

WITNESS TO A CENTURY ALONG THE MON HAROLD “CHOPS” LAUGHERY

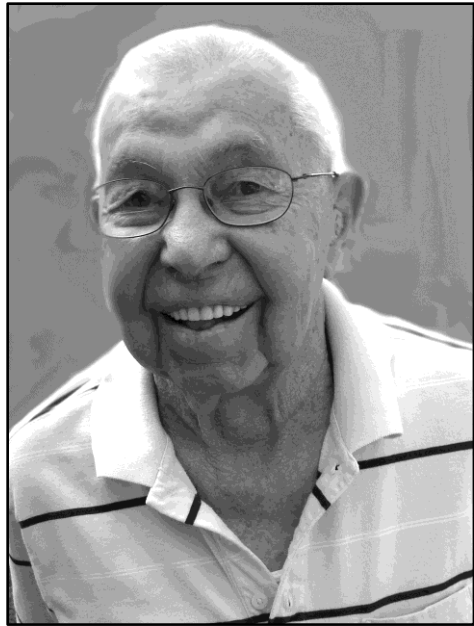
Today, January 18, 2004, is the 88th birthday of Harold Edgar “Chops” Laughery, and the spry West Brownsville resident is full of stories to tell – tales of epic floods, rumbling trains that can unscrew light bulbs, and forgotten coal mines that operated in the very heart of West Brownsville.

Harold Laughery has lived in Brownsville or West Brownsville all of his life, so I was pleased when he agreed to talk with me in his Main Street home and share memories that span most of the twentieth century.

Harold was born in his parents’ home on January 18, 1916 with the assistance of a midwife. The son of Alfred and Beulah Laughery, he was raised at 311 Catherine Avenue, Brownsville, and was educated in the South Brownsville School District. He attended Prospect Street School and South Brownsville High School on High Street until economic conditions provoked a decision that was not hard to make.

“When I was in the eleventh grade,” Harold said, “I quit school to go to work. It was the Depression, my income was needed, and many of the jobs in those days did not require a high school diploma.”

“Where did you get a job?” I asked.



Harold "Chops" Laughery 2011

“I found work with the Monongahela Railway, working at Maxwell on a section gang.”

“At Maxwell? How did you get to work from your home on Catherine Avenue?”

“I walked five miles to Maxwell. I worked all day, then walked five miles back, five days a week. I worked on what was called the paddy gang, riding the pump car along the tracks. We would load the rails, nails, and tools on the paddy car and ride the rails, doing repairs and maintenance work on the tracks or rail bed. That was the first of many jobs that I have had during my life. In fact, I’ve had so many jobs, I doubt that I can even remember them all.”

“So there is no one type of work that you would call your specialty?”

“No. While I worked on the paddy gang, I was earning forty cents an hour. I quit that job to take one that paid sixty cents an hour, working at the Alicia coke yard.”

“What did you do at the coke ovens?”

“There were about two hundred double ovens at Alicia, four hundred in all, and Roy Elliot and I were ‘pushers.’ That means it was our job to go to each oven after the coal had been poured in from above. Using a machine with a long tool on it, we would push around the mound of coal in the oven until it was level, so that it would burn evenly.”

“You did that for two hundred ovens?”

“It took us all day to do two hundred ovens, assuming there were no breakdowns.”

“So you worked for the railroad, and then at the coke ovens, two of the main industries around these parts back then. How about the coal mines?” I said half-jokingly. “Did you ever work in the mines?”

“Yes, I did,” Harold replied. “I worked with three other men in a slope mine in West Brownsville for about a year. I’ll tell you more about that later. I also worked at Isabella, but not down in the mine. I was hired to work at the tipple down by the river.”

“That reminds me,” I said, “of another major industry in the area back then, namely river transportation. Someone told me that you worked on the riverboats.”

“That’s right. Before I got married a fellow named Kenyon, who lived next to us on Catherine Avenue, got me a job working on a U. S. Steel boat named the *B. F. Fairless*. I worked inside the boat, shoveling coal to fire the boiler to make steam. I worked on that boat for about a year, but I didn’t like it.”

“Working on the river sounds romantic and adventurous,” I said. “Makes me think of Mark Twain. What didn’t you like about it?”

"I didn't like being away from home, and not being able to go get a beer," Harold laughed, "and not being able to go to the Plaza, the Bison, or the Strand . . ."

"But didn't you work for a few weeks solid, then get a string of days off?"

"No, I worked thirty days on, then one day off with pay! We had no union. So you were living on the boat and you had no life, if you know what I mean."

"I see. Now somewhere during the time you were working these various jobs, you met the woman you later married."

"That's right. I was driving truck for Brownsville Construction and still living on Catherine Avenue when I began dating a girl from West Brownsville named Frances Dunker. She lived next door to the house we're sitting in now. In 1939, Frances and I were married in the Methodist Church in Uniontown.

"For the first several years of our married life, we rented an apartment on Race Street from Fiddy Rathmell, then for five or six years we rented a house on Clover Street from Bob Petriello. When this house, which is next to my late mother-in-law's home here on Main Street, became available in 1947, we bought it from Andy Regal."

Harold paused mischievously. "I paid through the nose something awful!" he joked. "Had to go all the way up to \$3,000!"

"Then, a few years later in the early fifties, I bought the lot and house directly behind me from the estate of Steve Liptak, so my property goes all the way from Main Street back to Middle Street. I tore down the five-room house that was on Liptak's lot, because I got tired of replacing its furnace and hot water heater and cleaning it up after every flood. I kept the big garage that was on the former Liptak lot for my workshop."

"Harold, there's something I have to ask you. I understand that most people don't call you Harold. They call you 'Chops.' How did you get that nickname?"

"To tell the truth, I'm not sure," Harold chuckled. "Every kid had a nickname back in those days, you know. I think I picked up my nickname from my older brother Alfred, who worked for Ace Hardwick on the ice truck in Brownsville. They would go to the icehouse and load the truck, and people along the delivery route who wanted ice for their icebox would put a sign in the window saying how many pounds of ice they needed.

"It was Alfred's job to chop the right size block of ice, so they called him 'Chops.' I think maybe that's how I inherited my nickname." Harold laughed, "At least, that's my guess. I've heard all kinds of other stories, but they're not true."

“After you married Frances, did the wide variety of jobs continue, or did you settle down at one job for a while?”

“The variety continued. For a while I worked for Wright Poster advertising company. We built billboards along the highway wherever Ralph Campbell and Virginia Campbell, who operated the business, told our crew of three men to build one.

“I worked for about a year down towards Pittsburgh installing a big eighteen-inch gas line,” he continued. “I mined coal here in West Brownsville for about a year. I worked in an automobile plant in Ohio for a very short time.”

“An automobile plant?”

“Yes. In 1956, I couldn’t find a job here in Brownsville, and half of my friends had gone to Cleveland to get jobs in the automobile plants. So I went up to Cleveland, got a job, worked for eighteen days, and came home and stayed here.”

“Eighteen days? You didn’t like the work?”

“I couldn’t stand it in that factory. I didn’t know if it was raining, snowing, or what it was doing outside.”

“Now that you say that, I realize that most of the jobs you’ve mentioned so far are outside jobs. Working at the coke ovens, section gang on the railroad, building outdoor billboards, working at the tipple. What did you do when you returned to town?”

“I came back from Cleveland and went back on the boats, this time working for Hillman. Then I quit working at Hillman and got the job at the mine tipple in Isabella.”

While we were discussing Harold’s colorful employment history, the loud prolonged wail of a horn began sounding outside the house. I looked up toward the light fixture that was suspended over the kitchen table where we were sitting, and I saw that the entire fixture was shaking. Were we having an earthquake?

No. The entire house was trembling because a train was rumbling by, just a few yards from Harold’s front door. Railroad tracks run down the center of Main Street in West Brownsville, and those tracks have plenty of rail traffic every day.

After the train had passed and the vibrations stopped, Harold explained why he believes there are more problems now between the borough and the railroad than there used to be. Next we will explore Harold’s theory on that topic, and we will also discuss how, after living through nearly twenty floods, he has learned to cope with the unpredictable Monongahela River.

"CHOPS" LAUGHERY RECALLS AN UNUSUAL HOME INVASION

It was a terrifying situation.

"My wife had her suitcase packed. She was scared, knowing that it was inside the house, right on the other side of this door. I wasn't scared, but she was. And to make matters worse, the power was out. All we had was a flashlight."

Harold Laughery of West Brownsville was standing in the hallway of his Main Street home a few weeks ago, describing a traumatic night that he and his wife Frances experienced nearly twenty years ago. Harold motioned toward the closed wooden door that leads to his basement stairs.

"If it had come any further up the steps," he said to me, "Frances would have left. Fortunately, when it reached the top step, it paused. We waited to see if it was coming any further."

The filthy intruder that had crept in the dark up the Laugherys' basement stairs was too powerful to be stopped by any man, no matter how courageous. The menace had been in the Laugherys' basement before, but it had never threatened to come upstairs . . . until that night.

On that night, Harold opened the basement door in the dark, stepped back, and shined the flashlight on the invader. It had reached the top basement step. Harold and his wife stood silently a few feet away, watching as it paused in its ascent, seeming to decide whether it should enter their living quarters. Then after several agonizing minutes, it began an almost imperceptible retreat. First down one step, then another. Frances breathed a sigh of relief and set her suitcase on the floor. It looked like she would be staying.

"That is as close as we've come to having the Monongahela River flood the main floor of our house," Harold told me. "It was four inches from running over onto the main floor. The basement was completely in the river."

I shook my head as I contemplated living with that anxiety each time there was a heavy rainfall or a quick thaw.

"How many times have you been flooded?" I asked Harold.

"Since we moved to this house in West Brownsville in the late forties, I'd estimate we've been through eighteen or nineteen floods."

Harold's home is on Main Street, several blocks from the west bank of the Monongahela River. Homes and businesses closer to the river are more vulnerable to serious flood damage than the homes along Main Street, which usually escape the worst of the devastation. The 1985 Election Day flood, however, was different.



One of many floods in West Brownsville is shown in this undated photo.

“Before the Corps of Engineers raised that river,” Harold explained, “we would only get water up to Middle Street [the next street toward the river] and a little bit in the back yard. Now we get it in the house. In the 1985 flood, the water reached the top basement step in our house. My wife had a little suitcase packed. She was scared.”

The Corps of Engineers actions to which Harold referred involved the locks and dam at Charleroi.

“When they re-built the Charleroi dam,” he explained, “they backed the river up to Brownsville. Before that, when I was working on the river boats, this river was approximately eight to ten feet deep. Now it is twelve to fifteen feet deep.”

“Is that all?” I had assumed the river was deeper than that.

“Oh, there are spots that are deeper,” he said, “but on average, that is the depth of the channel. When I worked on the boats in the summertime, we would stir up mud with a nine-foot barge all the way down to Clairton.”

“What do you mean by a ‘nine foot barge?’”

“That is how much water the barge was drawing . . . how far below the river’s surface the bottom of the barge is. Most barges were about eleven feet from top to bottom on the inside. About thirty-two to thirty-five inches of the barge would be above the water line, and that was called the ‘freeboard.’ The rest of the barge, about eight-and-a-half feet, was underwater.

"In the old days when the river was lower in the summertime, we might scrape bottom with that barge. Now the river is several feet higher, which makes the average flood worse than floods were in the past."

"You said that even the 1985 flood didn't scare you. Don't you worry about your electricity, your utilities?"

"In '85, they shut off the electricity to this area. Now every time the water comes up, they shut off the gas and the electric."

"I have heard it said by people who do not live along the river, 'I would only go through one flood if I lived along the river, then I would move.' What has kept you from moving?"

"Money. Working all of these years to acquire everything we have in this house, then just giving it away and starting all over."

"I see what you mean about 'giving it away.' The threat of flooding surely affects the property values in the flood-prone part of West Brownsville. What about flood insurance?"



"It is expensive, and here on Main Street, we don't usually have a lot of flood damage. One of the fellows who lives back there," Harold motioned toward Middle Street, "when the river came up last month, he walked out of his house, locked the door, and took his cars to his relative's house. I had twenty-four inches of water in my basement; he had five feet. But he has flood insurance, and they paid for just about everything."

"You would think he would have a hard time renewing that flood

insurance if he keeps filing claims, wouldn't he?"

"Once you have it, they can't take it off of you. I get letter after letter offering me flood insurance. I know some people whose properties are lower than I am here, but they just can't afford it. The fellow I was talking about earlier is paying over \$500 a year. And how many years go by that we don't have a flood? When we do, I don't have that much damage in this house, only in the cellar. When the water goes down, I usually have mud to contend with."



St. John's Methodist Church is visible on the right

"Usually?"

"Yes," he explained. "This flood we had last month – there wasn't any mud in my basement, because the water came up through the sewers. The river never went over its banks."

"Is there a system in place to warn people that the river is flooding?"

"Before, there wasn't. It was just done by word of mouth. Now they blow the fire whistle. You are going to bed knowing the river is high, so when you hear the fire siren, you know what's happening. You start putting stuff up higher, moving cars up to Main Street."

During our discussion about the flooding of the Monongahela, a long train rumbled past the house, causing the light fixtures, dishes, and everything else in the kitchen where we were sitting to vibrate. Railroad tracks run down the center of Main Street, and that has made for a touchy relationship between Main Street residents and the railroad over the

years.

“The people of West Brownsville seem to have ongoing complaints with the railroad,” I said, “including dirt from the coal, the track bed sinking in the middle of the street, trains blocking intersections, and heavy trains damaging sewer lines under the tracks. Were there always that many problems with the railroad?”



“Not as many as we have now,” Harold asserted. “Before diesels, when they had the steam engines, they had fewer cars on a train, and each car was lighter. There may have been forty or fifty cars in a train, and the trains came by less often. They used the river more to transport the coal.

“Make no mistake, those old steam engines were filthy. You couldn’t hang clothes outside because of the steamboats and steam locomotives. But when it would rain, it would wash that coal dirt right off the house, and everything would be nice and clean again.

“But this diesel dirt, it sticks. It doesn’t wash off. The diesel engines put out a lot of smoke, and it is oily and gritty smoke, very hard to clean off. I could take you outside right now and take a rag and show you how my siding is oil-stained. I wash this house every spring.”

“And what about the vibration and the constant need for repairs to the track bed . . .?”

“With the diesel engines, the trains are longer now. They may have 144 cars, and each car is heavier than before, one hundred tons or more. There is a tremendous vibration in the house when a train goes by. I have light bulbs that unscrew themselves. I think the diesel engines and heavier cars do a lot more damage than occurred in the old days.”

Harold chuckled and shook his head. “Folks on Main Street joke that we have a river in the basement and a railroad through the parlor.”

Ironically, the coal-laden trains pass within yards of the remnants of an old mine that was located in the center of West Brownsville. Harold worked in that mine for a short time many years ago. When our conversation continues, Harold will share his memories of the old Collins mine, located across the street from his present home.

REFLECTIONS ON A CENTURY OF CHANGE ALONG THE MON

About one hundred yards from the front door of Harold "Chops" Laughery’s Main Street home is one of five towering piers that support the western end of the Lane-Bane high-level bridge. Located on the West Brownsville side of the Monongahela River, these massive piers contain hundreds of tons of reinforced concrete . . . and a tiny bit of copper.

“I have a penny in each of those piers,” Harold Laughery joked during our recent conversation in his home. The bridge piers were

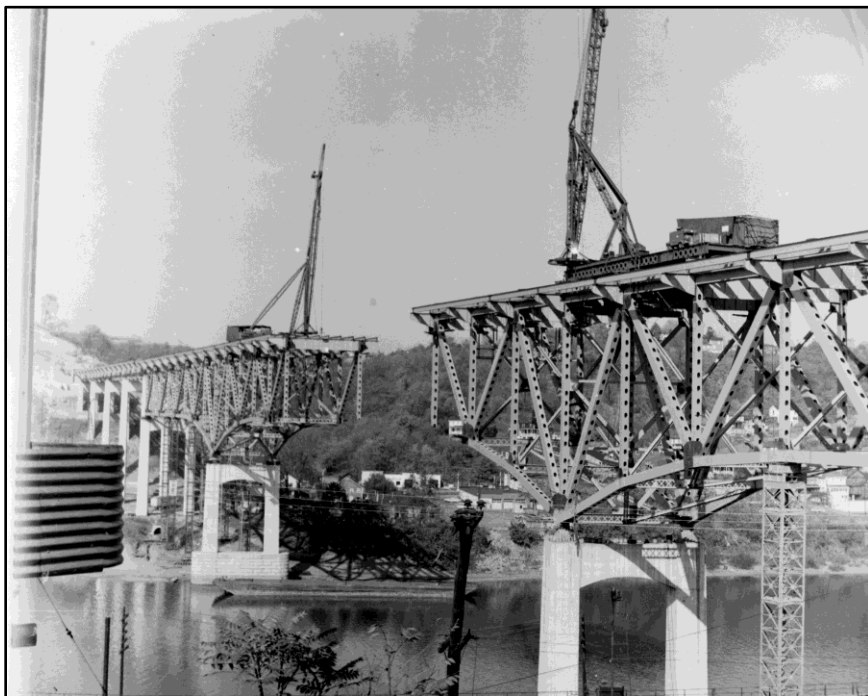
constructed between 1958 and 1960, and Harold was a sidewalk supervisor who watched the 160-foot high pillars being built and occasionally threw in his two cents worth.

Well, not quite two cents.

"When they would take a bucket of cement to pour it into a pier, I would toss a penny in," Harold smiled.

Since he was employed on a riverboat during those years, it was occasionally necessary for Harold to enlist the services of a relief pitcher to perform the coin-tossing ritual.

"If I was working on the river," he revealed, "my father-in-law, who lived next door to me, would throw one in. So there's a penny in every pier."



"A penny in every pier!" says "Chops" Laughery, describing his custom of tossing a cent into the wet concrete of each pier supporting the Lane-Bane Bridge.

Construction of the Lane-Bane Bridge and the four-lane highway that hugs the West Brownsville hillside beneath it forever altered the appearance of this small Washington County community, nestled in the shadow of the hills along the Monongahela River. As is often the case



Potter-McCune, one of the businesses removed by the project to construct an intersection with the four-lane highway leading up the hill and under the new Lane-Bane Bridge, is shown left of center in this undated photo.

with such a massive public works project, some folks lost their homes to the project.

“The project took eleven houses across Main Street here,” said Harold, “because the hillside alongside the four-lane road wasn’t stable, and that caused sewer and water trouble in those houses. Those houses were taken after the bridge was already built. Only two houses on the river side of Main Street were taken to build the piers.

“West Brownsville used to be a busy town,” Harold continued. “For example, you had Lincoln Bakery, Stapleton’s Dairy, Potter-McCune, Herbertson’s Ford, Bakewell and Hartmann Dodge and Plymouth garage, Swift Meat Packing, several service stations, welding shops, a restaurant, several neighborhood grocery stores, and about seven beer gardens.

“Some of those businesses were removed when they built the four-lane highway at the intersection of Bridge and Main Street.”

“There were quite a few businesses in this town in those days,” I agreed. “Didn’t you tell me there was a coal mine in town too?”

“Right over there,” Harold nodded, pointing in the direction of Main Street and the West Brownsville honor roll on the other side of the street.



This May 1962 photograph shows earthmoving is underway preceding the construction of the intersection between Bridge Street and the new four-lane Route 40 leading up the hillside.

Just up the street from the honor roll is the West Brownsville borough building, which occupies the former Collins Service Station.

“The mine entrance was located in the hillside between the honor roll and the borough building,” Harold said.

“What was the name of the mine?” I asked.

“It was the Collins mine. I worked in that mine for less than a year before World War II. Old man Collins, Gus Collins’ dad, owned it.”

In 1950, to honor the 100th anniversary of West Brownsville Borough, a book called “A Century Of Progress” was published. It was written by a committee that included noted Brownsville historian and teacher Jesse Coldren. A few days after I spoke with Harold, I consulted that book and discovered some background information about the Collins mine.

“The Collins Coal Company,” the book explained, “was organized as a distributing agent for the Maxwell Coal Company in January, 1926, with one truck for the delivery of domestic coal. The Maxwell Coal Company went bankrupt in the crash of 1929 and the Collins Coal

Company bought it out in 1930.

“This company,” the article continued, “continued delivering coal until 1936, when a truck and equipment were acquired to move household goods, which was the start of the E. W. Collins Transfer.”

On January 3, 1948, E. W. Collins opened Collins Service Station not far from the former site of the Collins mine in which Harold had worked a decade earlier.

“H. J. Carter, Frankie Grosnack from Blainesburg, his dad, and I – they’re all gone except me – went into that mine with a mule,” Harold explained, describing his labors in the Collins mine during the 1930s. “We would walk in, just the four of us, at 11 o’clock each night. It was a slope mine, not a deep mine. We cut out all of the stumps of coal in that mine.”

“Cut out the stumps? Doesn’t that mean you were removing the pillars of coal that had been left behind to hold up the roof?” I asked. “That sounds risky.”

“It was,” Harold nodded. “We could hear the slate caving in from one night to the next.”

“How far into the hill did that mine go?”

“I don’t know the length. I do remember that it went in a little ways, then turned gradually upriver toward Krepps Knob.”

“How did you remove the coal from the mine?”

“We had a mule.” Harold chuckled as he thought about the stubborn animal. “He would pull 12 cars of coal, but he wouldn’t take the 13th. If that mule felt the weight of a 13th car, he would refuse to pull. He would pull 12 coal cars to the bottom of the entrance slope, then we would unhook him, and he would go on up to the stable by himself. We had a Mack truck engine on top of the tippie, and we would attach a cable to the coal cars and pull them up the slope to the mine entrance.”

“Where were the tippie and the stable located?”

“The tippie was right where the borough building is now,” Harold said. “The stable was where Gus Collins’ service station had its air pump, where you could put air in your tires. The entrance to the mine was just north of the honor roll.”

I noticed in the West Brownsville Centennial book that in 1943, the West Brownsville honor roll was built on a plot of land donated by Ed Collins.

“After the coal reached the tippie, was it then dropped from the tippie into a railroad car?” I asked, knowing that the railroad tracks ran adjacent to the site.

“No, it was dumped into trucks,” Harold said. “They sold house coal for home heating.”

"It is odd," I said, "to think that there was a coal mine operating right in the center of West Brownsville."

"There was another one!" Harold declared. "Champion Mine was right where the railroad tracks leave Main Street in lower West Brownsville. It was on the west side of the street, and it had a high tippie that went all the way to the river. I remember that the Hughes house sank one story into the ground because of the Champion Mine caving in. No one ever built on that spot; it is a vacant lot now. So there have been at least two mines in West Brownsville, plus Lilley Mine further down the river."

"Harold, you live just a stone's throw away from the old West Brownsville schoolhouse. That building has to be at least a century old, doesn't it?"

"I think it may be the last school building from the old days that is still standing in West Brownsville or Brownsville," Harold said. "Think about it. Second Ward School is gone. St. Clair School in Brownsville Township, both Front Street schools, Prospect Street School and the old Brownsville High School on High Street have all been torn down. Only the West Brownsville schoolhouse is still there."

"I guess you're right," I agreed. "I can't think of another old-time local school building still standing. I attended Blainesburg School, just up the hill from West Brownsville, and it was torn down years ago. I wonder how old the West Brownsville schoolhouse is?"

"I don't know," Harold answered, "but I can tell you that it is on that well-known 1883 panoramic drawing of West Brownsville, Brownsville, and Bridgeport."

Later, I consulted the 1950 West Brownsville Centennial book again, and there I found the answer to our question. "West Brownsville Grade School," the book explained, "was built in 1870 at the cost of \$6,000. It contained six classrooms and hall, also a cupola and bell. The original cupola is still on top of the building but hidden by the fire wall that is one of the many additions to our school. . . . Rooms have been added to our building and we now (1950) have eight classrooms, two large halls, the principal's office and a dental clinic."

In recent years, the school building was the West Brownsville home of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). I said to Harold, "Is the schoolhouse used for anything now?"

"I understand that a fellow just bought the building from the VFW," he replied, "and he is putting a new roof on it. I believe he plans to use it as a warehouse for the time being."

Among other jobs that Harold Laughery has held in his lifetime were those of riverboat captain and captain of the last remaining Monongahela



Note the cupola in this undated photograph of the West Brownsville School.

River ferry boat, the *Frederick*, which connects East Millsboro with Fredericktown. It was with regret that we ended our conversation, knowing that there is plenty more to be discussed at another time. As we parted, I did so knowing that Harold Laughery is another treasure in our midst, with a memory teeming with stories of old West Brownsville and Brownsville.