

The last brickmaker in America

For 20 years, CBS News reporter Charles Kuralt has been touring the country for his “On the Road” TV series, searching for those special stories that capture the essence of America. In 1986, after delivering the Red Smith Lecture in Journalism at the University of Notre Dame, Kuralt was asked by a member of the audience if one story stood out above all the rest. Here is his reply.

I guess my favorite story concerns George Black, a brickmaker from my home state of North Carolina, who lived to be 101. He had been making bricks since 1889, and when we met him in 1970, he was 91 and making bricks yet. He had a mud mill, with a mule that walked in circles to stir up the mud. Mr. Black would take the mud and form it expertly into these big outsized bricks, exactly the way bricks were made in Colonial times. And his bricks were much in demand in places like Williamsburg in Virginia and Old Salem in North Carolina, where old buildings were being rebuilt. As we walked about Winston-Salem with him, he showed us this brick church, this brick schoolhouse, this brick walk and this wall—and we suddenly realized that George Black almost alone had made the building materials that had made much of that city. He said Mr. R. J. Reynolds came riding out one time and asked, “Mr. Black, do you think you could make thousands of bricks for a tobacco factory?” Mr. Black said yes, and you can still see his bricks in that enormous building today.

Well, the morning after the story was on the air, my phone rang. It was Marvin Kalb, our State Department correspondent at the time. He said something to the ef-

fect that: “There’s a fellow here in the State Department who wants to talk to you. His name is Harvey J. Withered and he’s with the U.S. AID program.” I said sure.

When I reached Harvey J. Withered, his voice was trembling with excitement. He said, “I hear you did a story about a brickmaker last night,” and I said yup. And he said, “Gosh, I’ve been looking all over the country for one. Forbes Burnham, the prime minister in Guyana, told us if we want to give them some foreign aid that would do them some good, send them a brickmaker. He said they have a 5-year plan to rebuild the country in brick and there’s no shortage of raw materials—there’s plenty of mud in South America—but they don’t want to build a brick factory. They want somebody to teach the people village by village to do it for themselves.” I said, “Well, I’ve got just the man for you, Harvey, but he is in his nineties.” And Harvey Withered said, “I don’t care how old he is. I think he’s the last brickmaker.”

The next day, on official government business, Harvey flew down to Winston-Salem. He met Mr. Black, and they struck what is perhaps the best foreign-aid deal the country’s ever made. For \$1000, Mr. Black would go to Guyana for ten days, taking along

his granddaughter and a couple of neighborhood kids—all familiar with the art of brickmaking. Harvey J. Withered was excited. Mr. Black was excited—he had rarely if ever been out of the county and here he was going abroad on a government mission. I was excited. And it became a pretty big deal, as these government things do.

They called the project Operation Black Jack, and cables flew back and forth between Washington and Guyana. The FBI came down and fingerprinted Mr. Black to make sure he was not some kind of dangerous subversive. Then somebody high up in the State Department looked this thing over and said, “Wait a minute. This man is 90 some years old. That’s just ridiculous.” He stamped the project “canceled,” and down it tumbled through the bureaucracy to Harvey’s desk.

This time he called me practically in tears. He said, “After all this, it’s all over. They say he’s too old,” I tried to cheer him. He’s

one of those bureaucrats we’re always reading about. He’d been there 20 years, and here he was trembling on the brink of actually doing something. He’d been so excited, and he’d been shot down. But now journalism took over. Mr. Black had been telling people how

he was going to go to South America, and the Winston-Salem Journal sent a reporter and photographer around. They did a pageone story. UPI picked up the story and ran it nationwide. Someone at the White House read it and said, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if President Nixon would see this man off?"

The very week that the State Department had canceled the whole thing, the White House was inviting Mr. Black to come meet the President on his way to South America. Harvey J. Witherell, sitting there in the wreckage of his dream, let his eye fall on the President's appointment schedule for the week and saw, "10 a.m. Wednesday, George Black, who is going to South America for the State Department."

So, of course, that made Harvey feel better, a lot better. And, whistling a little tune, he cut the item out, attached it to his canceled project and sent it up through the bureaucracy again, and sure enough, as he knew they would, all the wheels that had been running backward started running fast forward. The canceled project became high priority, and Mr. Black and his family came to Washington and met with President Nixon at the White House.

Then he went to South America and ran all the people ragged who thought he was too old. His hosts were exhausted by his visit. He came back feeling great.

But the best moment took place the day Mr. Black went to the White House. They opened the Oval Office doors to the press for three minutes. I was among the crowd straining to see what was happening. Suddenly, some big, burly photographer pushed Harvey J. Withered right out of the way to take a picture. In his moment of glory, he was shunted aside.

But not for long. Someone took a photograph that shows President Nixon surrounded by a sea of handsome black faces—Mr. Black's family—and a white face sticking in from the corner. Somehow Harvey J. Withered got in there after all A

Acknowledgment This is reprinted with permission from the May 1987 Reader's Digest and the Red Smith Lectureship in Journalism at t

PUBLICATION #M900268
Copyright © 1990, The Aberdeen Group
All rights reserved