CHARLES RAYMOND BROOKES

EAST LIVERPOOL HIGH SCHOOL, CLASS OF 1911 | 1892-1982

“A plain, blunt man.”

Research, HVR, and story by T.P. Calhoun | Revised August 13, 2026



Charles and Elsa, circa May 1918 — Charles in uniform, 1918 - HVR color

Marriage May 15; enlistment May 30 - just 15 days apart.

I first met Charles Raymond Brookes as a face. The Evening Review put the graduating class around its front page in May 1911, and Charles was one of the young people looking out at us from those little newspaper portraits. At first he was just another serious young man in a suit looking a bit annoyed about the whole thing.

Then I dug up the Keramos yearbook for 1911 and there he was again, this time much clearer, with the yearbook’s opinion of him printed directly beneath the portrait: “A plain, blunt man.” I liked that. It is short, a little funny, and much more useful than the sort of sugary yearbook line people often got. Somebody in that class thought Charles was direct, uncomplicated, maybe a little brusque, and apparently thought everybody else would recognize the description—which they probably did in that year, all having been well-read in the classics.

An English Immigrant Florist’s Son

Charles Raymond Brookes was born in East Liverpool on October 19, 1892, the son of John Brookes and Elizabeth Moore Brookes. He grew up in a large family, with several sisters around him.

His father John had been born in England and became part of East Liverpool’s substantial florist and greenhouse trade. The 1902 city directory is wonderfully simple about it: “John Brookes, florist,” living on Trentvale near the city limits. Later the family was associated with the Dresden Avenue greenhouse operation. By 1920 Charles himself was working as a florist in a greenhouse. So before we get to steel mills and bakeries and all the other

things that show up later, Charles started in the family business, working with plants under glass.

That also makes the Brookes story an East Liverpool story in a way that is easy to miss if we think of the city only in terms of crockery. There were greenhouses, florists, church musicians, lawyers, shopkeepers, Scouts, teachers and all the rest living right alongside the potters. A remarkable number, really—and then there was Riverview Orchids, about which more in the future!

East Liverpool Class of 1911

Charles graduated from East Liverpool High School in 1911. In 1911 that meant more than it sounds like it means now. East Liverpool had roughly twenty thousand people, but the graduating class had only forty-nine students. High school was not yet something virtually every teenager did. A great many young people Charles's age were already working full time. None of my grandparents ever made it into high school, for example.

So the Class of 1911 was selective. These were the kids whose families, abilities and circumstances allowed them to stay in school into their later teens. When we follow them afterward, we keep seeing college, teaching, professional work, civic organizations, music, churches, businesses and leadership roles.

Charles did not become a lawyer or professor. His working life is actually much more interesting than that because he kept changing with the economy around him. There is also evidence in the 1940 census material that he completed two years of college. Gotta chase that down.

Absolutely Abrupt Life Changes!



Charles R. Brookes and Elsa M. (Shurte) Brookes, circa May 1918. Full-length HVR color treatment.

Seven years after graduation, Charles married Elsa Marguerite Shurte on May 15, 1918. We now have a remarkably good image of them standing outdoors together, full length, on grass. Charles is in a very handsome three-piece suit that looks new. Elsa has on an elaborate light blouse and long skirt that also look new. The vegetation looks like late spring. One of the trees still seems to be finishing leafing out. Charles looks dazed to me, but I have rarely seen such a welcoming smile as Elsa's. Wow.

The shadow falls short and largely beneath them. That puts the photograph somewhere around the high-sun part of the day, probably around noon or early afternoon. Put that together with May vegetation, fresh clothes and the documented May 15 marriage, and I

think there is a very good chance we are looking at Charles and Elsa shortly after the wedding, perhaps that same day. We can't prove it, but it is a good historical inference, and the photograph itself is extraordinary. We are not looking at abstract ancestors. We are looking at a young couple at the beginning of a marriage.

Fifteen Days Later He's Off to War!



Charles in uniform, 1918. HVR color portrait derived from the surviving military photograph.

May 15, 1918: Charles marries Elsa. May 30, 1918: Charles enlists at Wellsville, Ohio. Fifteen days.

Whatever Charles and Elsa imagined the first weeks of married life were going to be, the First World War immediately intervened. The photograph of Charles in uniform, taken sometime in 1918, looks very different from the wedding photograph. Same young man, same year, different world. He definitely looks more determined than in 1911, even though this is also a new suit, previously unworn.

The Ohio World War I roster: Age twenty-five, born October 19, 1892 in East Liverpool, resident of East Liverpool, enlisted May 30, 1918 at Wellsville, and entered the National Army. Charles was first assigned to the 49th Company, 5th Infantry Replacement Regiment at Camp Gordon, Georgia, where the roster carries him to July 17, 1918. Then he appears with a Camp Gordon automatic replacement draft through August 17. After that he was sent to the Base Signal School, 1st Depot Division, through September 28. By late September he had moved into Company B, 116th Field Signal Battalion, where the roster carries him through October 12. The surviving screenshot continues into another headquarters-company assignment, but the last line is clipped, so I am not going to invent the rest of it.

That sequence changes the picture. Charles was not simply put into a generic infantry company and left there. Within four months he had moved from an infantry replacement regiment into signal training and then into a field signal battalion. The Army was sorting him, training him and moving him increasingly into communications work. Whether he actually went overseas is still one of the things I just don't know. I won't put him in France just because other East Liverpool units went there. The surviving roster tells us what we know and, just as usefully, where the record presently stops.

Back Home in the Crockery Valley

Charles and Elsa built their family in East Liverpool. Their children included Elsa Elizabeth, generally called Betty; Marian Lou; Charles B.; and Jo Ann. The family stayed rooted in the city. Their addresses move through the records, particularly along Dresden Avenue and later St. Clair Avenue, but Charles never really left East Liverpool, and his family maintained a pattern of participating in things.

Shock! Charles Was Not an Operative Potter!

He started out as a florist in the family greenhouse. By 1939 he was a driver for New System Bakery, living at 1813 Dresden Avenue. The 1940 census calls him a salesman, working on his own account.

And then here came trouble: In 1950 the Ancestry transcription of the census said he was an “agricultural inspector” at a steel mill. That sounded so odd that I assumed something had been misread. It took hours to figure out and a close visual inspection of the actual census scan. He was an “agricultural implement inspector” at a steel mill. You have no idea how difficult that was to clear up. But it makes sense. He was not inspecting farms. He was inspecting manufactured agricultural implements in a steel-mill setting. That is a real occupation, and it is a wonderful East Liverpool–Midland sort of occupation.

The 1954 East Liverpool directory independently calls him a “mill wkr,” which fits perfectly with the census. We still need the employer name. Crucible’s enormous Midland works just upstream and across the river is the obvious possibility, but until a record actually says Crucible, I want to leave it as a strong candidate rather than promote it to fact.

So Charles’s working life goes from greenhouse florist to bakery driver to salesman to agricultural-implement inspector in a steel mill. That is a man moving through the employment world available to him over forty years.

Musical Threads Run Through His Life

“Charles played violin” does not quite cover it. He sang bass. He played violin. He performed orchestral and chamber music. His children participated. Music passed through the household.

His father John had already been deeply involved in the Methodist Protestant church and was remembered as a longtime choir director, church steward and member of the building committee. So, by the 1930s, Charles was in the First Methodist Protestant Church choir as a bass. The church was presenting E. L. Ashford’s cantata The Prince of Peace, and the published choir roster includes Charles Brookes among the basses. Other Brookes family members appear in the same roster. I found a sacred musical service at First Methodist Protestant included orchestra, choir, organ, piano, solos and a string quartet. Charles Brookes is explicitly listed as a violinist in the Sunday-school orchestra and as one of the players in the string quartet performing Tchaikovsky’s Andante Cantabile. Marian Brookes appears in the choir in the same program. So we can actually see father and daughter participating in the same church musical life.

A Plain, Blunt Man Keeps Turning Up

One of the things I like about Charles is that he does not become famous enough for the newspapers to manufacture a public persona around him. Instead, they keep catching him doing things. He sings. He plays violin. He works. He raises children. He appears in church programs. He changes jobs. He remains in East Liverpool.

The records are ordinary enough that they become intimate. A census gives us an age, an address and “agricultural implement inspector.” A church notice gives us “bass.” Another gives us “violin.” A city directory calls him a mill worker. An Army roster moves him from Camp Gordon into signal training. Put them together and Charles begins to live in color.

He Lived to See History Recorded in Color!



Charles late in life - the surviving original color photograph.

And nearing the end we actually have color, Charles as an old man, outdoors in a light shirt, white-haired and smiling. It is not a great photograph technically. It is soft and a little washed out. But it is really him, in real color, and that matters more to me than making him prettier than the evidence allows.

Charles died in East Liverpool on February 17, 1982, at eighty-nine years old. He had spent almost his entire life in the same Ohio River city where he had been born in 1892 and graduated from high school in 1911. During that life he worked in a greenhouse, drove for a bakery, sold things, inspected agricultural implements in a steel mill, sang bass, played violin, raised a family and stayed deeply connected to church and community.

“A plain, blunt man.” And apparently a very useful one.

* T.P. Calhoun, August 13, 2026