

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
KARL JACOB BELSER
(1902 - 1972)

Chronology of Events

Life of Karl J. Belser (1902-1972)

1902. Born in Ann Arbor. Mich. May 1. Early Morning. At 600 E. Washington Street. My parents were Dr. Martin Luther Belser MD. And Emma Louise Sheetz Belser. My mother said that it was a cold night and it snowed so that when she looked out the window after I had arrived she noted that the new leaves on the large maple tree in front of our house were covered with snow. By early morning the sun was shining and the soon snow was gone. My birth was a great strain on my frail mother, since I was a large baby. During this time we had a maid and a nurse to manage the household, as my mother was virtually an invalid.

1903. My brother Walter was born on Oct. 16. This almost killed my mother who had to undergo surgery thereafter. Walter was a small frail child who developed an abscessed ear. This trouble resulted in

the loss of hearing in one ear. While my mother cared for us our hair was allowed to grow and to be combed like a little girls. However when she became too ill to care for us our nurse had the hair cut.

1904. I began to talk and since my mother loved the German language she spoke to me in German. We also had a German nurse and a German maid. My father also spoke German. As a result of this, German actually was my first language. This was the first Christmas I remember. I received a dapple-gray rocking horse while my brother was just beginning to walk.

1905. to 1907. We spent our winters in New Washington Ohio with my mother's parents (*John Sheetz was a rich business person in New Washington*). Mother would pack up, call the hack (*a horse drawn taxi*) and we would take the Ann Arbor railroad train to Toledo. We would arrive about noon and take the Pennsylvania RR. to New Washington about 4 PM. It would take all day to go about 150 miles. Grandpa was at the station wit his surrey and Molly (*his horse*) to take us home.

I never was able to figure out just how father got along without us all summer with just Sofia and Amanda to look after him. Some times he used to come to New Washington for the last week or two and then come home with us. He had one of the early cars and on several occasions drove the 100 miles. In those days the rural roads were miserable and cars broke down frequently. I remember one time going 50 miles in low gear because the transmission went out. Sand and mud caused trouble. Sometimes we went to Detroit by train and took the boat to Sandusky Ohio where we took the "short line" to Caruthers, which was only 8 miles from New Washington. Here we took the Penn. RR to New Washington. The boat crossing Lake Erie would stop for a few hours in Put-in-Bay where we would picnic and explore the caves. This was always a pleasant trip if the lake was calm. The steamers large side-wheelers were "The Kelly" and the "Put-in-Bay." They had huge rocker arms on top.

When we got to New Washington we were ready for fun. In all there were 11 grand children all about the same age and the summer sped fast. We knew everybody in town and we had friends all over the countryside.

New Washington is a lot like it was then. (1963) The R.R is gone and the paved streets have come but it is a good deal the same.

(The 1963 above was written in the margin, which makes me think that these notes were written in 1963. Also noted in the margin were: Measles, mumps, adenoids and tonsils out. I remember some about these occasions. Operations were done at home. I was sick. Bled a lot.)

This routine in the summer continued through the 1st World War. In 1919 (*actually 3/31/1918*) my grandmother died and the old home broke up and in 1932 (*actually 1922*) grandpa died ending this period. My father's death in 1915 (*12/14/1915*) drew mother closer to home.

1908. I entered elementary school. I was enrolled in the Kinder Garten at the age of 6 years. I was shy and had some difficulty because I spoke and understood German much better than I did English. My teacher was Miss Ranney who liked me very much and recommended that I skip the 1st grade. The school was

"William S. Perry" first ward. The principle was Miss Carrie Dickens, a real tough girl as I remember.

1909. I entered the second grade (Miss Lusey). I didn't do well and it became apparent that I should have been in the first grade. I became nervous and shy and actually afraid. My eyes were tested and it was decided to put glasses on me. My teeth required a lot of attention due to defects caused by high temperature during a case of measles.

1910. I entered third grade with Miss Molke as teacher. My nervousness grew until I was a nervous wreck. It was proposed to place me in a special retarded class. My parents rebelled and removed me from public school and placed me in the hand(s) of two very kind teachers Miss Wapples and Miss Bissell who ran a small private school. Here I received a lot of personal attention and over came much of my shyness and nervousness. I spent one year completing the third grade.

1911. I returned to public school 4th grade with Miss Harris. She seems to have understood me and helped

me a lot. At any rate this completed my experience in public elementary school. This was a troubled time and I became quite withdrawn. I spent a lot of time indoor(s) at home - reading - making things - dreaming.

1912. My mother and father with my aunt Amanda made a trip to Europe. A patient of my father died and made him the beneficiary of her will. Her name was Mrs. Holden and I remember she died of cancer. She gave my mother a beautiful paisley shawl. The trip lasted all summer and my brother and I spent the summer in New Washington with grandma and grandpa. We were looked after by our nurse Mrs. Garupner who was German and tutored us in the language. She had lived in Alsace during the Franco-Prussian War of 1871. She told us lots of stories of her experiences. In the fall I started to attend parochial school. (Lutheran, German) Here I learned my catechism preparatory to confirmation. I enjoyed this experience. (grades 5 - 6 Laurer Schmidt)

1913. Grade 6. German school. Continued same life style. Mother used to take us boys for long walks around the

boulevard - to Island Park and West Park. They were memorable experiences. Father's health began to fail. He was a wonderful man - considerate of his family and terribly hardworking. I'll always remember him as a very busy man with a telephone in the dining room, hall and bedroom. It always seemed to me that he was called out every night. At this time he had the first and only X-ray machine in the city. He drove horses on his rural rounds and always left two at the local livery stable. I remember Freddie and Dan (blind). He used a cutter in winter and a storm buggy in the summer. This hard work shortened his life.

1914. I was 12 years old when World War I broke out. I was in 7th grade and was sent to special high school preparatory class. Mrs. Downs and Mrs. Plympton taught me for two years. They spent much time strengthening my math and English. My father had an auto accident in which he injured his knee. This injury troubled him the rest of his life. He gave some thought about re-entering the army as a medical officer. I can recall his Spanish-American war buddies talking this over with him. However, he knew

the serious nature of his illness and decided to live the rest of his life in comfort at home.

1915. Father grew more and more ill. However he kept working very hard. Finally the nephritis made him blind. In about October he and mother decided to go to Hickory N.C. so that he might rest. They brought him home in Dec. 14, 1915. He passed away at the prime age of 48. Grief struck not only our family but the entire community. My mother went into mourning and really never came out again. From that time on she devoted every moment to bringing myself and my brother up. She sold the office to Dr. Theodore Dillman who came and took my fathers medical practice. He was an old friend of the family. Father had helped him when in school. Father had promised me a radio set for Xmas. Mother knew about it and bought the parts and had a local radio amateur put it together for me. I was in the 8th grade.

1916. I became a member of the church and in the fall entered high school. This was a totally new experience and the high school was very close to home. I got my first long pants a big event in a

kid's life in those days. After my fathers death my aunt Amanda became my favorite person next to mother. She had worked hard with little education to become head of the order department of the Univ. of Michigan General Library. She let us kids work unpacking and stamping new books. She knew all the professors and people who worked for the U of M. My father had not left our family in very good financial shape but mother's father kept us solvent. (9th grade)

1917. America entered the war and my radio had to be dismantled. We had a victory garden on the lot next door. Germans were made miserable. This was the year of the influenza epidemic. The soldiers in the R.O.T.C. died in large numbers. I was a sophomore in high school. I took Latin - math - history - physics. I did very well. (10th Grade)

1918. I was sent to Culver Military for summer. Very unhappy time for me. Was glad to get back to high school next fall. War over Nov. 11. Tension relaxed. I got my first vacuum tube at Xmas. Back at radio. Studied hard. Made a good high school record. (11th Grade)

1919. Senior high school

1920. In the fall of 1919 I entered the university in the literary college. I didn't know what I wanted to do. Did well in English, history, math and language.

1921. Fall entered school of architecture. Worked hard to learn a new activity.

1922. Sophomore

1923. Junior

1924. Senior in architecture. Univ. of Michigan. I received scholarship to be resident student at school of American Research in Santa Fe New Mexico for summer. Hugh Caldwell went with me. Dr. Hewlett was the director. We lived in the palace of the governors. Made several field trips to various pueblos. Great experiences. Worked hard and made good record. Made Tau Epsilon Delta (*actual Greek letters here*) honorary.

1925. Worked under Eliel Sarrinen in the spring. Tried Booth Competition First time. Worked on Cran Brook Studies. Made first trip to Europe with Harrison Cook during the summer. Our trip was like mother's in 1912. We saw England, Holland, Belgian, Germany, Swiss lakes, Italy and France. It was fast but a good introduction. When I came back my mother thought I should continue school. I entered Harvard grad school of design. This was a year of growing up. My first away from home. I did well in school. Came in contact with brilliant students.

1926. In the spring June '26 my aunt Amanda died. I left school early to be at the funeral. Received small inheritance. Went back to school in the fall and did my thesis project.

1927. Received my degree (Masters of Architecture) from Harvard in the spring and got my first job with F.A. and F.M Kendall \$25 per week. Joined the Boston Architecture Club where I continued to study design and to teach the younger boys. This was a wonderful time. I made many wonderful friends. I enjoyed the

theater and the symphony. I was free and enjoyed myself very much.

1928. In the spring of '28 after two unsuccessful attempts I won the George Booth traveling fellowship for study abroad. I can tell you I was walking on air. I was so surprised I couldn't go to sleep. I walked and walked. My bosses were wonderful to me raised my salary to \$35.00 per week and when I left gave me a month's pay. I had saved a few dollars so when I was ready to leave I had \$800.00 of my own added to the \$1200.00 in the scholarship. This was a royal sum and I was out of this world in happiness. I went home to Ann Arbor where I was greeted by all and arranged to leave in mid Sept 1928. The details of this year are recorded in a diary that I kept. It was really a turning point in my life. I was never to be mother's little boy again. I was my own boss and I began making my own decisions. I spent Xmas in Rome, a really memorable experience.

1929. Spring made trip through Austria and Germany, France and England. Corresponded with Clint Cowgill about job at V.P.I. (*Virginia Polytechnical Institute then*

and Virginia Institute of Technology today) Finally agreed to teach as an instructor. Arrived V.P.I. end of September. Was shocked at its remoteness from cultural activity. No music - no art - no theater. Some other culture starved instructors

Set about getting new department ready for program. Library. Lantern slides. Started working on campus master plan. Prepared course outlines for history of architecture - domestic architecture graphics - analytic geometry and projections. Stock market crash.

1930. Had hard time deciding whether to return. Finally did because architecture was hard hit by the depression. Got into teaching routine. Made many friends. Save my money. Weathered bank holiday. Moved into new Univ. Faculty Club. Managed house. Mother lost a lot of her money in the depression. Never got over it.

1931. After school was out I made a trip to Europe to study French Romanesque Architecture. Things were cheap and I had a wonderful time on a few hundred dollars.

I stayed in France all summer - Mont S. Michel 2 weeks - Chartes 2 weeks - Paris 2 weeks - Anvergne 2 weeks - Burgundy 2 weeks. I saw a lot and saw it very well. Returned to V.P.I. Worked on the designs of several campus buildings and campus master plan. Became a registered architect in both Michigan and Virginia.

1932. Walter married Marjory Fisk. Went to Yellowstone Park with them. And then I went to Cedar City Utah where I met Hugh Weasche an instructor at V.P.I. who worked as a National Park Naturalist at Grand Canyon. We toured through Bryce Canyon. Cedar Breaks, north rim of Grand Canyon, south rim, Phoenix, New Mexico etc. Saw Worlds Fair in Chicago en route. Returned to V.P.I. in the fall. Started to paint, sketch, etch, etc.

1933. Went west in summer. Liona Diekema and Vernon Tengate and aunt Martha Tengate took me to Glacier Nat. Park. I went from there to Klamath Falls Oregon where Hugh met me and took me to Crater Lake where he was stationed. Here I met Ernest Moll a professor of English at Univ. of Oregon and arranged to do the

drawing for his book of quatrains "Blue Interval." I spent several weeks on this project. Then Hugh and I set out for home. We went down the redwood coast highway stopping at Berkeley, Monterey and Los Angeles, then across the southern route. I returned to V.P.I. in the fall quite refreshed. Finished illustration during fall and winter.

1934. Worked on a full teaching schedule. Taught watercolor and drawing along with history, design and graphics. During the summer I took drawing with professor Vallerio and he taught me a great deal about watercolor and etching. The next fall I made a lot of progress in these fields.

1935. Taught at V.P.I. New faces began to appear on the faculty. During the summer I undertook to do the clay models for the sculpture on the new dairy husbandry Bldg. Which I designed. I did go home to Ann Arbor for a couple weeks but came back to teach.

1936. I decided to take a sabbatical leave without pay to study planning and housing. I wrote numerous letters to distinguished men in architecture and design

asking for advice. I finally decided to work under Dr. Salvisberg at the Univ. of Zurich. So in the fall of 1936 I made my fourth trip to Europe. I went to Paris first, then to Rome and back to Zurich. I stayed in Zurich for Dec. Jan. Feb. and part of March. During this time, with Dr. Salvisberg's help, I researched all the housing movement in Europe and outlined an extensive tour through Austria, Germany, Scandinavia including Finland, back through Belgium, Holland, France and England. I saw Mussolini, Hitler and many others. I purchased a good many books for the V.P.I. library. I did many drawings, watercolor, pencil. I really enjoyed the trip. I took over 1000 pictures. I began to write Wilma on this trip. I returned to V.P.I. in the fall of 1937.

1937. Was disappointed on return. Did receive a promotion to Assoc. Prof. but could not get new course work on housing and planning introduced. Became engaged to Wilma and gave her a ring on New Years Eve.

1938. I was married on July 2, 1938 and Wilma and I went to Perry sound on Lake Huron on our Honey Moon. When I came back to Blacksburg the house I had designed for

us wasn't quite ready. BY mid-October we moved into our new house, which we both loved very much. We furnished it with loving care as though we intended to stay there the rest of our lives. I knew this was not to be. We did have a nice start.

1939. Mother gave us a 1939 Chevrolet Coupe (\$700) our first car. We still had it in 1950, which was a good long time. In the summer we went back to Ithaca for Wilma to complete some work and then we toured New England and the mid-west. Returned to V.P.I. War broke out in Europe.

1940. Jan 27 Karl Arnold was born in Roanoke Hospital. I had pneumonia in the spring and nearly died. Dad (*George*) Beckman came to live with us in the fall. I was asked to undertake the layout of Camp Lee. I took a leave and did the job. I was then transferred to Blackstone, VA to layout Ft. Pickett. This was completed in the spring 1941.

1941. Resigned my position at V.P.I. and returned to Ann Arbor in June. Stephen was born in August. Was appointed visiting lecturer in planning and

architecture at the Univ. of Michigan in October.

Pearl Harbor in Dec. A hectic year with pressure and tension on every hand.

1942. Left university in June. Took Wilma to Estes Park for a vacation. Returned and took a position with the city of Detroit in the department of city planning. Bought a house. Moved family. I enjoyed my new work but my salary was impossible. The war curbed me from moving again.

1943. Larry was born May 14. Was looking around for a better job. Bryant Hall went to San Francisco.

1944. Had an offer from the city of Los Angeles. Took job in March. Moved family in May. Larry just one year old. Challenged by the job. Worked with enthusiasm for about a year. Designed a prize house for Pittsburgh Plate Glass competition. Did some painting.

1945. Sept. Took a job at Univ. of Oregon at Bureau of Municipal Research and Service in Eugene Oregon.

Moved Family. Bought house. Worked on a statewide city planning program. The war was over.

1946. In the fall I was transferred to the school of architecture and allied arts as a teacher of history and graphics.

1947. to 1950. I taught lower division design as well as city planning. I was not very happy. The school was in constant turmoil and the weather was wet and miserable. The children were small and all in all the place was a drag. I tried to get back to California but failed. I was pretty discouraged since there really was no future for me there.

In 1950 I decided to apply for a sabbatical leave. I hoped to get a Fullbright grant but this fell through so I applied for a job in Santa Clara County on a temporary one year basis.

1951. On June 15 I arrived in San Jose with family and trailer. We moved into a small house in the mountains. I rode the bus to and from work and suddenly my job became that of Assistant Director and

I was handed the job of reorganizing the department. I worked night and day at this since I fully expected to Eugene the following fall.

(Montezuma School is written in the margin. This was where my brothers and I went as day students because our local school in the mountains was a one-room schoolhouse.

1952. Nestor Barrett the planning director resigned and I was asked to stay on and take the job. After much soul searching I decided to stay. This entailed financial hardship and it really was a tremendous gamble. However, I did it. *(My father had to pay back his sabbatical salary, one-half his full university salary.)* The county charter went into effect in the fall of 1951 and the government was overhauled. Planning found a new place and I worked hard to build a sound program. The growth was coming on by leaps and bounds. We moved to the new site at First and Rosa Streets. Our family was settled in our new house at 660 Dry Creek Road Campbell *(address later changed to 960 Dry Creek)*. All the boys were in elementary school.

The End

(Note: This text was entered and edited (*italica*) by Karl
Arnold Belser in June 2005)