

UMSIS

At 90, Kerr has 'been somebody' a long time

By Isaac Rebert

T Henderson Kerr didn't have a dime and couldn't play a note of music when his family moved him to Baltimore from his native Cambridge in about 1902.

In his native city as a boy, he worked as a domestic during the summers when he wasn't in school scrubbing floors and running errands for the folks. His hours were from 8 A.M. to 8 P.M. except Sunday when he had to work only 10 hours.

He was paid \$5 a month for his labors. To this day, eight decades later, he grits his teeth to keep from swearing as he recalls those bitter days. Cambridge, Md., was no place for a Negro, he says, insisting on retaining the name for his race that he grew up with.

He has calculated exactly how few pennies per hour that salary came to. Now that he is rich, he keeps referring to where he started as a reminder of the enormous distance he has come.

He is rich today. He won't say how much he is worth, but he admits to owning considerable real estate and he still collects royalties on Kill-A-Kough, one of the patent medicines he compounded. Last year, he boasts, he paid more than \$10,000 in taxes, which is a lot more money than many of his neighbors earn in a year.

He is a short, slender man, and he lives in a small row house on Division street that he has lived in for 64 years. (He owns many of the houses in his block.) He is in good health, proud of his achievements, more certain than ever of the philosophy that brought him to where he is today.

He is wearing a white shirt, a neat tie and a gray button-front sweater under his blue jacket. His skin is moderately brown, his palms are pink, his teeth are prominent, and he gesticulates a good deal when he talks. His voice suggests a man used to being listened to. If you ask him to repeat, it comes out irritated and impatient. You should have got it the first time.

"I've always been a loner, not a joiner. I've

never smoked or drank. I've never been active in any church. I've never been one of these folks that goes places just to see and be seen.

"Being seen is not what's important. It's being somebody. Don't just act like you're something. Be something. If you're something people will see that you're something. But if all you're doing is acting, they'll see that too. You aren't fooling anybody."

Being somebody. Henderson Kerr started out by being a musician. Shortly after he came to Baltimore at the age of 14, while he was a pupil in grammar school, a teacher (who was later to become his brother-in-law) lent him a violin and a book on how to play it. A few months later he was fiddling tunes, and a year or so after that he had taught himself to play the piano and the flute as well.

By the time he was a student at Frederick Douglass High School, he was concert-master of the newly organized Baltimore City Colored Orchestra. This orchestra put on concerts, along with the Baltimore City Colored Chorus, for the general public and in the colored schools. He was paid \$10 for a performance.

He produces a picture of the orchestra, with himself—a tiny dark figure—sitting as top violinist under the baton of the conductor.

"I'll tell you how that came about. They had just organized the Baltimore Symphony, and in those days no Negroes could play in it and no Negroes could get in to hear it. In those days, you couldn't even find a Negro sweeping the corridors in City Hall. Negroes weren't anywhere in those days.

"Don't let anybody tell you we haven't come a long way. In those days we couldn't even sweep the corridors. Now we've had a city solicitor, we've had district attorney, we've even got some rich men."

But Henderson Kerr was no man to be satisfied just playing in somebody else's orchestra. He organized his own, the Kerr Society Orchestra, playing dances and popular concerts for what he calls "the better class of people."

"We played churches and moonlights, nice

kind of places. No jazz, I never did like that jumpy kind of stuff. I like society kind of music, not the kind the riff-raff would enjoy."

But even with his own orchestra, playing tunes all night for other people to dance to wasn't enough for Henderson Kerr, no matter how much of an ego-trip it was. He craved a more steady life with position and status in society.

So when he graduated from high school, he enrolled at the Howard University School of Pharmacy, paying his way by making music for people to dance to.

Then, after working in other people's pharmacies for seven years at \$12 a week, on July 19, 1919, he opened his own drug store on the southwest corner of Myrtle avenue and George street, in the heart of West Baltimore's black neighborhood.

Kerr's Drug Store. He brings out a photograph reeking of nostalgia. A big show window with the smiling face of a pretty bob-haired girl. The familiar logo of Hender's Ice Cream, the Velvet Kind. Inside, under an embossed tin ceiling, round tables with white marble tops. A glass cigar display, the familiar little boxes with their lids flipped open to show their wares, lined up inside. Two penny gum ball machines on a marble counter. A glass cylinder that dispenses straws. An old-fashioned soda fountain with two faucets, one for plain water, the other for seltzer.

Mr. Kerr doesn't care to dredge up that part of the past, but his daughter, Louise Kerr Hines, does it for her father.

"He ran that store for 40 years. It wasn't just a drug store, it was a neighborhood institution. Dad was everybody's free 'Doc.' He took care of their sicknesses, listened to their troubles, helped the kids with their homework and the soldiers with their allotment applications. He held their money for them, told them stories, wrote their letters, arbitrated their arguments and gave them free notary service.

"He had the only reliable clock in the neighborhood. Everybody came to the store just to

see what time it was. He had 100 pictures hung around the store of important Negroes, like Thurgood Marshall, W. E. B. DuBois, Lillie Jackson and Paul Laurence Dunbar, and he made sure that people knew who they were.

"He believed everybody needs somebody to look up to, and he knew that many people around there just didn't have anybody."

But while he was a do-gooder, he was also a businessman. In those days, a pharmacist didn't just count out pills and pour medicines from a big bottle into little ones. He compounded his own, and Henderson Kerr didn't miss the chance of being creative in his own field.

Kerr's Kill-A-Kough was his best seller, but on the shelf alongside it stood Kiddie Kough, Gas Go, Not So Bad (for people who found Kill-A-Kough too strong), Must Stop (for diarrhea), Ker-Choo (for head colds), Ker-Lax, Ker-Lene and Ker-Tar (for troublesome hair).

He even compounded his own commercial jingles. Long before Hyman Pressman, Henderson Kerr was regaling Baltimoreans with verses like *If that cough gets any worse/Your next taxi ride will be a hearse and Even though you didn't ask it/You may be snoozing in a casket.*

The combination of friendly druggist, astute businessman and promoter was unbeatable. He made a lot of money.

He never moved away from his old neighborhood, never bought two fancy Cadillacs or a mink coat for his wife; but having money, he was able to guarantee his children some of the opportunities that he never had.

His oldest son, Thomas H. Kerr, Jr., studied piano, organ and composing. He headed the piano department at Howard University until his recent retirement. He was the first man of his race to give a piano recital at the National Gallery of Art.

Henderson Kerr's daughter, Mrs. Hines, recently retired after 26 years with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. She was the person who, when she was denied admission to a training class at the Enoch Pratt Free Li-



T. HENDERSON KERR

brary because of her race, got the NAACP behind her and filed suit in federal court against this discrimination.

She was following her father's philosophy -- not to be a political activist, but when the course of events thrust her into a conflict situation, to insist on her dignity as a human being. Her father backed her all the way; and it was this case that led to the admission of black people to the library's staff.

A third child, Judson Kerr, operates an estate and tax business in Baltimore and looks after his father's holdings.

One luxury the old man did permit himself. In 1960, when he sold his store (it has since become part of the site of Murphy Homes, a public housing project) he fulfilled a lifelong ambition: He enrolled at the Peabody Institute for formal training in violin and flute.

Last week, T. Henderson Kerr celebrated his 90th birthday. A hundred selected guests attended his party at the Heritage United Church of Christ on Liberty Heights avenue to wish him many, many more.