

EPILOGUE:
THE FRAGILITY OF HISTORY
AND OUR DUTY TO PROTECT IT

This final article of the book reprises the theme with which the book began – the fragility of our connections to the past and our duty to speak out when our heritage is in jeopardy.

Some things are irreplaceable. There is no amount of money that can re-create lost historic buildings, records, or artifacts. That is why it is often heart-rending to watch the destruction or irreversible alteration of a historic building or even an entire neighborhood of a historic community.

Nearly forty years ago, Brownsville was changed forever with the construction of a four-lane highway through its North Side. I have no doubt that there are readers who might characterize the laceration across the historic North Side as “destruction” rather than “construction.” The word “gutted” has been used a few times to describe the transformation of picturesque, tree-lined Market Street into a four-lane concrete raceway.

In terms of transportation, it was “progress.” But the picture postcard tableau of a historic town overlooking a peaceful river valley will never be the same. Now we must depend upon photographs to attempt to show our younger generations the town as it once appeared. The point is this: it is an example of a historic treasure which was sacrificed for what were believed to be valid reasons.

There is a fragile cord which connects us across the years to our ancestors. Among the fibers of that cord are the family stories we are lovingly told by our grandparents, the historic buildings we pass in our community every day, and the sidewalks where we can retrace the steps of our great-grandparents.

But as with another type of cord, the severing of any strand of that

cord is final. The delicate threads which bind us to our ancestors are finite in number and are irreplaceable. Someday, for the “best” of reasons, the last tangible connection may be severed. Then only memories and fading photographs will remain. And we will have only ourselves to blame.

A deliberate decision to sacrifice a historic site or artifact is difficult to accept. Even more tragic, however, is the loss of priceless records or artifacts as a result of an accident. It is just such a double tragedy in Brownsville’s past to which I turn today.

In a recent conversation, I was discussing with a local resident a subject which holds a special fascination for me – the life of Jesse Coldren, whose tenure as a school teacher in the Brownsville area earned him a permanent place in local lore. As we talked, the fellow told me that a great tragedy of Jesse Coldren’s life was the spectacular 1927 fire that destroyed the plant of the Brownsville Publishing Company, publishers of the *Morning Telegraph* and *Evening Telegraph*. Jesse had been compiling material for a history of Brownsville that he had planned to write. The destruction of the *Telegraph*’s pre-1927 files was a major blow to his efforts.

The blaze occurred on Wednesday afternoon, June 16, 1927. The cause of the fire was unknown, but it was believed to have begun in the garage that stood between the *Telegraph* plant and the Hagan plant. The two plants were located on the south side of Bridge Street at the Brownsville end of the inter-county bridge. The garage in which the fire apparently started was used to house the Hagan ice cream trucks. It was also used by the state police to house four horses, but the horses had been removed earlier on the day of the fire.

The fire apparently had been smoldering in the garage for some time. It had already infiltrated the *Telegraph* plant when Managing Editor Harry E. McCamic rounded the corner at the end of the inter-county bridge at approximately 4:10 p.m. just in time to see the flames shoot through the garage roof.

He turned in the alarm and rushed into the *Telegraph* building to warn the employees, who were unaware of their danger. Five fire departments responded to the blaze, with the Brownsville, South Brownsville, and West Brownsville fire departments joined later by those of California and Uniontown, which made the trip from Uniontown to Brownsville in seventeen minutes.

When the roofs on both plants collapsed, the firemen’s efforts were directed to halting the spread of the fire to the Bridge Garage (another garage in the vicinity of the blaze) and to a dozen or more frame dwellings on Arch Street. Nearly a dozen lines of hose were utilized

from four fire plugs and from the West Brownsville truck, which was on the riverbank using its water pumper.

An hour and a half after the first alarm had been turned in, the *Telegraph* was a smoldering ruin. The Uniontown *Morning Herald* reported the next day that “the *Telegraph* building was a total loss, with damage estimated at \$52,000. The second floor of the Hagan plant was destroyed, while the first floor was damaged by water. Damage to the plant as well as the one-story garage was estimated at \$100,000. The electrical store of the Ray Hartman Electric Company located in the Hagan building was damaged by smoke and water to the extent of \$5,000.”

The *Telegraph* was back in business by August. Its temporary office was located at 107 Water Street. Both newspapers, *The Morning Telegraph* and *Brownsville Evening Telegraph*, were soliciting subscribers by late August.

But the great tragedy of the fire was not the loss of the building. It was the loss of the back issues of the newspaper. To my knowledge, there is no repository which contains issues of the *Brownsville Telegraph* from its first day of publication in 1914 to the day of the fire. The *Telegraph's* daily accounts of life in the Brownsville community during the fourteen years prior to the fire, upon which Jesse Coldren would have depended heavily when writing his planned history of Brownsville, went up in smoke that June afternoon.

I described this as a double tragedy. There was yet another tragic consequence of the *Telegraph* blaze. Mr. Walter Catterall, who was employed at the *Telegraph*, was also a dedicated trustee of the First Methodist Church, Church Street, in Brownsville. That historic congregation is possibly Brownsville's oldest, tracing its beginnings to July 4, 1776, when a Methodist service was conducted on its present Church Street property by the founder of the church, Chads Chalfant. For reasons that remain unclear to me, the precious historic records of the First Methodist Church were also destroyed in the *Telegraph* fire. It is painful to note that in an era when photocopies were a technological advance yet unheard of, there were no duplicates of those records.

I am aware of more than one explanation for how the church records came to be in the *Telegraph* building on the day of the blaze. I have been told that they were being stored there. I have also been told that Mr. Catterall may have been doing some work involving the records. Unfortunately, of one thing there is no doubt. The historic church's irreplaceable records were destroyed.

An act of God? A disastrous twist of fate? Both of Brownsville's newspapers and one of its oldest churches lost the written record of their

past in a single afternoon. It is unpredictable events like this that shock us into realizing how fragile our connection with the past truly is. And that is why, when we can possibly protect that precious bond, we must do all we can to defend it.

There is no historic house, no yellowing document, no aging artifact, and no picturesque community whose potential destruction, for even the very “best” of reasons, should not cause us to pause for a long, long time and think: Should we allow it?

We owe it to our children to ask that question.

And when the answer is no?

To act.