Interview with Gerd Keuffel

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Recently I had the great pleasure of speaking with Mr. Gerd Keuffel, great-grandson of Wilhelm Johann Dietrich Keuffel, co-founder of the Keuffel and Esser Company. I was immediately struck by his graciousness and by his delight in sharing what he knows about K&E.

We started our conversation with the recent designation of the K&E Building at 127 Fulton Street in Manhattan as an Official Landmark5. Ironically, Gerd had recently visited the building and knew it had been nominated as a Landmark, but wasn’t aware that it was official until I congratulated him and his family on this great honor. The Oughtred Society sent a letter of support to the Landmark Preservation Commission during its deliberations earlier this year.

The eight-story K&E Building on Fulton Street was constructed in 1892-93, featuring a beautiful and detailed Renaissance style facade. Incorporated in the ironwork is the K&E Gryphon logo, which was adopted at the founding of the company. The stonework features the Keuffel Coat of Arms, which dates from 1629.

K&E was founded in 1867 by Wilhelm J.D. Keuffel and Herman Esser. Their initial focus was the importation and sale of drafting tools to engineers, architects, and builders. By 1870, they initiated the manufacture of precision instruments, starting with hard rubber draftsman’s curves and triangles. K&E began American manufacturing of slide rules in 1891, after selling imported slide rules beginning in 1880.

Wilhelm was born in Walbeck, Germany in 1838. He became an apprentice in a hardware store in Braunschweig and later joined The Ravene Co. in Hannover. He came to The United States in 1866 to sell Ravene’s engineering products. Seeing a market opportunity in the construction boom following The Civil War, he invited his former co-worker, Herman Esser, to join him in forming K&E. Their vision was well founded, and rapidly increasing demand caused the firm to move to four progressively larger addresses before their headquarters was established at 127 Fulton Street in 1878. Construction of the new building began on this site 14 years later. Manufacturing operations had been moved to Hoboken, New Jersey in 1875.

In 1902, Herman Esser retired from the company and returned to Germany for personal and family reasons. Esser had been president of K&E from 1867-1902. After he moved back to Germany, Keuffel took over the reins as president until he died in 1908. Wilhelm was particularly skilled in the purchasing and marketing aspects of the company.

Another key individual in the company was Wilhelm Ludwig Ehrenfried (W.L.E.) Keuffel, who was a second cousin. He was born in 1861 in Millheim (Austin County), Texas, where his father had acquired a ranch after emigrating from Germany. W.L.E. was an industrious student of metalworking and was adventuresome. He pursued travel and was introduced to K&E in New York when the General Post Office had forwarded his mail to the company rather than holding it for him in general delivery. Wilhelm offered him a job, which he initially turned down. After an extended working tour of Europe, he returned to New York in 1883. This time, Wilhelm was able to convince him to join K&E to assist in expanding the Hoboken factory complex. W.L.E. Keuffel went on to become an engineering products pioneer at K&E. He was instrumental in many patents (including one for the slide rule frameless cursor) held by the company. One of his many important contributions was in developing the company’s noted slide rule dividing and engraving equipment.

Other presidents of K&E included:
Willie Gottfried Keuffel (son) from 1908 – 1942
Carl Bernegau (a son-in-law) from 1942 – 1946
Karl Keller (a son-in-law) from 1946 – 1950
Carl W. Keuffel (son of W.L.E. Keuffel) from 1950 – 1961
Alfred E. Busch (grandson of Wilhelm J.D. Keuffel) from 1961 – 1975
Thomas R. Nye from 1975 – 1982
In March of 1982, K&E was purchased by Kratos, Inc. in a leveraged buyout. The company had been publicly held since 1965.

Over the years, Gerd has collected a number of K&E slide rules as well as drafting equipment, engineering and surveying instruments and catalogs (he has a full set of K&E catalogs from 1900 to 1962). He seeks these in exactly the same way most of us do, by way of various sales and auctions. As you may imagine, it often makes quite a splash when the seller learns that the buyer is a Keuffel! He enjoys asking the seller about the history of the item and inquiring who used it. This is definitely in step with his open and friendly nature.

One of Gerd’s prized possessions is a slide rule that appears to have been imported in the 1880s and used by his great-grandfather. It shows no manufacturer’s identification, but has “Keuffel” etched into the metal cursor. It is a simplex style slide rule with a 25-centimeter scale on both edges. This rule has its original cardboard case.

He also has collected a variety of planimeters and transits. K&E developed its own optical glass for these precision instruments when imports became impossible during

5See the preceding article for more information regarding this building.
World War I. Many K&E historians have heard the story of “Mary the spider lady”, who supplied spider web material for use as the crosshairs in these instruments and for the Norden bombsights made by the company during the war.

We wrapped up our conversation with a few personal notes. Gerd was born in Germany and moved to the United States in 1949. He has lived and worked in five different countries. He was employed by General Motors for 27 years in the Overseas Division, and has two sons and a daughter, all born on different continents. Now that he is retired, you can frequently find him on the golf course or traveling. He now has time to devote to one of his great passions ... learning more about his family’s history.

Gerd Keuffel at the Oughtred Society East Coast Meeting, Nov. 11-13, 2005.

The bust is of Wilhelm Johann Dietrich Keuffel, co-founder of K&E.