

Karl Straus

Community Leader Who Fought Intolerance



Karl Straus (B. 1921) practiced law in Asheville, North Carolina for over 50 years.

“Giving Back” to the Community

Because Karl felt his community had offered him extraordinary opportunities and deserved his everlasting thanks, he wanted to make a difference in Asheville’s civic, educational, philanthropic, and religious endeavors, always in an effort to “give back.” He served on numerous boards including: UNC Asheville Board of Trustees and its Foundation Board, Memorial Mission Hospital, Wachovia Bank, Congregation Beth HaTephila and the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina. He considered intolerance, prejudice, and discrimination a disease to be eliminated, and so volunteered his time with the Asheville Chapter of the National Association of Christians and Jews and the Asheville Buncombe Human Relations Council.

Coming to America

Harry Straus brought his nephew Karl to New York City in 1936 from Mannheim, Germany to remove him from the danger of the Nazis. After high school and secretarial school, Karl came to Pisgah Forest to work at his Uncle Harry’s cigarette paper manufacturing plant, Ecusta Paper Company. In 1942, Karl tried to join the military, but was rejected as an “enemy alien.” As soon as he became an American citizen, he became a member of the US Army Air Corps, then transferred to the Allied Military Government for postwar Germany.

“...This occasion is of particular significance to me as it was twenty-seven years ago almost to the day that I stood in this very courtroom where you are standing now and received my certificate of naturalization—when I became an American citizen just like you have become American citizens this morning.

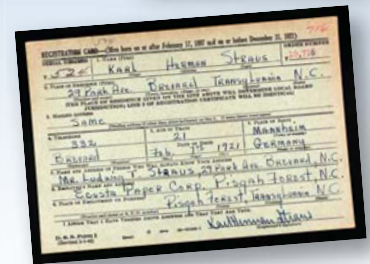
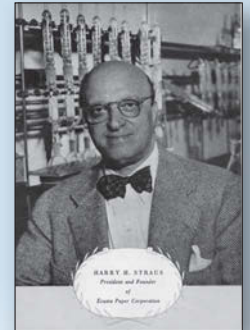
“This occasion very beautifully dramatizes and gives living proof of the opportunities of this land of ours and it is my honor today, as president of the Buncombe County Bar Association, to give to each of you a pamphlet in which are contained the principles of right and justice.

“The pamphlet, entitled ‘Charters of Freedom: The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights’... embodies in its structure an accumulation of the wisdom and the genius of generations of men and women. We as individual citizens seem unimportant and small. Yet it is the individual...that justifies the existence of our state, and the system of our government—and we give the government the responsibility to maintain the conditions, the peace, the order and the justice, under which we, the individuals, can strive and under which we, the individuals, are given an opportunity to develop to the fullest all the abilities with which God has endowed us.

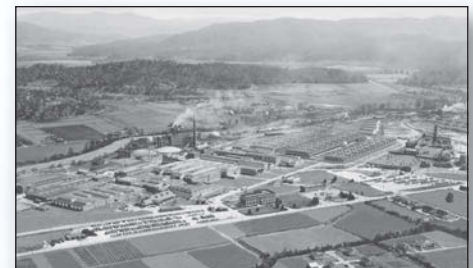
It is very appropriate therefore that on this occasion you are presented with copies of these documents, for this charter of freedom has formed the basis and given the inspiration for so many of the changes our country has directly and indirectly brought about in the thoughts and philosophies and in the betterment of peoples all over the world—and it is the same charter of freedom which has been the fundamental basis for so many of the all-important changes that have been brought about in our country in the past decades.

So, on this day of your naturalization, I hope and trust that in return for the right and privilege of citizenship, you will assume one of the responsibilities of citizenship, the active participation in all the affairs of our government...It is my firm conviction that if as a nation and as a people we are to grow and prosper and achieve all that which we are capable of achieving, it can only be within the fundamental principles of these documents, our charter of freedom.”

Karl felt his proudest moment as a lawyer was in May, 1970, when, as the president of the Buncombe County Bar Association, he addressed new US citizens at their naturalization ceremonies, which were held in the same federal courthouse where he himself had become a citizen 27 years earlier.



The Ecusta Paper Corporation, Pisgah Forest, was started by Harry Straus, uncle of Karl. Plant construction was completed in 1939. Its location near Brevard, provided clean water and the workforce necessary to supply the U.S. tobacco industry with American manufactured cigarette papers made with flax. Prior to this time, all cigarette papers were imported from France and were made using rags. With World War II about to begin, RJ Reynolds and others realized that they could not rely on suppliers in Europe and that the war would increase demand for cigarettes.



After World War II

Returning to the United States in 1946, Karl benefited from the GI Bill to attend college and law school at New York University, while also working at a gas station. He chose this path over the objections of his Uncle Harry, who did not think Karl needed a law degree to return to work at Ecusta! Karl did return to western North Carolina and settled in Asheville after a short stint practicing law in New York. It was here in Asheville, that Karl partnered with his father-in-law, Joseph A. Patla, to form the law firm of Patla & Straus.



Karl took the North Carolina Bar Exam in 1953 and partnered with his father-in-law, Joseph A. Patla, to form Patla & Straus, which today is the firm Patla, Straus, Robinson and Moore. Karl is in the sixth row, fourth from the right in front of the Buncombe County Courthouse.



Karl understood that leading others to give has the greatest impact as a philanthropist. He demonstrated dedicated service to the University of North Carolina at Asheville while serving as chair of the Board of Trustees and later chair of the university Foundation Board. For his service and support to the university, UNC Asheville awarded Karl the chancellor’s medallion in 1989 and also named its track in his honor in 1992. In this 1989 photo Karl is recognized for his board service by Chancellor David G. Brown.



Karl went to college on an urban campus. He dreamed of what it would have been like to attend a school like the University of North Carolina Asheville in such a beautiful location. Always athletic, Karl would come to campus to play tennis. On one of these visits, he met Chancellor William E. Highsmith who suggested he become involved with his adopted campus and he did! Karl Straus and Chancellor Samuel Schuman at the dedication of Straus Track, October 1992, are pictured above.



While working at a New York law firm Karl reacquainted himself with Sylvia Patla, whom he had met 13 years earlier at Ecusta in Pisgah Forest. Sylvia had come to New York to experience life outside of her native Asheville. When Karl was offered a job in Waynesville for the astronomical sum of \$6,000 annually, they both quit their jobs and moved back. That job never materialized, so Karl started his own firm in Asheville with his father-in-law, Joseph Patla, Sylvia Patla Straus (1922-2013) and Karl are pictured above.

