

## WASHINGTON BRICKLAYERS— “THE TRADE’S BEEN GOOD TO ME”

Ruth Jordan

“So you hold a card and you draw good pay and hospitalization and insurance . . . that’s all important. But there’s something else that’s important about being a bricklayer, the challenge of the job. I love to see it done right.” Morris Moore has been a bricklayer since the 1930’s and he has never tired of his trade.

“I feel better when I’m working. I’m going to keep on working as long as I can. Bricklaying has been good to me.” Guy Kuhn will be 83 on July 17. Except for a short stay in the hospital in 1966, he hasn’t missed a working day since he took out his card in Bricklayers Local #1 in Washington, D.C., in 1911.

And Morris Moore, Jr., the younger man, says it articulately. “Bricklaying has always been important—as far back as Biblical times. . . . Each day is a challenge and the awareness of this challenge makes it exciting. Who knows, the building you might be working on might get an award. . . . You don’t get the public glory, but you know your craftsmanship made that award possible. It’s good to tell your children.”

The father, the son, and the old bricklayer came to the trade because it was a good job. But they are all part of a tradition of pride in the exacting, mathematical quality of the work that also excited the aristocratic, intellectual Winston Churchill. Churchill reported in his memoirs that one of his proudest moments came when the British bricklayers union made him a member in recognition of his own brick work on his estate.

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The three men are all members of Local #1, one of four locals representing bricklayers, stonemasons, and tile and terrazzo workers in the District of Columbia. The local is 100 years old, one of the original units in the 108-year old international union.

It is an American mixture of Scotch and Italian immigrants, Blacks, and first-generation Americans. They lay their brick Eastern style here—a long layer of mortar, enough for “four-five-six brick at a time.” In other parts of the country, west of Indianapolis and in New England, they use the “Pick and Dip” method. The bricklayer puts down just enough mortar for one brick. Oddly enough, productivity under both methods is the same.

Guy Kuhn remembers the first brick he laid, when he was 10 years old in Hanover, Pennsylvania. “My father was in the construction business and I used to go out on jobs after school or on Saturday and lay brick.”

He came to Washington, D.C., on the day after Christmas in 1911. “All you could see then was horsedrawn sleighs driving down Pennsylvania Avenue.” He joined Bricklayers Local #1 and has been on the job ever since.

Kuhn is known by bricklayers all over the city. He has worked suspended high over the Potomac and down in the subterranean depths of Washington’s garages . . . always with a big cigar clenched between his teeth . . . a steady, compact man.

“I worked on the Lincoln Memorial in 1916—that’s all stone backed up with hard tile, 12 inches by 4 inches wide. I worked on the Jefferson Memorial and the swimming pool at the White House. We had to work at night, and FDR would come out late to watch us. He always had a drink this high in





83-year-old Guy Kuhn, a journeyman member, Local 1, of the Bricklayers, Masons & Plasterers since 1911, demonstrates "laying brick to the line" as co-worker "butters the joints." Photo by Lou Hollis

his hand" (he indicates about 12 ounces). "But he never offered us any."

Guy Kuhn lives in a room on Sheridan Street in Northwest Washington. He says bricklayers in the Washington area have always had a private social life, although, "We do go down to the hall for a card game now and then." That, says Kuhn, "has been going on for a long time."

Morris Moore has two sons and they both followed him in the trade. He's very proud of it.

His eldest son, Morris Moore, Jr., remembers: "He used to show us where he worked and tell us, 'I worked on this job or I worked on this school.' Now I do the same with my children."

When Morris Moore, Sr., came to Washington, D.C., from Caroline County, Va., he had only a few dollars in his pocket. Those were the Depression years.

"I wrote home and asked my mother for money, but she only sent me a bus ticket home. I stayed on in construction in Washington, working as a laborer, earning 40 cents an hour. I didn't eat anything from one lunch to another."

Moore learned bricklaying from the contractor he was working for, and joined Local #1 when union contractors were constructing buildings on Howard University's campus. He was one of the first Black members of the local, which now has more than one-third Black membership. His son Morris was the local's first Black apprentice.

Moore is a deeply religious man. A trustee of the Vermont Avenue Baptist Church, his social life revolves around church activities—"about 95 percent of the time." His wife Beatrice leads one of the church choirs, taking the singing group on tours to New York, St. Louis, and through the South.

Moore thinks union bricklayers in Washington don't share much of a social life, but says it's not the same in other parts of the country. When there was no work here, Moore traveled to jobs in Pennsylvania.

"We were invited into other men's homes. All you had to be was another bricklayer. We drank their homemade wine, went around to their saloons, we had a wonderful time."

He's sorry union men around here don't get as involved with the local. Since 1956 he's been a foreman but still attends most meetings.

"There are 1100 men in the local. When the meeting is held on Saturday you can find 100 or 150 men there, and in an election maybe 4 to 5 hundred will vote. It's their own fault for whatever happens."

Moore got involved as soon as he became a member. He's served as a convention delegate in the past. "If you don't get active you shouldn't squawk about the way things are done."

You get a strong sense of this handsome man's



principles in the sure way he talks about his values, and even from the outside of his polished, white brick house off North Capitol Street.

You aren't surprised when you hear about his wife's battle to keep the street clean by sweeping it herself.

Moore was pleased when his two sons went into the trade, but he believes every youngster should get as much education as possible, even if he will take up a trade.

"The only drawback to bricklaying is the seasonal nature of the work. You only work eight months out of the year. The trouble with most bricklayers is that they live in the summer as if they were going to have it all year 'round."

Union bricklayers learn their trade in a three-year apprenticeship program. A satisfactory apprentice makes the grade when he becomes a journeyman bricklayer. At that point he's considered qualified to work just about any job. But being a journeyman doesn't guarantee him work. He still must apply to the contractor, take the layoffs when there's no work, sit at home when it's cold and it snows and building grinds to a halt.

Moore feels strongly that workers trained in this apprenticeship program are better workers.

Morris Moore, Jr., has built his own reputation as a top-quality bricklayer. When he first came on as an apprentice he was very green. "Everyone respected my father, though, and they treated me well. Their primary object was to make me a competent bricklayer."

Moore Jr. doesn't think the younger men have the same respect for the journeymen that he had. "I was afraid to talk back to a bricklayer. . . . These fellers have a different attitude. We try to give them the same concept, that it's our duty to teach them and theirs to learn. But most of them are just interested in eight hours' work."

Moore had thought about becoming an architect at one time but isn't sorry he remained a bricklayer. "You go through different stages in this trade. In the first ten or fifteen years you think you are *the* best. Each person you work with is a challenge. You compete against the others to see how many bricks you can lay and how good a job you can do. But later on, you don't think about it that way. You compete with yourself in the quality of work you can turn out."

The younger Moore worked on the Washington Post building—the newest all-brick building in Washington, D.C. It contained many different kinds of masonry and represented a challenge to the skill of the bricklayer. "When you can do it all in a way that satisfies you, then I guess you can say you feel peace and harmony."

## ANOTHER TOOL IN THE CARPENTER'S CHEST

Archie Green

Within the large boundaries of American Society we recognize that certain sets of people are *folk*, generally by virtue of their singing particular songs or by retaining distinct lifestyles. Persons in folk societies, to some degree, accept the notion that they stand apart from mainstream values. In my personal introduction to carpentry during 1941 (learning the shipwright's craft in San Francisco, Local 1149, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America), I was not led to think that our trade had been touched by folklore. Perhaps western cowboys, mountain banjo pickers, or Amish farmers might be categorized as folk, but not ordinary *woodbutchers* and *termites*. Yet today, after three decades of talking and listening to carpenters and other building tradesmen, I have come to an understanding that all mechanics, in some measure, cherish traditions which are special to their skills.

Carpenters are well aware of these working *hand-me-downs*. However, they do not use academic or ethnographic terms to describe their trade's traditional behavior: customary beliefs, special slang, tool nicknames, job humor, training techniques, union loyalty. In a sense, carpenters are too busy working to afford the luxury of sitting back to reflect on their special culture. Actually, all skilled workers draw on some traditional expression to convey work practices to apprentices or to build solidarity against alien forces. Nevertheless, an appreciation of their tradition does help "workers in wood" deal with each other as well as with the world beyond the trade.

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