

A Biography of James Joseph Kerr by Mary Kerr  
(Submitted to [www.IrishNative.com](http://www.IrishNative.com) in response to the posted excerpt  
of Thomas Keigher's memoirs)



The excerpt of the memoir of Thomas Kerr (born Keigher) complements many of the stories passed on to me by my father about his father's family's life in Ireland and the transition to America.

After reading it, I want to share information about the life of James Kerr (born Keigher, 1900-1959), the older brother referenced in the excerpt. The story began, in 1916, in County Roscommon, when his father told him that he was sending him to America. On the train from the farm in Ballyglass, James Kerr was a teenager feeling sad to be leaving his family behind and fearful about the future. Among those on the train were members of the Connaught Rangers, young men or teenagers only a few years older than himself. They befriended him and told him that going to America was a wonderful thing, and they wished that they could go, too. They gave him orange slices, a rare treat in rural Ireland in those days.

Taking the ship to Ellis Island, then a train from New York to Boston, he surprised his aunt by arriving right at the door and a day early. When he arrived, he was told that the family spelled the name differently in America, and he became James Kerr.

While living in his Aunt Anne (Kerr) Roemer's house, he completed high school and learned the bricklaying trade from her husband, Edward Roemer, who as a mentor also introduced him to unions, American politics and campaigning. As a young man James Kerr worked as a theatre usher, a bricklayer and a campaign worker for Boston politicians. One assignment for Mayor Curley was to use his Irish charm to keep a specific relative of the mayor's distracted and away from the press at public events.

During the Great Depression, when there were periods of unemployment, he spent mornings searching for work and afternoons reading at the Malden Public Library. His older sister called his routine "loafing," and wrote to their mother in Ireland. The mother in Ireland wrote back that she was happy to hear he was now working in a bakery!



Not depending on luck, James Kerr overcame the economic conditions. With his savings, he purchased a car in order to access work sites beyond the reach of public transportation.

With the ownership of a car and the New Deal, life improved. James Kerr was able to get to more work sites, and there was more bricklaying work. He met and married Catherine Greer, my grandmother. They lived and raised their family

in St. Mark's Parish, in Dorchester, not far from the house, where James Kerr's aunt and uncle had once lived.

His first born, a son, he named Henry after his own father, who had sent him away 20 years earlier.

During World War II, James Kerr was deemed too old to serve in the military. Instead, he put pipe fitting on U.S. naval ships in addition to bricklaying.

After the war, in 1948, James Kerr represented his local union as a delegate to the Bricklayers, Masons and Plasterers International Union of America's 19th Biennial, 59th Convention, San Francisco. The trip took him across the country by train. As he travelled, he met union members from other states of all different backgrounds. He was horrified and protested when he learned that, while he was off the train at one station, the African-American members of his union sharing his car, with whom he had been conversing a few minutes earlier, had been moved to a separate car on the train by authorities, because the train had stopped in a southern "Jim Crow" state. Witnessing how people in the rest of the country lived opened his eyes.

Throughout the trip, he sent postcards to his family from various cities and, in California, got a chance to do a little sight-seeing. When he returned home after the convention, he excitedly announced that Truman would win the presidency, because he just met people from all across the country and "not one" was planning to vote for Dewey.

Three years later, he was representing his union at a function, where he was enjoying a conversation with Congressman John F. Kennedy. He and a few other bricklayers were pressing "Young Kennedy" as to whether he would run for the U.S. Senate. Kennedy finally revealed that he would, then excused himself, saying he had to call the Boston Globe to tell the reporters there that he would be announcing his run the next morning. Otherwise, they would be "mad" at him. After he made the call, he came back and the conversation continued.

In 1953, construction began on the Saint Anthony Shrine, on Arch Street, in Boston. The massive cornerstone, which James Kerr lifted and set in place, and the other heavy blocks, making up the facade of the building, were less challenging to James Kerr than the work

involving the mosaics in the inside and rear exterior of the Worker's Chapel. As he told his son, the labourers had large hands, and the tiny mosaic tiles had to be placed with great precision.

Among the many other building sites James Kerr worked on were those for the construction of the Shattuck Hospital, Columbia Point and Boston College High School, where his son, Henry Kerr, graduated, in 1954.

During his son's summer apprenticeship as a bricklayer while in high school, James Kerr pointed out the engineer on the site as the one whose education allowed him to do his day's work without the intense physical labour. If that is what you want, go to college, he told his son.

Diagnosed with a benign brain tumour, James Kerr endured two surgeries, in 1957 and in 1959, but the tumour was too deep to completely remove. When he died, the newspapers were on strike, and his family expected few to attend the wake; there were no published death notices or obituaries. However, a testament to the good life he lived and the love people had for him was evident in the long line of family, friends and neighbours who came to honour his memory.

Before his death, he had lived to see his son, Henry Kerr, graduate with an engineering degree from North-eastern University and his daughter, Frances Kerr, graduate Notre Dame Academy, in 1958. The former went on to become an engineer and an attorney. The latter, an artist, became a social worker. Their adult lives went on to reflect the faith and values passed on to them by James and Catherine (Greer) Kerr.

Henry Kerr, my father, always described himself as the son of an Irishman with reverence for the people of Ireland, their history and their immigration experience.

**Updated Biography by James Kerr's grand-daughter Mary Kerr**

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