

[Karl A. Brucker, Stonecutter]

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LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: KARL A. BRUCKER, STONECUTTER

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Name of Person Interviewed George A. Bruns (white

Fictitious Name Karl A. Brucker

Street Address 1300 Calhoun Street

Place Columbia, S. C.

Occupation Stonecutter

Name of Writer Stiles M. Scruggs

Name of Reviser State Office

When I called at the stoneyard of Karl A. Brucker, he was closing a sale of a tombstone to a lady customer. After he had finished, he asked the object of my visit. He then invited me into his office and willingly gave the following story of his life.

“I was born March 27, 1874, at our home, which was then on the 2000 block of Sumter Street, Columbia. I am the youngest son of Karl Brucker and Elizabeth (Kimbraugh)

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Brucker. Both my father and my mother were born near Hanover, Germany. They, with their parents, came to South Carolina, when father was sixteen and mother was twelve years old. Those families were neighbors in Germany and likewise when they came over here. [?????]

“Father had never seen a banana until he saw a big bunch hanging in a Charleston grocery store. He asked the clerk what the bunch was. 'Bananas,' 2 the clerk said in German. 'They are good to eat.' He pulled off one and handed it to father, and he started to eat it, rind and all. 'Hey, you can't eat it that way!' said the clerk, taking the banana and peeling it. Then he handed it back, saying, 'Now eat it.' And father did. He liked it so well that he bought a dozen and kept eating. Soon he was ill from the effects of the strange fruit. He never cared for bananas again. He told me the story one day when I carried his lunch to the jewelry store. I had bought bananas and placed them in his lunch.

“My father learned the jeweler's trade and established a jewelry store on the 1500 block of Main Street. The store stood on the site where the S. H. Kress store now stands. He managed to pay house and store rent and to support the family, which embraced my mother, four sons, and two daughters. But none of the children had any spending money unless they earned it. At the time I started to school, when I was seven years old, I had a few nickels in my pocket that I had saved from my paper carrying earnings. I carried the route for The Columbia Daily Register in 1881, for fifty cents a week. The carriers today, they tell me, now get ten or twelve dollars a week for the job I did for half a dollar.

“I kept in the public school until I completed the course, and on Saturdays I sold papers, or carried a route between sessions. The little sums that I earned in the summer, generally less than a dollar a week, helped to pay for school books and little things dear to boy life, such as candy and chewing gum. Through direction of my father, I transferred from public school to Thompson's Academy. It stood where Taylor public school now stands. There I remained during 1890-91.

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“My schooling was apparently a tug of war between me and the teachers from beginning to end. One illustration may suffice to show what caused it.

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Every time a circus came to town I would leave the schoolroom and follow the parade to the show grounds. One time it was P. T. Barnum's show. I had seen his picture in the newspapers and read about him until I was anxious to see him. At the show grounds I was talking about it to the strange lads I saw there near the big tent. 'I sure would love to see P. T. Barnum,' I was saying. As I looked up a well-dressed, smooth-faced gentleman was passing by me. He adjusted his silk hat and smilingly said: 'Hey, Laddie, you wish to see Mr. Barnum?' I was dumbfounded, but I said, 'Yes, sir, but I lack ten counts having the price to get in.' He took me by the hand, and at an entrance he told the man:

'See that this lad gets a good seat near the center ring. He is my guest, and I'm judging he will grow up to be a great showman.' The man who took me to a seat, said, 'You must be a great lad to win favor of the man who owns Barnum's Greatest Shows on Earth.' From my seat I cheered when the same gentleman who put me in the tent came out to make an announcement. This thrill was so enjoyable to me that school switches mattered little. I think I got one for that lark, but I received so many whippings that I have lost track of the count.

“When I was seventeen years old, I became anxious to earn some money. So I got a job with A. R. Stewart, who was working the granite quarry at Granby, three and a half miles below Columbia, on the east side of the Congaree River. My father was unwilling for me to quit school, and he arranged for me to attend night school, when I returned from Granby. So I began work at Granby the next day. And after I had finished a hard days work and walked approximately four miles home, I was not yet through my daily task.

“The hard days work in the granite quarry, and the four mile walk home, were followed with a bath, supper, and then an hour at night school. Returning 4 home, I studied at least an

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hour, preparing my lessons for the next day. When I hit the hay, as our boy gang called the bed, I was so dead tired that I was asleep instantly. Father saw the tasks were hard on me, but he was not disturbed much about it. One evening as we talked, he said, 'Every German boy has to learn at least one trade. Even the son of the Kaiser is not excepted. Life is a struggle, son, physically and mentally. Although you are an American citizen, you are a German boy, and you are learning a good trade. You will not beg bread, because you are not afraid of hard work and long hours. I'm proud of you!'

"After three years at Granby, during which my wage had increased from fifty cents a day to three dollars a day, Mr. Stewart told me I could go to Rion, where he also had a producing plant, and finish my four year apprenticeship, if I so desired. I gladly accepted the change. And at Rion, Fairfield County, South Carolina, I became a full-fledged journeyman stonecutter, and my wages increased accordingly.

"From 1896 to 1904, I engaged in the building trades as a stonecutter. At different times, I worked on the Anderson Courthouse; several steel, stone, and brick buildings at Atlanta; Stone Mountain; and on another courthouse at Lithonia, Georgia. The wage in 1896 was not so big as it is now. The top was five dollars a day then. Now is it nine dollars. I saved a considerable sum on these early jobs. But they were far between, and I had to spend money when I came home, waiting to get work again.

"My father was getting old, and he was often sick; or my younger sister was ill, and the money in my pocket went out to both of them when it was needed. My sister, Amelia, was a mere babe when our mother died. I was the youngest son, and I was only three years old at that time. Amelia and I 5 stayed with father all his life. When he died of old age ailments, in 1918, he left the home residence to Amelia and me.

"Failing to get rich in the building trade, I quit it. And in 1904, I engaged in the monument business in Columbia, under the firm name of Hyatt and Brucker. Mr. Hyatt looked after the granite and of the work, and I specialized on the marble side. The firm managed to win

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favor with the buying group, and we did a pretty fair business. In 1916, I bought Mr. Hyatt's interest in the stoneyard and have been operating it ever since. As I look over the years, it occurs to me that my life has been a struggle from infancy to date. What little education I got was a big struggle. My trade apprenticeship was a hard grueling life. My career as a builder was full of hard work at a low scale of wages, and the building up of this monument yard was not at all an easy life.

“The reason that I am a bachelor is not because I didn't love the girls. The one great love I had for one girl, here in Columbia, gives me a sweet memory even to this day. The man who wrote: 'It is better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all,' certainly spoke my sentiments. I lost the girl because I told her we would have to care for my father and sister as long as they lived. She wished a home of her own and nobody in it but herself and her husband.

“And now, at the age of 65, one of my big duties at the stoneyard today is the designing of monument patterns. These change with the years, just as the styles of hats or automobiles do. We practice in the cutting of stone here on the yard. In addition, we get monument catalogues annually, from which we get fashion designs.

“Just now the request for monuments is, generally speaking, for either marble or granite in rather modest design. Each monument is fitted with special coping to surround a grave, and the ensemble in a modern cemetery is now thought to be very attractive to the eye.

“From the business angle of my stoneyard, we keep busy, therefore, we are reasonably happy. I buy my supplies of granite and marble freshly sawed. The blue granite Rion quarries won the blue ribbon at the Chicago World's Fair, in 1894, and it has been popular in the trade ever since. I buy marble, freshly sawed, from the quarries at Tate, Georgia, and import Italian marble from Philadelphia. The sawed stone, arriving here in the rough, is dressed, lettered, and carved on this yard.

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“The letters are first carved on a glass-like rubber, attached over a stone. Then the letters are cut out on the rubber, and afterwards, we blow them in the cut holes on the rubber with a sand machine. When we remover the rubber blanket with hot water from the stone, the letters are cut in the stone. This is a great improvement over the old system of cutting the letters by hand, which sometimes cracked the stone and was not nearly so regular and neat as the present system.

“I employ stonecutters who have specialized in dressing and lettering inscriptions on monuments. Two of the employees work in granite and one on marble. I am inclined to think that my plant sells its full share of monuments in the Columbia District. The law, and public sentiment as well, causes the market to call for the three foot height and two and one-half foot width monument in either granite or marble.

“The tall shaft is made only on special order, and it has been more than a year since we have had a call for one. The depression in past years, such as in 1893, or 1907, never interferred very much with my sales. But the depression of 1929 - and yet hanging fire - caused a considerable slackness in my trade. Business for 1838-9 has been better at my yard than it has in other years since 1929. My sales in 1938 netted me \$3,147.50. This figure is about 7 as high an average as I have yet had at the close of a year. But, of course, I hope to do a greater business in 1939.”