

Karen and Jack Zerr

Saint Charles' Ancestors

The townspeople got together and built the Saint Peter Church and also the Saint Joseph Hospital, which was just a house on McDonough. Karen's great grandparents joined Saint Peter in 1860. They helped to build the church but not at the very beginning. Her great-grandfather on her mother's side, John Jeremiah Buse, was a cabinet maker and so was her grandfather, Arthur Wilke.

Karen's great grandfather, John Jeremiah Buse, wrote about Saint Charles. His grandson collected the writings and put them together in two books by John J. Buse. One is Small Town, which has historical writings of Saint Charles; it's out of print now. The other book is In His Own Hand, which is a scrapbook of Saint Charles County, Missouri. It is still in print. She showed the books during the interview.

Her great-grandparents on her mom's side lived on 3rd and Madison. Third street runs between the rectory and the parish center; Madison is where the hospital parking garage is now. It was convenient for them to be parishioners here because they lived so close to the church. Both sets of grandparents, the Buse and Wilke sides, lived near her family.

Her Grandpa Wilke worked at ACF, which was a big employer in the 1890's. Karen showed a picture of his mother, Emma Wilke, taken on her 99th birthday.

Karen's Parents

Karen's parents were Arthur and DeLellis Wilke. For Karen's first four years, her dad was gone fighting in World War II. As was typical of that generation, he didn't talk about his experiences. When he returned, he used the GI bill to get a business degree.

Karen's dad worked at Union Savings Bank (originally Union State Bank) for many years, and he eventually became president. He helped integrate it with Commerce Bank in the late 1960's. He served a term as treasurer of Saint Charles city. She remembers that Andy McCullough was a lawyer, prominent in the city. Frank Brockgreitens was the mayor. Karen went to school with Barb Brockgreitens, Frank's daughter.

Karen's mother was DeLellis, named after Saint Camilles DeLellis. Her nickname was "Ditto." She was 4'10 and Karen's father was 6 feet. Her mother grew up above the American Sewing Machine building, which was near Saint Charles Dairy. She was educated through high school. She worked at Braufman's Dress Shop; the building is still on Main Street.

Karen described her mother as a people person. Karen's mother was very involved in Girl Scouting at Saint Peter, locally, and the next highest level. She was involved in the Catholic Women of America diocesan organization. Her mother had a good voice and sang for funerals and weddings.

Karen's mother used to talk about walking to church on Christmas Eve, and hearing Christmas music coming from Saint Peter bell tower. Her mother's dad was playing the violin and his brother, a horn.

Karen's mother was a docent on Main Street and conducted tours. She had a script for each house. Karen said, "Social, social."

Jack's Parents

Jack's parents were Ernie and Clementine Zerr. His dad left school after fourth grade to work on his father's farm. Later, he worked in a grain elevator in Saint Peters. His dad grew up during the Depression. He believed, "Give the employer more work than he expects. Don't worry about wages."

His mom went to school through eighth grade. There was a one room schoolhouse at Spencer and Mexico that Jack's mom attended. It was still standing when Jack was a child. It wasn't locked and he was able to go inside. The whole floor was covered in school books that were used in the olden days.

Jack's dad grew up on a farm just down Spencer Road from where his mom's family (Schneider) had a farm. Her family's farm was on Spencer just opposite where the library is now.

Jack's dad and his dad's older brother both married Schneider girls. So, the Zerr and Schneider families were close.

Jack remembers some of his mom's relatives spoke German. His Uncle John told him that everyone at All Saints, and, also in the town of Saint Peters, spoke German. This included the Masses, school, etc. Once World War I started however, no one spoke German anymore.

Jack has four siblings who survived. His parents had lost three babies before Jack was born and two after he was born. Jack, ironically, did not find out about the first three lost babies until he started dating Karen. His mother told her, and she told him. The babies are buried at All Saints Cemetery, as well as the baby that Jack and Karen lost in 1969.

Karen's Childhood

Karen has a sister, Susan, who is nine years younger. Karen attended Saint Peter Grade School and Saint Peter High School. (She attended Sacred Heart for Kindergarten since Saint Peter did not have one.) During her school years, she made lifelong friends that she still gets together with. She described them as a real family. Three years ago, the friends got together at Old Hickory Country Club. The women were: Frances Brueshaber, Karen Wilke Zerr, Audrey Hobelmann Paule, Catherine Hollander Boettler, Marva Lee Willbrand Prinster, Carol Leverenz Brucker, Lorita Wussler Thornhill, Barbara Keithly Zeisler, Janice Schroder Chandler, Gloria Wapelhorst Schierding, Mary Jo DeCoster Smith, and Armella Schneider Aubuchon.

Almost all of her teachers were Sisters of Notre Dame. She has memories of her third-grade teacher reading them the "coolest" books, like The Boxcar Children.

Karen made her First Communion in second grade on May 8, 1949 and described it as a "big deal." She showed a picture of the First Communion children during the interview. There was one class with 46 children. There were no volunteers helping. She described the children as well behaved. They all knew they would get in trouble at home if they misbehaved. The girls wore the same style of dress and the boys wore navy blue pants and white shirts.

In third grade, she made Confirmation and the children wore the same outfits as they did for First Communion. She remembers that they were standing outside between the church and the old old convent carrying lit candles when one of the girl's veils caught on fire. (The chapel is now where the old convent was.) Karen said it was "scary but not catastrophic." Jack chimed in and said it happened at his church, too, and the ushers were used to putting out veil fires.

Karen usually got a part in school presentations. One year she was an angel over Baby Jesus in the manger. Another year she read The Poor Little Matchgirl. This prepared her to be a lector because she wasn't afraid of being in front of people. She said, "This was part of God's plan."

Karen was involved in Girl Scouts, which was big here. They used one of the rooms in the Hall for their meetings. In October 1950, she was in Brownies; she showed a picture of the troop, which was in the Banner News. Her maiden name was Wilke and she amazingly had curly hair and was tall. However, she was no longer the tallest kid after the eighth-grade summer when all the other kids grew.

There was always a parade at the end of the school year from Saint Peter to Blanchette Park. It went past Saint Charles Borromeo, up Randolph, and then to the park. People made banners and hats and the streets were closed; people lined up and watched. Karen was one of the tallest kids in class and often carried the banner. At the park, they had a picnic, bingo and rides. Karen said, "It was a big deal and great fun. I miss it."

Karen liked reading and English. She stated she was good in math until high school when it got more complicated.

She was in the choir as a freshman at Saint Peter High School. Sister Ambrose was the music director and they practiced in the chapel in the convent.

Jack's Childhood

John (Jack) Zerr was born six miles to the west in Saint Peters, Missouri. The sign in the 1950's stated that the population was 277. He went to All Saints Grade School in Saint Peters where he had ten people in his class. Jack described Saint Peters as having a Main Street, a Second Street, and then the railroad tracks marking the north edge of town. His first home was in a rented apartment in half of the downstairs of the building, which was on the north side of Main Street right before the bridge over Dardenne Creek. The other half of the downstairs of the building was a nonfunctional tavern. It still had bar stools, tables, and chairs. The owners of the building, Kunderers, lived in an apartment above.

Jack started first grade in 1947; he didn't attend Kindergarten because there wasn't any. He described his Kindergarten as being at home with his mom. His mom taught him to read using the conversation bubbles in the comic strips.

Jack always liked stories, which was a foreshadowing of his later career as an author. He liked Tarzan stories and got them for Christmas or his birthday. There was no TV yet so he listened to the Lone Ranger on the radio on Saturday mornings.

Jack described his education at All Saints as very good. There was one nun for first and second grade, one nun for third, fourth, and fifth grade, and Sister Superior for sixth through eighth grade. There was also a housekeeper nun. The children worked on their assignments when the nun was teaching the other grade(s).

He liked math, English, and history. Jack enjoyed serving at Mass. He remembers having to read prayer cards that were in Latin on the altar.

How Jack and Karen Met

When Jack attended Saint Peter High School in Saint Charles, he got exposed to the big metropolis of Saint Charles, much bigger than Saint Peters. He described Saint Charles as “high faluting.” He was bedazzled with Saint Charles. His uncle lived on Tompkins and had the first TV that Jack ever saw. It had a very small screen compared to today’s monsters.

Both Jack and Karen attended Saint Peter High School as freshmen and were in the same grade. They went to Duchesne from their sophomore through senior years. They stated that it took years to build a new Catholic high school in Saint Charles. Saint Peter and Saint Charles Borromeo had to work together to make Duchesne happen.

Jack figured out who Karen was in their freshman year. Unfortunately, it wasn’t a good situation for Jack. They took a Latin quiz and the papers were graded by classmates. Karen’s best friend’s quiz was graded by Jack. He was sure that he knew Latin because he was an altar boy and had prayer cards, but unfortunately, he graded her quiz incorrectly. He noticed Karen and her best friend, Betty Iffrig, looking at a particular question on the graded quiz, which had been graded incorrectly. Jack stated, “Karen shined a ferocious frown on me.”

So how did they get together, given this poor start? The kids from Saint Peters and Saint Charles didn’t hang out much together, partly because of transportation. Jack hitchhiked to and from school. Hitchhike corner was the intersection of Kingshighway and Clay Street. He was dropped off there in the morning and walked to Duchesne. Most afternoons he walked back to that corner to stick out his thumb.

In May of 1958 at the end of their junior year, Jack was lucky one day. Instead of having to walk to his hitchhike-home corner, Margie Harris, a St. Peters girl with a blue 1955 Ford convertible had a seat open, and she offered it to Jack. Margie and the other two girls chitter chattered away while Jack hunkered in his corner. A block from school, just before Elm St. starts up the hill, Jack noticed a girl walking. She wore a school uniform and carried a sweater and books. Jack stated, "That's when Cupid shot his arrow right into my gizzard."

Karen, however, stated, "Cupid's arrow only went one way." It took Jack a while to get the courage to ask Karen for a date. He finally called her during the summer and asked her to a movie. Karen wasn't allowed to watch R rated movies and asked Jack which one he wanted to take her to. Jack was caught off guard and had to get back to Karen.

Cupid eventually worked his magic. Jack never wore his senior class ring because he gave it to Karen before he ever put it on.

After high school, Karen attended nurse's training in St. Louis and then worked at St. Joseph's hospital for a year as a registered nurse. She loved pediatrics. At that time, pediatrics and the medical units were combined so she didn't always work pediatrics. She lived with her parents at 6th and Tompkins, with Bross Brothers Mobile Home Park across the street, and walked to work.

Karen and Jack were married on June 8, 1963, at Saint Peter by Monsignor Strauss. They've been married 62 years as of June 2025. As a sidenote, the church then still had a communion rail and four sets of pews and five aisles.

Jack told a story about their wedding. He was standing outside church by himself by the side door. Suddenly, a "divine voice" told Jack to go into the church. A pigeon pooped right where he had been. Jack said, "The biggest pigeon with the biggest case of diarrhea splattered the sidewalk right where I'd been standing."

Jack's Navy Career

Jack wanted to go to college after high school. He was sure Karen expected to marry a college grad, and her dad for sure expected her to marry one. Karen's mom wanted her to marry a doctor. One of Jack's high school teachers helped him try to find some kind of college scholarship, but nothing worked out.

However, Jack's dad had other ideas about Jack's career. One Saturday morning at 7:00 a.m., Jack's dad woke him up and told him to get ready. Jack was surprised because he didn't need to be at his grocery store job until 9:00. His dad had to say it twice. Jack knew better than to have his dad say it three times. He didn't tell Jack where he was going. It turns out they went to the Navy recruiting office in Saint Charles. Jack's dad had already filled out the paperwork. Jack was "Shanghaied into the Navy by my own dad."

At age 17, Jack enlisted in the Navy in 1959 four days before his 18th birthday just after he graduated from Duchesne. At that time, if someone enlisted before they were 18, they could get out at age 21. So he'd only have to spend a couple of days over three years instead of the normal four years. That was his original plan.

After Boot Camp, Jack was sent to Electronics Technician school. He figured after he got out of the Navy, he could do TV repair at Sigmund's Television in Saint Peters. However, he heard about a Navy college program, called the NESEP (Naval Enlisted Scientific Education Program), and he put in for it. After he graduated from college, he would go to Officer Candidate School and be commissioned an officer.

His chief, however, refused to approve Jack's request to apply for NESEP, because Jack was "sicker than a dog" on his first ship, a destroyer. His nickname was "Two Buckets." However, his division officer was impressed by Jack's grades in Electronics Technician School and high school. He approved and arranged for Jack to take the test. Jack found out he got accepted while he was scrubbing pots and pans in the galley during a deployment to the Mediterranean. His chief had been assigning him compartment cleaning and mess duty because he didn't want seasick Jack to work on his electronics. The mail came in with important news. Jack was promoted to a 3rd class petty officer and was accepted to Purdue via NESEP. That meant no more "scuz duty."

At Purdue, he pursued an Electrical Engineering degree. After he served his time, he figured he could design TV's. He was not planning to stay in the Navy.

Jack and Karen got married between Jack's sophomore and junior years while he was at Purdue. Karen worked at Saint Elizabeth hospital there in Lafayette, Indiana, as a nurse. They still have wonderful friends from that time. Jack described those friends "as at the same level with grade and high school friends." Karen stated, "They're Midwesterners and salt of the earth."

Jack was deployed to the Tonkin Gulf on a destroyer during the Vietnam War. He had intended on serving the four years he owed the Navy for college, but then the anti-war protests back home disturbed him. The protests seemed more anti-America than anti-war. Feeling as he did, he felt compelled to do

something to support our war effort in Vietnam. Aside from one encounter with North Vietnamese PT boats, Jack didn't feel like he was contributing much to the war effort, but every day, planes flew from our carriers to bomb the North. They were doing something. They inspired Jack to apply for flight training, and he was accepted.

Jack fundamentally believed that the words in the constitution were meaningful, and that we should defend the constitution. Jack believed Khrushchev when he said, "We will bury you." He stated, "The country is worth fighting for."

Jack described how he was able to practice his faith. On small ships, there was no priest, so about once per month, there would be a visiting priest. On Sunday if the weather was good, there would be Mass on the helicopter deck. The priest set up a folding table as the altar and the men acted as altar boys.

When there wasn't a priest, somebody would lead lay services, recite Bible verses, and they'd pray the rosary on Sunday morning. There were always 30 seconds of evening prayer over the MC (ship's announcing system). Jack stated, "It was enough to keep the faith alive for those willing to put in a few minutes a week."

May 27, 1972

On May 27, 1972, Jack and his roommate, Tom, were scheduled to fly a mission over the northern part of Vietnam. Jack launched first in his A-4 Skyhawk. About a mile in front of the ship, he experienced an engine failure and had to eject. After he landed in the water, he was able to contact the ship on his survival radio and tell them he was okay.

The ship continued to launch planes for the strike mission. They'd pick Jack up by helo when the launch was complete.

On that mission, Tom was shot down and was a POW for nine months. He was released in 1973 when the war ended.

The squadron wives and Karen supported Tom's wife through her terrible ordeal. And all the wives watched the news each night. Besides news about protests, there was news about the war, and occasionally, news about POWs.

Fire on Board the Ship

In the summer of 1988, Captain Zerr took command of the carrier, USS *Constellation*. When he took it to sea for the first time, he was a bit freaked out, because it was such a huge ship. But they passed the last sea buoy exiting the harbor without incident, and he breathed a sigh of relief. But immediately, Jack heard, "Fire, fire, fire in engine room 1," over the MC.

It turned out that during the ship's last inport period, jet fuel lines had been repaired improperly. And 55,000 gallons of fuel were pumped into the engine room. The crew managed to get out of the engine room and seal the space, which contained the fire for a time, but then it flared up again and spread around to other parts of the ship. In all, it took eleven hours to get the fire under control and extinguished.

Fortunately, Jack took over a ship with a great crew, a great executive officer and a great chief engineer. The engineer served as the chief fire fighter directing the rest of the crew's efforts, and as soon as the fire was out, he was on the radio lining up shipyard workers to be ready to start repair efforts the minute they docked back at the naval base.

The ship cruised back and forth just off the coast of California while fighting the fire, and they had news helos buzzing around them, and the news of the fire was reported on national TV. Karen worked with a Navy chaplain fielding phone calls from worried parents and wives.

Out of the 4,000 people on board, no one was killed or seriously injured. One man had some burns to his face and hands but was back at work quickly. Some men suffered from smoke inhalation.

Though the fire caused significant damage to the ship, the admiral in charge of west coast aircraft carriers told Jack "If the 'Connie' does not deploy on time on 1 December, it will screw up a lot of schedules. Can you get your ship fixed and deploy on time?"

Jack replied, "I can't promise we'll make it on time, but if there is one carrier crew in the world that can pull it off, that crew is over there right now on Connie and working like heck to put her back together again."

The ship and its airwing had a lot of at sea training to accomplish before 1 December, and it was all accomplished while a couple hundred shipyard workers labored to repair the number one engine room. Amazingly, Connie deployed on time.

NATO

After the carrier tour, Jack was assigned to NATO in Belgium from July 1990 to September 1993. He worked for a four star Army general. While he was there, Desert Shield and Desert Storm happened. Also, he was promoted to a one star admiral in Belgium

During the Belgium assignment, their youngest child completed 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. She went to a Department of Defense school. Karen stated, "The advantage of being in the military is that there is a ready made American community on our bases overseas."

She described their time in Belgium as a broadening experience for the entire family. They visited most of the countries in Western Europe. Their youngest daughter became fluent in French. The *Belgiques* were wonderful, as were the people they met from the other NATO countries.

In 1993, the family returned to Norfolk for one more Navy assignment; then Jack retired.

Life as a Navy Wife

Jack was emotional when he stated, "Military spouses and the service they render, I personally consider it to be worth so much more than the service that I rendered."

Karen stated that when Jack was flying during Vietnam, it was constant stress for the families worrying about their husbands. Mail service was the only form of communication; it took 14 days for a letter to arrive so news was always two weeks old. Their oldest daughter took the brunt of the stress. Karen stated, "When she was in high school, I told her if I called her at high school, she had to be available." She knew what her mom was talking about.

Jack and Karen have six children: Jennifer, John II, Julianne, Janine, Jodie, and Jessica. At one time four of them had the chicken pox at once and Karen had to take care of them by herself.

They now have, besides the six, twelve grandchildren, and five great grandchildren.

When Jack served as a CO (Commanding Officer), Karen stated, "I was their mother (referring to the families of the sailors in his command), especially when the guys were gone. These things were learned as I went along. I grew up really fast."

She would smooth the way for medical help. Generally, there was a hospital on or near the base. She helped families with babies. She comforted families who lost loved ones. She entertained officers and their wives. The flying community is its own family. They take care of each other.

When Jack was the CO of the USS *Constellation* that caught on fire, CNN and other news' media outlets were flying helicopters above it. Wives were concerned and trying to call the chaplain. There was no Family Service Center then. As the wife of the CO, Karen called the chaplain to get more information to pass along to the families. She volunteered with the chaplain to call the wives of the 20 men that had suffered chemical burns from the jet fuel and smoke inhalation. She and the chaplain also visited them in the hospital the next day.

When Jack ejected from his plane, the wife of his CO and the wife of the next highest CO notified Karen. It was always in the back of Karen's mind, as the wife of a CO, that she might have to break bad news to a wife.

Karen wasn't aware of all the travel and moving with the Navy when she married Jack, even though her dad had been gone for the first four years of her life. The family lived in 25 places over 32 years. Their children are from all over but will mostly say they're from California. There was a poundage limit every time they moved. The family learned to pare things down.

Karen is glad that their kids grew up with other military families. Except for the youngest one, their kids attended first through eighth grade at Catholic schools. The schools had many military families. She said some moms, when their husbands deployed, took the kids and went home. Those kids would have been anomalies among the other children.

Karen had to stay on top of the children's education. She had to make sure there weren't gaps or duplicates in courses.

Karen mentioned several places where they had lived. San Joaquin Valley in California was a farming community. She said, "We had high expectations of the schools we sent our children to, and, in a few places, we inspired a school to raise its standards." Lemoore, California, south of Fresno, was wonderful. "The townspeople accepted us. Some other places, townspeople were antagonistic towards the military."

Karen's Dad's Navy Experience

Karen's dad, Arthur, enlisted in the Navy in Saint Louis, and in December, 1941, was sent to San Francisco. From there, he hopped from island to island in the Pacific working as an airplane mechanic. He saw lots of action and had many close calls.

Ironically, Karen knew nothing about this until 1986. As was typical of the men of World War II, they didn't talk about their experiences. Karen's dad actually told Jack about his experiences.

In 1986, there was the annual reunion in Florida for men of the USS *New Orleans*, which was a cruiser in WWII. Its bow had been blown off by a torpedo and then repaired. John Lehman, the Secretary of the Navy, was scheduled to talk to the WWII sailors but he had a conflict. Jack was CO of the current *New Orleans*, an LPH then, so the Navy eventually passed the responsibility down to Jack to speak to the WWII crew at their annual reunion, in Orlando that year. Since Karen's parents lived 45 miles north of Orlando, they invited them to the reunion.

The day after the *New Orleans* reunion, Karen's dad opened up to Jack on the covered porch of his retirement community home. He talked about all kinds of things. It was very emotional for Karen's dad and for Jack, and still is emotional for Jack. Karen had no idea about any of this.

Return to Saint Peter Church

Jack retired from the Navy in 1995 and he and Karen came back to Saint Peter Church in 1996. He worked at McDonnell Douglas/Boeing putting together the P8 airplane. He was in Long Beach, California for two years and then Seattle for three years by himself. Karen stayed home and took care of her mother.

Father Bromschwig was the pastor when they came back. Father had been the moderator at Duchesne when Jack and Karen were there. Saint Peter had been Karen's church but Father made it both of their churches. Karen stated, "When Father celebrated Mass, it was a real celebration."

Karen remembers a smaller parade and picnic in 1996. Ralph and Betty Elmendorf were very active with the parish and the parish center and were the Grand Marshalls. They rode in a car up First Capitol past the people lined up on the sidewalk.

Karen volunteered as a teacher's assistant for over twenty years at Saint Peter Grade School and then Saint Elizabeth Grade School after Saint Peter closed. She "loved every minute of it." Once she helped Miss Marcella Boerding with the children's sacramental preparation.

Karen belongs to the Saint Joseph's Hospital Auxiliary. She helps with fundraising and community awareness. She has been president twice. She has volunteered on both the 150th and 175th Saint Peter anniversary committees. She is a lector. Both Karen and Jack are in the choir.

Jack is an author. He has written 15 books. He's written five books on Vietnam that are mostly about combat. He has written almost three historical fiction books placed in 1858. They're about a family moving to Kansas to be able to vote for Kansas to be admitted to the Union as a free state. The rest of the books that he has written are standalone historical fiction. He aims to write at least one page per day.

They both agreed that the church is the hub of the community.