became a fish peddler. These two

men were both radical idealists active in labor struggles. When they were arrested in 1920, there was public outcry that the two were being persecuted because of their outspoken labor ideals. For 7 years, there were trials, appeals, petitions, examinations, and mass meetings. On August 1927, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed. Today, practically no one who studies their case believes that they were guilty.



Alfred E. Knobler

The effect of the Sacco and Vanzetti case on Mr. Knobler was that he became very active in trying to protect an individual's right to free speech. In a letter to VPI professors who had signed a statement supporting the House Committee on Un-American Activities (1961), Mr. Knobler stated that "Teachers should be in the front line of those demanding 'freedom to think' lest they turn out rubber stamps instead of inquiring students living in an atmosphere which permits democratic dissent."

Mr. Knobler graduated from Virginia Tech in 1938 with a bachelor's degree in Ceramic Engineering. This was at the time of the Depression, so jobs were scarce. Mr. Knobler hitchhiked from the Bronx to Tennessee because he had heard of a porcelain factory in Chattanooga. On the way back, he was picked up by a driver who gave him some insightful advice. The driver told him, "You oughtta sell something. You talk good."

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"Teachers should be in the front line of those demanding 'freedom to think' ..."

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Mr. Knobler took this advice to heart, and when he arrived home, he wrote 75 letters to different ceramic and glass factories in New Jersey. He eventually landed a job with Trenton Potteries, working on

commission. His salary was \$35 a week, which was unheard of when the normal weekly income was \$10-\$12 a week.

During World War II, Mr. Knobler was employed by the War Department as an engineer inspecting statite, an insulating material produced by war plants. In 1946, at the war's end, Mr. Knobler established Alfred E. Knobler & Co., a national sales organiza-

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## The thousands of cameo glass blanks...will be brought to life...

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tion. In 1949, Mr. Knobler purchased Tri-State Glass Company, a hand-made glass factory operating out of an abandoned garage in Huntington, West Virginia. Before the sale could be completed, Mr. Knobler had to arrange for the factory to receive gas. At that time, there was no pipeline from the Columbia Gas source. Mr. Knobler convinced the gas company to lay the pipe, and the Pilgrim Glass Corporation was born.

The Pilgrim Glass Corporation did not use machines to make replicated glass pieces, but instead used time-honored techniques for making individual glass pieces. Some of these techniques date back to the time of the Romans when glass blowing was first discovered as a viable technique. Some of the intricate pieces produced by Pilgrim Glass include hand-blown crackle glass, glass animals, cranberry glass, and cameo glass. Some consider cameo glass an engineering marvel. Several layers of glass are applied, one on top of another. If the thermal expansion character of each layer is not carefully controlled, then the piece will crack. Once the layers are applied, the top layers are sandblasted by hand so that a specific design shows with the layers being revealed in the design (as shown on the opposite page).

The Pilgrim Glass Corporation closed its doors forever in March 2002. However, Mr. Knobler worked with Margaret Mary Layne, the executive director at the Huntington Museum of Art, to develop the Legacy Cameo Glass Project, which allows some of the artists from Pilgrim Glass to continue their work. The thousands of cameo glass blanks already created at Pilgrim Glass Corporation will be brought to life by artisans at the Huntington Museum of Art.

Mr. Knobler continues to visit Virginia Tech at least once a year. During these visits, he speaks with students about current issues and life in general. During a commencement speech to Department of English students in May 1989, Mr. Knobler related this inspirational poem written over 400 years ago by John Donne which he had read during his English classes at Tech:

*"No man is an island, entire of itself;  
Everyman is a piece of the continent,  
a part of the main.  
Any man's death diminishes me,  
because I am involved with mankind.  
And therefore, never send to know for  
whom the bell tolls.  
It tolls for thee."*



Alfred Knobler with MSE students on a visit to MSE.

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## Knobler Scholarship Recipients (2004-2005)

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### Undergraduate Scholarships

Nicholas C. Bell  
Vincent P. Caluori  
Brian T. Costello  
Diane M. Fields  
Matthew L. Hubbard  
Michael P. Hunt  
Matthew E. Lynch  
Jennifer E. Mueller  
Kristine R. Obusek  
Edward R. Parker  
Kristin M. Patterson

Alexander W. Scott  
Ashley A. White  
Michael H. Willemann

### Graduate Knobler Scholars

Ted A. Asare  
Feiming Bai  
Todd M. Heil  
Ben D. Poquette  
Nurdan Demirci Sankir