

# BROWNSVILLE'S LEGENDARY TEACHER

## JESSE COLDREN

I have to tell you. This story was a challenge for me to write. I have been putting it off because I knew it would be complicated. Because Jesse was very complicated.

I am not sure what it is about Jesse Coldren that makes him seem to be an almost legendary figure. I never met him. In fact, I had never heard of him until just a few years ago. Now, forty-one years after his death, he is more real to me than if I had known him personally.

Jesse Coldren was a teacher, as I am. He taught history at the high school in Brownsville, as I do. He was fascinated with Brownsville's past. His grand plan was to write a new history of Brownsville. His life's work was to assemble the documents needed to carry out his plan. He aimed to learn more about his subject than anyone has before or since. The book would be his crowning achievement. It would be his legacy, a gift to the town he loved.

This is a true story of a lifetime's achievement vanished. It is a tragedy. It is a mystery. It is a story of a man who was one of a kind. Eccentric. Driven. Dominated by the love of his life: researching, teaching, and writing the history of his hometown. The great blessing of this story is that Jesse never knew its tragic ending.

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Jesse Coldren was born in 1880, the oldest of the three children of John H. and Anna P. Coldren. His younger brother, Samuel, was born three years later. His baby sister, Sarah Frances Coldren, was born in 1887 and died in 1891.

Prior to his fifth birthday, Jesse attended two of what were known in the 1880s as "pay schools." Ten days before he turned five, he started public school. During his twelve years as a public school student, Jesse

was never late to school and did not miss one day. It was the beginning of a trend.

In his fifty years as a public school teacher, this man, who never owned an automobile, was never late to school and never missed one day of school. Combining his years as student and teacher, his perfect attendance record spanned sixty-two years.

Jesse was a slightly built young man. His friend, the late Eugene Townsend, once told me Jesse loved to walk and run. He walked to and from school. He walked to church. In fact, when Jesse retired from teaching many years later, a reporter wrote that because he “was forced to walk to his teaching jobs in the early

days, sometimes as much as twelve miles a day, Mr. Coldren attributes his excellent health over the long period of years to the exercise obtained in walking to and from school.”

Jesse did not give all the credit to his walking habit.

“Mr. Coldren,” an interviewer wrote, “is an early riser and has been arising at 5 a.m. for many years. One of his own personal stories is that as a boy he remembers salt mackerel was a steady Sunday morning breakfast menu. Because of the salt mackerel Mr. Coldren drank water copiously and attributes this water drinking to much of his good health.”

Jesse’s physical size nearly sidetracked his career. In 1899, he went in search of a teaching job.

“Everybody said I was too small,” he said years later. “I only weighed 118 pounds.” So Jesse worked in the courthouse at Uniontown and later in a drug store, awaiting a job in the profession for which he yearned.

In 1900, at the age of twenty, Jesse Coldren began his half-century teaching career. His first teaching job was in a one-room school in Redstone Township, three miles east of Brownsville. He walked three miles to school each morning, three miles home each night. He taught thirty-four pupils in eight grades, all in one room. His salary for the year



**Jesse Coldren at age 5 (1885)**

was \$198.50, at a rate of \$30 per month minus \$1.50, which he paid to someone to sweep. The first boy who swept for him was named Clarence Hess. Half a century later, when Jesse retired, the superintendent of schools in Redstone Township was Clarence Hess.

He taught at that building for just one year. According to the *Brownsville Telegraph*, Jesse's next four years "were spent teaching at Gillespie school in Washington Township, where he was paid \$40 a month and walked the six miles each way to school, leaving his home in Brownsville at 6 a.m."

The school had four classrooms. Viola Eckman, Mary Shauffler and Kate Finch taught in three of them, while Jesse served as principal and taught the top grades. Jesse said that while at Gillespie, he taught an adult class "in the evenings, teaching from 7 to 10, without charge, to satisfy the yearning of some of the older persons for schooling."



**Brownsville Union School, where Jesse Coldren served as assistant principal for four years, opened in 1860 and closed in 1910. In 1914-16, Brownsville General Hospital was constructed on this site at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Church Street. The steeple of St. Peter's R. C. Church is visible in the background.**

Jesse next spent a year at the West Point school. That building still stands in altered form. It is on Thornton Road (Route 166) at the end of the long level stretch after passing Fort Burd Presbyterian Church. It is

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on the right side of the road at the top of the long hill.

Jesse's teaching career then brought him to Brownsville Borough. For four years, he served as assistant principal at the Union School, a three-story brick building that stood at the corner of Church Street and Market Street. It closed in 1910. When the new Brownsville High School building opened on Front Street that fall, Jesse was principal and remained in that capacity for thirteen years. Then Jesse spent a year teaching in Brownsville Township, followed by eight years in the Redstone Township schools.

In 1910, Jesse, who had already graduated from California Normal School (later State Teachers College), began attending the University of Pittsburgh on Saturdays and week nights. He would often rush from his teaching job to catch the train to Pittsburgh. Evening classes at Pitt lasted from 6:00 p.m. until 10:00 p.m. Jesse would then head back to the train depot to return to Brownsville. Much of his reading and schoolwork was done to the hypnotic rhythm of wheels riding the tracks. Jesse earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Pitt in 1924 and a Master of Arts degree in 1929.

That was not enough for him.

From 1910 through 1939 (by which time he was fifty-nine years old), Jesse amassed 101 graduate credits at the University of Pittsburgh, 29 more than was necessary to attain a doctorate. He did not receive his doctorate because he never had time to complete his thesis. His research topic, on which he did copious research, was "Political Campaign Songs of the United States from George Washington to the Present." His search for data on the subject took him to libraries in New York, Boston, Cleveland and Chicago.

How devoted was he to the study of history? The late Eugene Townsend, Redstone Township and Brownsville educator, knew Jesse Coldren well. When Mr. Townsend and I began a videotaped conversation back in 1993, the very first thing that Mr. Townsend asked me was whether I was familiar with the work of Jesse Coldren.

"Jesse Coldren was a Social Studies teacher in Redstone," Mr. Townsend told me. "He and I were very good friends. He walked from Wheeling clear through to Cumberland one summer and talked to people along the way and discussed Route 40 . . . well, it wasn't 40 then, it was the National Road."

It was another indication to me that Jesse Coldren, well respected by his fellow educator, was committed to the hands-on study of history.

During the Depression, there was a one-year gap in Jesse's teaching career. In an interview upon his retirement in June 1951, Jesse told William A. White of the *Pittsburgh Press*, "I was dropped that year

because I was getting too much money in the opinion of the board. I got my notice too late to find a place for the next term.”

Jesse was back at it the next year. He did not know it, but this time, he was “home” to stay. In the fall of 1933, he returned to Brownsville and began the final eighteen years of his teaching career. He taught in



**Brownsville High School on Front Street, where Jesse Coldren served as principal for thirteen years from 1910 – 1923. Following the consolidation of South Brownsville and Brownsville borough schools in the mid-1930s, this building became Brownsville Junior High School. The former South Brownsville High School on High Street became Brownsville High School, where Jesse Coldren taught senior history for the final fifteen years of his teaching career.**

the high school on Front Street, and when the Brownsville and South Brownsville borough school districts consolidated in the mid-1930s, he went to the newly designated senior high school on High Street as instructor of senior history, the position from which he retired in 1951. In his fifty-year teaching career, he estimated that he had been connected with 10,000 students.

This was the teaching career of Jesse Coldren. But the true fascination for me in the story of Jesse Coldren lies not only in his teaching career. It rests in his lifelong crusade to do something no one has ever done. He was determined to research and write the complete history of Brownsville.

I have had some good luck. I have spent many hours talking with a

longtime resident of Brownsville who knew Jesse Coldren very well. Next, we will look at the personal side of Jesse Coldren.

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### *JESSE COLDREN'S UNUSUAL GIFT TO HIS CHURCH*

Over the past year, I have been fortunate to have had several lengthy audiotaped conversations with a longtime resident of Brownsville who, I am confident in saying, knew Jesse Coldren as well as any person now living. At his request I have agreed to preserve his privacy, and I will refer to him simply as “John.” In my wide-ranging discussion with John about Brownsville’s history, the subject of Jesse Coldren originally came up purely by accident.

“Jesse had, in my knowledge and association with him, one brother who was living during my lifetime, a brother by the name of Sam,” John told me. “Samuel Coldren was an optometrist in Brownsville. He operated out of a small shop adjoining his home at the top of the hill across from the entrance to Knoxville, the street that cuts back into Beacon Hill. There was a small frame bungalow that sat right back in there.”

John hesitated before continuing.

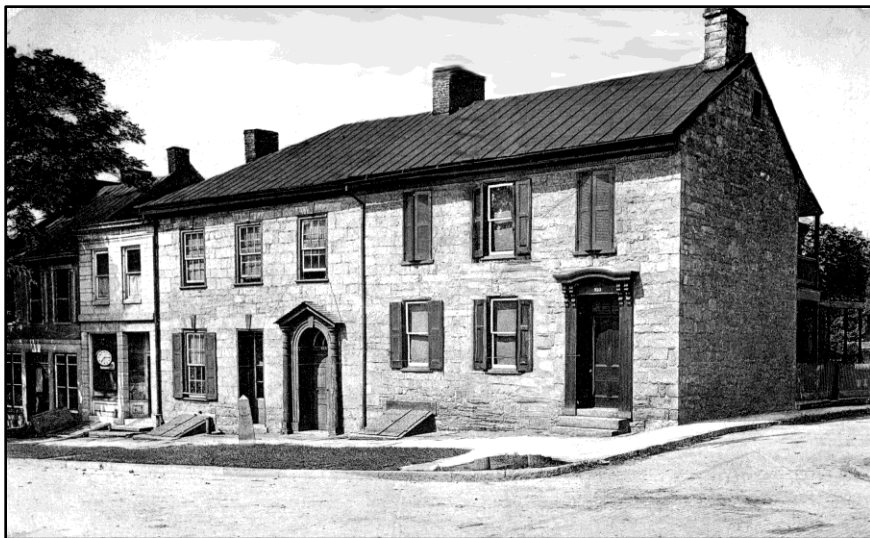
“Mr. Coldren had one other sibling. He had a sister who died on Christmas Eve. I don’t know what age she was, but it affected the family so deeply that they never celebrated the holidays at Christmas subsequently. I never observed any special Christmas dinner and celebration, no Christmas decorations, no Christmas tree . . .”

“Now, when you say the family,” I interrupted, “you mean Jesse’s parents?”

“His mother was the one who was left, but in the conversations that I had with him, I never pried, and I only accepted and listened to what he was willing to volunteer in normal conversation. But I think that he felt that his sister’s death contributed to his mother’s problems as well.”

Jesse and his mother had lived on the ground floor of the Brashear House, a historic building still standing at the intersection of Market Street and Sixth Avenue on Brownsville’s North Side.

“I don’t know whether his mother suffered from a stroke,” John continued. “It’s possible she had a stroke, because as I remember her, she . . . I don’t remember whether it was in a chair, a regular arm chair, or whether it was a wheel chair. I don’t think it was a wheel chair, but I



**Brashear House at Sixth and Market (c. 1910)**

can remember her definitely being bundled and wrapped up in a down-filled comforter sitting in the chair. I can remember her with her hair pulled back and tied in a knot in the back.

“Jesse cared very deeply about his mother. He tried to provide as much care as what his education in that particular field would permit him to provide. It may or may not have been sufficient or adequate, I don’t know. This may have been part of the reason behind his proposal.”

Following the death of his mother Anna in 1930, Jesse was now alone at Brashear House. The proposal John referred to was a proposal of marriage. In 1931, at the age of fifty-one, Jesse proposed marriage to a twice-widowed lady named Sudie Truxel Hoover Gaskill, who was fifty-two.

John speculated that Jesse had asked Sudie “to assume responsibility for being housekeeper and, I don’t know whether she refused to move in as a live-in housekeeper without the benefit of marriage or not. They were committed to religion pretty strongly. There were certain things that were acceptable, and certain things that were not acceptable. Someone moving into living quarters with somebody else, unless there was a marriage vow, that was not an acceptable condition.”

In 1931, Sudie, who had two children still living with her, became Mrs. Jesse Coldren and with the children moved to Brashear House. She lived there with Jesse for the next twenty-seven years until his death in 1958.

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Jesse was a loyal churchgoer. A 1951 *Brownsville Telegraph* article said that he had been “clerk of the congregation of the First Presbyterian Church since 1908.” In fact, Jesse gave that church a unique gift.

Back in 1910, the Union School at the corner of Church Street and Fifth Avenue was closed. It was torn down to make room for the construction of the Brownsville General Hospital, which opened in 1916.

The bell in the school’s bell tower had been cast in 1860 by the A. Fulton Company. From 1860 until 1910, it had rung to summon children to school on Brownsville hill. It was always an honor for the student who was selected each day to ring that bell.

When the building was about to be torn down, Jesse bought the bell. Not having adequate cash to pay for it, he traded his piano for it. Soon after that, he donated the bell to the First Presbyterian Church of Brownsville, which had no bell.

Jesse said, “I didn’t appreciate the bell much when I was going to school myself, but I certainly enjoy hearing it ring now.”

That bell hung in the tower of the First Presbyterian Church on

old North Bend in Brownsville from the time that Jesse donated it until the church burned on June 7, 1967. The displaced congregation



**The bell that had hung from 1860 - 1910 in Brownsville Union School at Market and Fifth was later given to the First Presbyterian Church on North Bend by Jesse Coldren.**



worshiped for a time with the congregation of the Central Presbyterian Church in downtown Brownsville. They also conducted services in the basement of the burned building for a short time. In 1969, the two Presbyterian congregations merged. In 1972, the combined congregation began to worship at their newly constructed Fort Burd Presbyterian Church on Thornton Road.

Suspended over a small pad on the front lawn of Fort Burd Presbyterian Church is a large old bell. On special occasions, particularly weddings, a rope is attached to that bell. A person inside the front door of the church holds the other end of the rope and, upon a signal, pulls it. The bell produces a very rich tone and can be heard clearly for a great distance. It is this lovely bell that was salvaged from Union School, a gift for which a young history teacher traded his piano ninety years ago.

The donor of that bell was a loyal Presbyterian, but he was ecumenical as well.

“One of the practices that he (Jesse) followed, more than anything else,” said John, “was that he made at least one visit to every church congregation located within walking range of Brownsville.”

I said, “Of course, ‘within walking distance’ for him was a long way!”

“He made no distinction,” continued John. “He attended the synagogue, when it was in operation, he attended mass at the Roman Catholic churches, he attended services at the Orthodox; he followed the customs. I asked him one time whether he kept his hat on when he attended the services at the synagogue. He said, ‘It’s the custom, and I followed the custom of the congregation.’”



**After a 1967 fire ravaged the sanctuary of the First Presbyterian Church, the church was razed and the bell was installed on the lawn of the new Fort Burd Presbyterian Church on Thornton Road, where it still resides today. The words on the right side of the bell read, “Cast by A. Fulton, Pittsburgh”**

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“Why did he do that,” I asked, “go to all of those different churches?”

“He taught Problems of Democracy, and I think it was his way of keeping in touch with customs, ethnic customs, background. I think he tried to understand the student body that he was trying to instruct, to teach, to impart knowledge to. He was very conscientious.

“Quite frankly, he was known in those days as ‘Professor.’ No one referred to him by his first name. No adults referred to him as ‘Mister.’ His title was ‘Professor.’ This is the way people addressed him. Students at school, of course, called him ‘Mr. Coldren.’ But from acquaintances that he met on the street, the greeting was ‘Professor.’”

The 1940 Brownsville High School yearbook *On The Mon* was dedicated to Mr. Coldren, who was beginning his fifth decade of teaching. The dedication message read as follows:

“The affection and admiration felt by the senior class for Mr. Coldren is not at all strange to those who know him. We know him best for his wonderful classes. They are a hybrid of almost anything we could possibly gather in a single classroom. Interest is the platform upon which they are constructed. Instruction, humor and an immense practicality are roped in a single stall, and the result is his class. In holding the positions of both teacher and principal, he has learned the best methods of getting students to put forth their best work. They leave feeling infinitely better and learned, and they don’t realize the reason for it. The reason is just Mr. Coldren. By mere association with him, we learn. We have all known him as one of the outstanding historians of the region, having for several years worked on a new history of Brownsville as a member of the town council and an outstanding citizen of the community.

Mr. Coldren, historian, teacher, scholar, you have the veneration and respect of the Brownsville High School.”

The yearbook dedication revealed the feelings of the students toward their longtime teacher. Next, I will tell you about a Jesse Coldren who cannot be found in the aging yearbooks – a man on a doomed mission to write the history of his beloved home town.

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***THE TRUE TRAGEDY OF THE LIFE OF JESSE COLDREN***

We conclude the story of Jesse Coldren by learning of the true tragedy of his life – the fate of his lifelong ambition to write a “new” history of Brownsville. Jesse’s longtime acquaintance, “John,” with whom I spoke in an audio-taped interview, remembers the senior history class taught by his one-time mentor.

“I can remember during my last year of high school, when I was a senior, and he was my home room teacher. I can remember so much, that he would walk and be at the high school as soon as the custodian opened the door in the morning, usually at least an hour, maybe an hour and a half before classes were due to begin. He would begin each day with the same routine. He would take the day’s current events, and he would write them out longhand on the blackboard. Whenever you came to school in the morning, the current events were all written out, ready for you to read and digest and understand.”

“Well, then, there was quite a span of years between your age and Mr. Coldren’s age.”

“Oh yes. He was at least on the upper end of middle age when I was eighteen years old in senior high school.” It was a friendship that evolved between a man who loved to teach and an enthusiastic student who loved to learn. The bond forged by mutual academic respect was intact when Jesse was forced to retire at the age of seventy.

“I know that he was very upset about it,” John said of Jesse’s retirement, “because he reminded me that he was still able to walk without assistance. He’d had a lot of practice. He’d walked so many years to teach.”

“So it’s your impression that if he would have been permitted to continue working, he would have?” I asked.

“He would have continued to the day he died. He was that dedicated. He was a very unique person. You had to understand, he had certain traits that were very difficult for someone who didn’t know him to understand.”

John stopped speaking for quite a while. I did not say anything. I could see he was formulating his thoughts. Then, in a pensive way, he continued.

“The tragedy of Jesse Coldren’s life, as far as he was concerned, in the many conversations that we had . . . because we had a rather unusual friendship . . . was the fact that the Brownsville *Telegraph*, along with its files and its morgue, went up in flames. The entire record of what was preserved in the newspaper files was lost during that fire. The only

access that he had to go back to for information about the local inhabitants and residents and the buildings and so on was what was in existence in other locations. Primarily, cemeteries were a source of information, which included Bridgeport Cemetery and Woodlawn Cemetery on the south side of town, Redstone Cemetery for Brownsville itself, the various cemeteries provided by the local churches such as the Methodist Church, the Episcopal church and others.

“The other place that he had access to was the Uniontown Library and the files of the *Morning Herald* and the *Evening Standard*, because if I remember correctly, both were in existence and publishing at that particular time. He also made arrangements to gain access to a collection of newspapers that were owned by Hayden Robinson. He was the owner of Robinson’s Drug Store. Hayden had a rather extensive collection of *Monitor* and *Clipper-Monitor* newspapers that predated the beginning of the Civil War.”

The awful implications of the destruction of the *Telegraph* files were instantly clear to Jesse Coldren. The would-be author of the history of Brownsville intensified his efforts to assemble as much historical information as he could about Brownsville.

In the summers, Jesse paid John, still a student, to visit church and community cemeteries in Brownsville with a notebook and pencil. John’s task was to record the information on all of the tombstones in the cemeteries. The intention of this project was to assemble data on the birth, death, and other tombstone information about the founding citizens and early residents of Brownsville and Bridgeport. John spent several summers in this endeavor.

Jesse also paid John to go to the home of Hayden and Marge Robinson on Front Street in Brownsville, where he would sit and hand copy articles from Mr. Robinson’s historic collection of *Monitor* and *Clipper-Monitor* newspapers. While Mr. Robinson would not let the newspapers leave the premises, he would allow John to come to the house to copy from them. One article in particular that John remembers copying dealt with the capture of a runaway slave. At the time, the story of the runaway slave made such an impression on John that he remembers it more than half a century later.

I asked John what eventually happened to Mr. Robinson’s rare newspaper collection, but he did not know what had become of it. John also spent summer days at the offices of the *Morning Herald* and the *Evening Standard* newspapers in Uniontown, copying articles relevant to the story of Brownsville’s day-to-day existence.

According to John, Jesse had also acquired some original historic documents related to Brownsville, some possibly dating back as far as

the Revolution. But perhaps most astonishing of all was Jesse's amazing newspaper collection. After the 1927 fire at the *Telegraph*, Jesse saved every newspaper he got his hands on during the next forty years. He subscribed to several daily newspapers. He bought many others at newsstands, at the railroad stations and elsewhere. He saved them all. Newspapers were stacked in towering piles in his Brashear House apartment. He was determined to have all of the information he needed to compile his history of Brownsville.

On Friday, June 8, 1951, he walked out of the Brownsville High School building on High Street for the last time. A teaching career that had begun in 1900 in a one-room school building and spanned two world wars and half a century was over.

"What will you do now?" he was asked.

Jesse told Pittsburgh *Press* reporter William A. White that he "hoped to complete a book he is doing on presidential campaign songs. It will cover everything from Washington and 'Yankee Doodle' to President Truman and 'I'm Just Wild About Harry.'

"No," Jesse said, "I couldn't quit work. I have too much to do."

An eager *Telegraph* reporter wrote, "He has compiled huge piles of historical information about Brownsville and Fayette County and hopes to write the first complete history of Brownsville."

Jesse had believed that the great tragedy of his life had been the destruction of the records of his hometown newspaper. Unfortunately, he was wrong. Jesse was never aware of the true tragedy of his life.

In 1958, at the age of seventy-eight, Jesse Coldren died unexpectedly. Upon his death, the Brashear House became the scene of a drama to rival an Agatha Christie mystery. The Dickensian maze of newspaper stacks and piles of historical research and documents, Jesse's



**Jesse Coldren in his later years**

world, was transformed in a few days and nights into a sterile apartment devoid of any evidence that Jesse Coldren had ever lived there.

When the mysterious packing and carrying were finished, the dark hallway of the Brashear House, which had been congested with antique furniture during Jesse's lifetime, echoed in its emptiness. The stacks of newspapers were gone. The handwritten records of inscriptions on the tombstones of Brownsville's church cemeteries had disappeared. The historic documents related to Brownsville had been taken away. The irreplaceable hand-copied articles from Mr. Robinson's historic newspaper collection were nowhere to be found.

In the 1940 yearbook dedication to Mr. Coldren, published eighteen years before, his students had written, "We have all known him as one of the outstanding historians of the region, having for several years worked on a new history of Brownsville . . ."

If so, where was Jesse's manuscript?

Where was his "History of Brownsville," his life's work?

It disappeared without a trace. In forty-one years since, it has never surfaced.

Perhaps there are readers of this column who can enlighten us on the events of those days that followed Jesse's death. It may be that everything that took place can be simply explained. If so, I invite anyone who possesses such information to end our bewilderment. For the past forty-one years, the residents of Brownsville who knew and respected Jesse Coldren have been left in the dark about the fate of his records, his possessions, and his beloved history of Brownsville.

So there is no "History of Brownsville" by Jesse Coldren for us to read. We will continue to rely on aging copies of J. Percy Hart's 1904 "History and Directory of the Three Towns" and other more ancient books for our historical research about Brownsville.

As for a history of the twentieth century in Brownsville? We are still waiting for that history to be written. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say, we are waiting for it to be written again. Or found.

This is the mystery and the true tragedy of the life of Jesse Coldren. A man who seemed to have been born for a purpose. A lifelong student. A dedicated teacher. A devoted son. A relentless researcher. A valued mentor.

And perhaps . . . the author of *The History of Brownsville*.

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In 1940, the Brownsville High School yearbook, *On The Mon*, was dedicated to Mr. Jesse Coldren, who was principal of the school and senior history teacher. Included in the yearbook was this poem.

*“An Ode to Mr. C”*

*“While looking back on my high school days  
I cannot recall a class  
With half the color of my senior history  
Which I tried so hard to pass*

*The subject itself was no prize  
But the teacher made it so  
He made forty five minutes speed away  
And made us sorry to see them go*

*He didn't teach from the history book  
His memory was his only text  
He sprinkled the period with variety  
No one knew what was coming next*

*He told us tales that thrilled us all  
His humor kept us roaring  
He told of experiences when he was young  
And what he saw when touring*

*As a result of one of his humorous puns  
We would nearly raise the rafters  
But he would just stand there and grin  
Until we ceased our laughter*

*He knew all about our Brownsville  
And about its people too  
He is always more than glad  
To pass it on to you*

*The latest things in news and data  
He would keep us all informed  
The way the Germans fought  
Or how the Russians farmed*

*If you want to find out something quick  
There's no better advice to seek  
Than that of this fine gentleman  
Portraying knowledge at its peak*

*Although he's up in years  
A spark of youth is smolderin'  
We take this space to pay a tribute  
To Mr. Jesse Coldren"*

----- by Nelson G. Wheeler, Class of 1940

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***FORMER STUDENTS REMEMBER "PROFESSOR" COLDREN***

The loyalty Jesse Coldren inspired in his students is as legendary as he was. He retired from teaching nearly half a century ago, yet his students still care enough about him to generate a steady stream of emails, letters and telephone calls to me about their favorite teacher. Readers are clipping these columns and sending them to friends in far-off places, which explains the origin of some of these letters and emails.

Pauline Paling Keller of Palm Coast, Florida, writes that her father, Dale Paling, was a student at Union School (Fifth and Church Street in Brownsville) when Jesse was assistant principal there. She enclosed in her letter the report card, signed by Jesse Coldren, that Dale received at the end of the 1907-1908 school year. I found it interesting that report cards were issued to parents every month. The teachers and school board members are listed on the reverse side of the report card.

Pauline wrote, "When I was in Brownsville High School, Class of '39, we all went home for lunch. It was a mass movement downhill, many on through town where they met head-on those from Junior High, and of course, those of us who went to the West Side. In all of this activity was always Jesse Coldren, moving along at a steady pace, a smile on his face and a book under his arm. The pace, smile and book were a constant."

She added, "To pass his Civics class, senior year, we had to memorize the Gettysburg Address and Preamble to the Constitution. Imagine listening to all 311 of us, and he still held the smile. He was



always kind to me.”

Marilu Stapleton Coppinger of Phoenix, Arizona, emailed, “I remember him so well, with his snaggle-toothed grin over the United Mine Workers Journal as he would quote from an article. He was a great teacher. He was lovable, and I believe was loved by all his students.”

Alma Marino of Hiller recalled a day in the early 1930s when Jesse brought his bride-to-be, Sudie, to Redstone High School to meet his classes. Alma loved his class. “He would take off his black-rimmed glasses and put one end in his mouth and talk,” she said. Best of all, she said, he didn’t give homework!

Mary Smith of Brownsville told me laughingly that Jesse would announce to his class each Monday morning, “Parade at eleven, be there at one,” making light of Brownsville’s laid back style.



**In 1944, 40 years after publishing *History and Directory of the Three Towns*, J. Percy Hart (left) returned to Brownsville for a visit. Here he reminisces with his brother, James G. Hart (right), and Brownsville teacher and historian Jesse Coldren (center).**

Earl Rumble of West Brownsville, a student of Jesse's, said Jesse paid him to take some photographs for him. Earl particularly remembered a photo he took of a brick building that Jesse told him was once "the colored school." Earl said it was "behind Doc Waggoner's house on Second Street in south Brownsville, on the east side of the street." Earl drove by the other day to see if that building was still standing. He called to tell me it is gone.

Frances Kremer Paxton of Hopwood attended Prospect Street School and graduated from Brownsville High School (High Street) in 1936. In Jesse's class, she said, "He would present all of the arguments on one side of an issue first, convincing most of the class to think that way. Then he would present the other side and invariably a debate would begin among the students."

She described Jesse as a "mild-speaking man. He always wore a white shirt with perhaps a stripe down it, plus a celluloid collar." Frances told me that Jesse would often send her husband to Murphy's in Brownsville to buy him eyeglasses. He would buy the glasses "by the number."

Jesse hated smoking. Bill Johnson, retired Brownsville pharmacist, remembers Jesse often reciting, "Tobacco is an Indian weed, the devil surely sowed its seed. It robs your pocket, smells your clothes, and makes a chimney out of your nose. Quit it, quit it, quit it!"

Betty McCune Rohrer of Orlando, Florida, emailed that her husband, Chuck, also recalled Jesse's anti-smoking rhyme. She added that Jesse would cup his hands over his mouth when he said, "Quit it, quit it, quit it!"

Angelo Quarzo of Brownsville told how Jesse handled a student who was eating candy in class. Jesse said nothing to the boy. Instead, Jesse walked to his own desk and opened the drawer. He took out a stick of gum, unwrapped it, put it in his mouth, sat down at his desk, put his feet up, and sat there chewing for several minutes. Finally he spoke.

"If others can do it, so can I." The story showed how low key and soft-spoken Mr. Coldren was.

During the 1936 flood (which preceded the 1936 windstorm by several months), Angelo Quarzo was a paper boy. He delivered his papers in a rowboat during the flood and a story about it appeared in the newspaper. Jesse told every class about how diligent Angelo was to carry out his delivery duties in the face of nature's obstacles.

Irene Nahory Bryan of Uniontown was a senior at Brownsville High School in 1937. She lived up the street from the old North Side fire hall on North Bend in Brownsville. She told me that her older brother, who lives in a nursing home and still has a good memory, will enjoy reading

the Coldren articles. He attended Union School, which closed in 1910. He will celebrate his one hundredth birthday on March 16, 1999.

Francis (Bud) Patterson of Charleston, West Virginia, emailed that Jesse was his home room teacher and his POD teacher. "I just saw Jesse's picture this morning when I was going through something from my parents' house," Bud wrote. "There was a copy of the West Brownsville Centennial Program and Jesse was the historian for that event." He concluded, "I always think what a shame it is that we never got to have a copy of that History of Brownsville."

What about that History of Brownsville? Have I received any calls about Jesse's "History of Brownsville" or the fate of his possessions? Yes I did, from two individuals, each of whom identified themselves and requested that I not publish their names.

Have we found a missing manuscript? No. But the veil of mystery about the events of the days following Jesse's death has been drawn back a bit.

The first individual is in a position to know that a local firm removed all of the newspapers that Jesse had collected since 1927. The papers were taken to a local scrap yard that baled newspapers. The caller indicated that there was no recollection of any type of manuscript being in the house at the time the newspapers were taken out.

What about the antique furniture and other items in the house? Another individual who called told a dizzying story of multiple break-ins and disappearing items. This caller, who was very close to the events which followed Jesse's death, told me that after Jesse died, Brashear House was sold. Arrangements were made with an antique dealer from North Carolina to remove the contents of the building.

Before the antique dealer arrived, the caller walked through the Brashear House. "There wasn't anything of his notes or anything, because we walked through," the caller said. "When we walked through, we saw books, saw newspapers, but there were no such things as notebooks, tablets."

"The place was broken into several times," the caller continued. "They took some of the books before the gentleman from North Carolina got in to take the furniture."

The dealer arrived in Brownsville, accompanied by his wife. He arrived with several large vehicles to remove the contents of the house. It was midsummer.

Inside the Brashear House, the heat was stifling. The antique dealer's wife became ill. The caller invited the woman to stay in the caller's air-conditioned home while the dealer worked at emptying the Brashear House. In gratitude, the dealer promised to leave behind a

particular wash bowl with a matching pitcher. An oak chest and a dresser were also to be left behind. As it turned out, the caller got only the dresser and still owns that piece, now beautifully restored.

Unexpectedly, the dealer and his sick wife left in the middle of the night to return to North Carolina. It was later learned that she had suffered a severe heart attack. In his haste to leave, the door was left unlocked. Another mysterious entry took place.

“When he left,” said the caller, “he left the door open, and whoever went in, they took those other things.” The caller said there had been books in the downstairs second room. “Somebody broke into the place the day after he took the furniture out, and they took a lot more of his books.” These were published books, however, not handwritten manuscripts.

Over the two months following the emptying of the building, the building was cleaned up and refurbished. Built in 1796, it is still in use today.

The fate of Jesse’s astounding newspaper collection and the antique furniture seems to have been explained. But it is neither the newspapers nor the antiques that interest me. Those issues of the *Brownsville Telegraph*, all post-1927, are available on microfilm. The antiques, however valuable, were not the focus of my fascination.

It is the missing manuscript, if one existed, and Jesse’s notes, the photographs he paid individuals to take, the records of town cemetery tombstone inscriptions, the hand-copied articles from Hayden Robinson’s newspaper collection, that interest me.

I am encouraged that none of the individuals with whom I spoke ever saw a manuscript or the missing historical documents. This could indicate they were among the first items removed from the house, by someone. And it could mean they still exist. I will continue to hope that is the case. Jesse’s loyal students and admirers can only wonder when and if they will ever turn up.

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*Note to the reader: On April 1, 2006, seven years after the preceding articles about Jesse Coldren were published in the Herald-Standard, I wrote the following column. It was one of my last for the newspaper, and for reasons that will become clear, it was among the most memorable.*

### **UNLOCKED DOOR REVEALS A REMARKABLE SURPRISE**

It was an amazing historical find.

The telephone call that led me to it came late in the afternoon. A familiar female voice said, "Glenn, there is something you just have to see. When I saw it, you were the first person I thought of, because I remember what you wrote years ago about Mr. . . ."

She stopped abruptly in mid-sentence. Then she said, "Can you meet me in a few minutes?"

My curiosity was aroused.

"Where?" I asked.

"Come to the old Brownsville borough building at the intersection of Market Street and Albany Road."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

The sun was setting as I parked in the Flatiron building parking lot and walked up Market Street hill toward the old borough building. It had been the Brownsville borough municipal building until a few years after the 1933 merger of Brownsville and South Brownsville boroughs, when it was replaced by the current municipal building at Second and High Street.

As far as I knew, the old borough building had been vacant since then. A year or two ago, the building's owner at that time, Mrs. Olga Gazalie, had donated it to BARC (Brownsville Area Revitalization Corporation). In recent months, BARC has been cleaning it up to use it for computer training classes and other activities.

I saw my telephone correspondent standing on the sidewalk in front of the building, shielding her eyes from the blinding sunset as she watched me stride up the hill. I crossed Albany Road, walked up to her, and saw that she held a key in her right hand.

"I guess we are going inside?" I puffed, somewhat out of breath.

"Yes," said Norma Ryan, a member of BARC's board of directors. "Thanks for coming."

She looked up and down the sidewalk, then quickly slid the key into the lock and entered the building.

I followed her inside. Norma turned on the hall light and

immediately started down a flight of stairs.

“We’re going down to the jail cell?” I was a bit surprised. “But I’ve already seen that, Norma. Remember, you showed it to me right after . . .”

“That’s not why I’m taking you down here,” she interrupted and said nothing more.

I withheld further comment and followed her down the wooden steps. Norma turned an old-fashioned round light switch, and the harsh glare of a ceiling bulb illuminated the forbidding jail cell door, solid iron except for a small window at eye level. For me, it brought to mind Charles Dickens’ *A Tale Of Two Cities*.

“That jail cell looks so medieval to me,” I shuddered. I was about to say more when Norma abruptly turned to the right, away from the cell door and toward the farthest corner of the room. There in the shadows was a door I had not noticed on my visit the year before.

Norma approached the door.

“We’ve been cleaning out this building,” she explained, “but no one could find a key to this door.”

Norma was speaking in hushed tones, which struck me as odd since there was no one in the building but us.

“Earlier today,” Norma continued, “I had the hinge pins removed so that I could see if there was anything in this closet.”

She turned to face me with an odd expression on her face.

I waited. “And was there anything in it?”

“It isn’t a closet.”

Norma turned the now-unlocked door knob and released it. The door swung slowly into the dark void beyond, and I immediately noticed a stale, musty odor. Norma stepped back.

“Go ahead.”

“You first,” I said uneasily.

Norma stepped through the doorway, reached above her head, and pulled a string. I was a step behind her when the overhead light came on. I stopped in my tracks.

We were standing in a cramped office, no more than eight feet square, furnished like the set of a 1930s movie. Against the opposite wall was an old-fashioned wooden desk, topped with three lengthy horizontal rows of pigeon-hole compartments. The wooden desk chair was turned sideways to face a flat typewriter shelf that had been pulled from its inset above the three desk drawers. On the extended shelf sat an antique typewriter.

On the left side of the desktop were a pewter inkwell and a fountain pen. Next to them, a pair of rimless spectacles rested on fully open

stems, perched as though a weary hand had just removed them and set them there. Like everything else in the room, the lenses of the spectacles were covered with a thick layer of dust.

To the right of the desk, hanging neatly on a hook on the wall, was a suit jacket. The tip of a blue bow tie protruded from its vest pocket. As I scanned the small room, my attention was captured by a large wooden box labeled "Zinfandel Raisins" sitting upside down on the floor next to the desk. On top of the box was a two-foot high stack of folded age-yellowed newspapers, at least forty or fifty of them.

I leaned over to study the front page of the top newspaper. The headline and date instantly thrilled and confused me. Disbelieving what I had read, I carefully lifted that newspaper to look at the one beneath it and was equally astonished by its headline and date.

"Norma," I exclaimed excitedly, "these newspapers are issues of the Brownsville *Telegraph*. But look at the dates and headlines. The top one is dated January 27, 1915 and the headline reads *TELEGRAPH PUBLISHES INAUGURAL EDITION*. The second one is dated April 18, 1921 and reads *BROWNSVILLE TRUST COMPANY OPENS DOORS*."

I was astounded by what I was seeing. I knelt on one knee next to the newspapers and gingerly slid my hand between two of the papers near the bottom of the stack. Lifting the papers that were above my hand just an inch or two, I could read the headline and date on the front page of the newspaper that was revealed.

March 15, 1925. *MODERN MONONGAHELA HOTEL GREETES FIRST PATRONS*.

I shook my head in amazement.

"All of these *Telegraphs* were published before 1927," I said to Norma. "That was the year when a fire destroyed the *Telegraph* building, including its archives. It was a terrible loss, because there are no copies of the *Telegraph* from 1915 to the summer of 1927 in existence. At least, that is what everyone thought. But look at these newspapers. They all appear to be . . ."

I stopped as a new thought occurred to me. I stood up, stepped back, and looked around the room with renewed curiosity. Why were these newspapers here? Whose cubbyhole office was this?

Then it hit me. Immediately I realized that the clues were everywhere.

The pile of rare newspapers, stacked chronologically as a conscientious historian would do.

Scholarly reading glasses resting on the desk.

A suit jacket with a bow tie in its pocket.

A secluded office in the former borough building, easily accessible

to someone who worked for the borough – such as a town councilman.

Could this possibly have been the office of . . . ?

I turned to Norma to voice my suspicion and was surprised to see her staring at me with a smile on her face and tears in her eyes. She realized that I had guessed the identity of the man who had worked tirelessly in this private hideaway.

Without speaking, Norma gestured toward the far end of the desktop. I followed her gaze to a thick pile of loose typewritten sheets. It had escaped my notice earlier because it was pushed back into the shadows beneath the pigeonhole compartments.

I felt a chill go down my spine as I realized what those papers might be. If this office belonged to the person whom I suspected, then could that pile of typewritten papers be . . . a manuscript, perhaps?

I reached toward them, carefully pulled the pile of papers to the center of the desk, and gently blew the dust from the top sheet. The typewritten words that were revealed, all in capital letters, froze me in mid-breath:

*THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL HISTORY OF BROWNSVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA: 1749-1957, by JESSE COLDREN.*

I gasped. This was Jesse Coldren's missing manuscript – his long-lost history of Brownsville, the one he had been reputed to have worked on for decades only to have it disappear upon his death in 1957. Many had subsequently questioned whether such a manuscript had ever existed. And now, here it was before me.

I felt like Howard Carter, the discoverer of King Tut's tomb. Ever-so-carefully, Norma and I leafed through the loose pages of Jesse's manuscript, awestruck at chapter after chapter of footnoted descriptions of the people and events that had shaped our town's history.

It was surreal to be reading this almost-legendary document. And as an incredible bonus, we had also discovered Jesse's cache of dozens of pre-1927 Brownsville *Telegraphs* bearing stories and advertisements that would help fill glaring gaps in our knowledge of early twentieth-century Brownsville.

Despite the chill in the basement, Norma and I were both perspiring nervously as we pored over Jesse's treasure. Intensely curious, I turned to the final page of his manuscript, anxious to learn which historical event was the last one Jesse Coldren had recorded in his masterpiece.

But instead of a final section summarizing his conclusions, I saw that the last page bore only a single paragraph. Stranger still, the paragraph was written in longhand, in blue ink that had faded almost beyond legibility.

I glanced over thoughtfully at the fountain pen and inkwell, then



said to Norma, "What do you make of this? Let's take this page directly under the ceiling light. Perhaps we will be able to read it."

I gently balanced the single sheet of paper on the tips of my upturned fingers and walked beneath the light. Norma slid her glasses down her nose, and I removed mine completely in order to read up-close. We leaned toward the page and peered at the faded handwriting. The message was faint, but we could read it – every word of it.

"To any person who is reading these words," read the inscription. "Would that it were true that these lost editions of the *Brownsville Telegraph* were real, and that my long-lost manuscript of Brownsville's history had now been discovered. But alas, it is my misfortune to reveal to you that you have become a victim of a custom that has existed since long before any of our memories. For you see, my friend, today is the first day of April. And because of that, I must reveal that all which has gone before on these very pages is but a figment of my successor's fertile imagination."

And to you, dear reader, I must convey my sincerest wish that the rest of this day will pass without anyone else saying these words to you – April Fool!