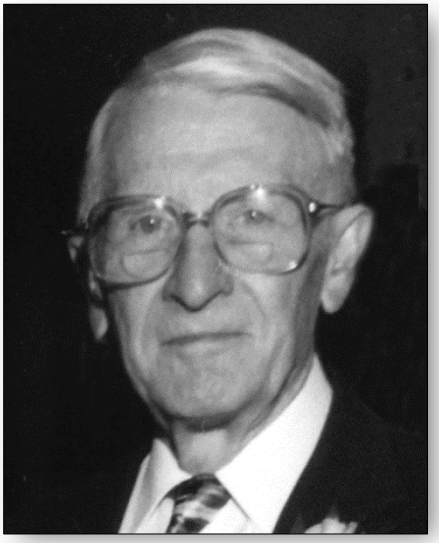
CHAPTER 15

LOOKING BACK WITH
JACK PURCELL



Jack Purcell may retire someday, but not just yet.

Jack, who blew out eighty-five birthday candles last Saturday, still keeps busy buying and selling antiques and collectibles at his home in Brownsville. He has lived in the Brownsville area for most of his eighty-five years, and recently he shared some of his memories with me as we conversed in the drawing room of his Front Street residence.

Jack was born on April 24, 1919 in Berlin, Pennsylvania, to Paul F. and Susan Deist Purcell.

"My father owned the National Hotel in Berlin," Jack said, "where nearly everyone was of Dutch or German descent. Purcell is an Irish name, but my mother was German."

"What brought your family to Brownsville?" I asked him.

"We left Berlin because the Volstead Act banned liquor sales, and that killed my dad's business. We moved about twelve miles away to Meyersdale, went on to Canton, Ohio, then moved to Pittsburgh in 1925. That is where I started first grade in a Catholic school, and I was still in first grade when my father got a job at Maxwell."

"In the mine?"

"No, he was a company policeman for H. C. Frick. He had previously worked in a mine near Somerset, but after the second day there, he never went back, not even to get his pay! Maxwell mine was no better. It was a bad mine for accidents. They referred to Maxwell as

a butcher shop, with guys getting injured all the time."

"You certainly moved around a lot in your first few years of life."

"And having moved around so much, I fell behind in my education. When we arrived in Maxwell, I was enrolled in Helen Horner's first grade class at Maxwell School, the same building that later burned in 1962. I probably was not going to pass first grade, but my mother was helping Helen Horner teach English to immigrants so they could get their citizenship papers, and Helen Horner kindly passed me.

"We lived in Maxwell in company house #183," Jack recalled, "and Steve Kosick's family lived in the other half of the duplex in #184. Steve was a little bit older than I was. You wrote a newspaper column a few weeks ago about what people often did on Sundays. We did not do much at all on Sundays, but we did walk up the railroad tracks from Maxwell to the ferry, cross the river, and walk to St. Michael's, where we attended church. Eventually, Steve's father bought a 1924 Dodge that was so tall we could stand up in it, and we rode to church after that.

"In the early 1930s, my father was transferred to Bridgeport, which was also an H. C. Frick mine. We moved from Maxwell into a South Brownsville apartment over George Goldman's store on Water Street. That property now belongs to Alonzo Dimperio, who formerly owned Sam's News Stand at the east end of the old Brownsville bridge.

"Then we moved further up Water Street, right next to Vigliotti's store, and then finally back to Sheridan Avenue, where we lived for the next seventeen years. Throughout all these moves, my dad worked as a policeman at Bridgeport."

"Was he a member of the Coal and Iron Police?"

"Yes, that was the correct name for them."

The Coal and Iron Police were infamous for their role in Pennsylvania labor history, but their duties did not solely involve enforcing home evictions or defending company property during labor disputes. The Coal and Iron Police were created to address a growing need for law enforcement within the crowded coal patches.

Pennsylvania was shifting from an agricultural economy to a more industrialized one, and violent disputes between management and labor became commonplace. Local constables and sheriffs found that maintaining law and order in the densely populated company towns was too much for them to handle, and in the late nineteenth century, the Pennsylvania State Police did not yet exist.

To address this problem, the coal and steel operators persuaded the state legislature to authorize the creation of the Coal and Iron Police. For one dollar each, commissions were sold to mine and steel mill owners, conferring police power upon whomever the owners selected.

"There were derogatory terms for the Coal and Iron Police too," said Jack Purcell. "They were called yellow dogs and other names. But the patch needed a police force, and someone had to do it. When you don't have a job and your family needs food, you take anything you can get. My dad patrolled the patch day or night."

"Was he the only policeman assigned to the patch?"

"They had three different shifts, but some of the policemen did not live there in the patch. When my dad worked in Maxwell, he and Andy Matis both lived in Maxwell, so people would come and get one of them at any hour. The same was true when we lived in South Brownsville. We lived right behind the company store, which was near the patch, so they'd come to our house to get my dad in the middle of the night, whether he was on duty or not.

"I remember one time somebody broke into the company store. They came to get my dad, and he had to go over and walk in, not knowing who was in there. If a husband and wife were fighting, the neighbors would come for him, and he would go over and counsel the people. Domestic problems were the most dangerous type of incidents. You could get yourself killed."

"Did he have the power to arrest?"

"Well, he did at one time, but then they took it away. At first he had police powers. He was sworn in as a deputy sheriff and had a badge that said 'Deputy Sheriff' on it. He had to practice with his gun so many hours each year so that he was permitted to carry it.

"Later the law changed, and he wasn't even allowed to carry his Police Special pistol. He did have a big dog that had come to our house and adopted us, and that dog would trail around the town after him. For serious matters, he would call in the State Police."

The Pennsylvania State Police force was created by the legislature in 1905 and was the first uniformed police organization of its kind in the United States. The state police force was formed shortly after a violent 1902 anthracite coal strike, when it was realized that maintaining law and order should be the responsibility of publicly paid law enforcement officers rather than the privately paid Coal and Iron Police.

"So you grew up in or near several patches," I said, "and even though your dad was not a coal miner, your early life paralleled that of the residents of those patches around Brownsville. When you graduated from Brownsville High School, little did you suspect that a war was about to begin that would be fought in many places far away from Brownsville."

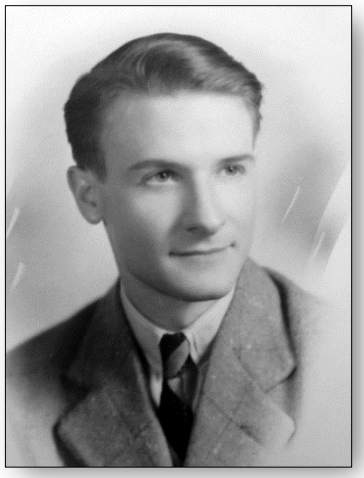
Like many other young men from coal and coke country, World War II uprooted Jack from the sheltered sameness of the southwestern

Pennsylvania coal patches, transporting him to the other side of the globe into a completely different world.

TECHNICAL SKILLS OPENED MANY DOORS FOR JACK PURCELL

For years, Jack Purcell has been known around Brownsville as the "radiator man" and the "antiques and junk man." It is unlikely that on his graduation day from Brownsville High School, this son of a Coal and Iron policeman would have guessed that someday he would become an authority on the three A's − aircraft engines, automobile radiators, and antiques.

"What year did you graduate from high school?" I asked Jack.



"I graduated from Brownsville High School in 1937," he told me. "In 1933, South Brownsville and Brownsville high schools merged, and the combined high school used the former South Brownsville High School building on High Street. I always thought they should have re-named it Jesse Coldren High School."

"You were a student of Jesse Coldren?"

"Oh, yes. He was one of the greatest instructors I ever had. He taught us POD and never gave his students books, but he often read to us. He always wrote the current events on the board for discussion.

"When he was teaching, if he sensed he was losing the class, he would drop his book on the floor. He must have felt the technique worked, because he used it numerous times. If he would assign you a topic to research, he would say something like, 'Go into the library, turn right, count down four shelves, go out eighteen books, and there will be your subject.'"

Jack sighed. "Jesse Coldren was quite a character − a fabulous individual. They don't make them like that anymore."

"I am curious," I said, "about the circumstances that led you to become this area's expert on radiator repair. What did you do after graduating from Brownsville High School?"

"The first day after I got out of high school," Jack said, "I was sitting on my steps on Sheridan Avenue, wondering what to do. Henry Rogers, who had worked as a deputy sheriff, and Bill Shumar, sales manager at Sidle Motor Car Company, drove up. Henry, who knew my father because he had worked on the Frick police force, said to me, 'You doin' anything?'

"'Just sittin' here,' I said.

"'You want a job?'

"'Sure I want a job,' I replied. The next day I went down there and started working at Sidle Motor Car Company [in the building to the left of Sunset Discount in Snowdon Square]. Guess how much I earned for working up to ten hours a day, six days a week?"

"What year was that?"

"1937."

"I'll take a wild guess at ten cents an hour."

Jack laughed. "Broken down by the hour, it wasn't much more than that. I started at ten dollars a week."

"Doing what?"

"Sweeping the floor, greasing cars, changing batteries, polishing and moving cars around. That was a big garage, a Buick and Pontiac dealership. They employed about thirty garage men, more than any other garage in Fayette County."

"To whom did Sidle eventually sell that business?" I asked.

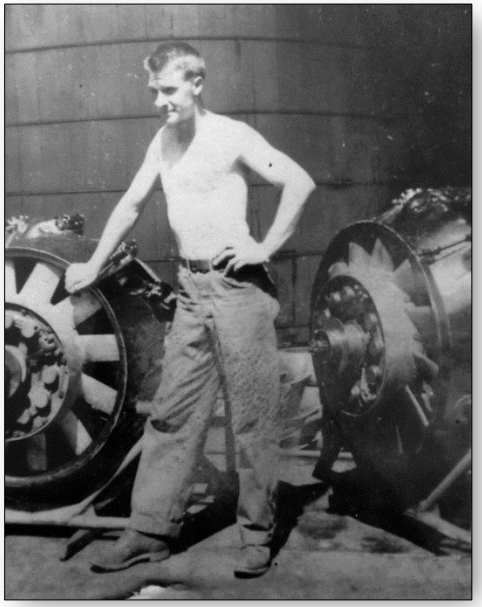
"He sold to Jack Goldman, who was his nephew, and Clint Childress, which is why their company's name was 'G. C. Motors.' Later Mickey Burke bought it from them.

"In 1939, after I worked for Sidle for a year or so, I went to work at Goldman's Chrysler dealership on Market Street. It was owned by Jack Goldman's relative, Max Goldman, and it was in the showroom where Fox's Pizza is now located. I earned forty cents an hour there, top pay for a body man and painter. Then World War II started.

"One of our mechanics, Charlie Pogue, left for Harrisburg to attend the Pennsylvania State School of Aeronautics. Charlie came back and told us that they teach you and pay you at the same time. That sounded good to us, so my co-worker Joe Nutt and I decided to go there. Joe, who was the smartest guy I ever knew, once described to me how an automatic transmission would work, even before they ever made such a thing!

"We went to the school, which was held in the seventeen-acre State Farm Show building and was run by the Middletown Air Depot Engineering School. It was the biggest school building in the world. They had B-29s, P-38s, and other airplanes just sitting there on the floor.

"The first day we walked in the door, Joe Nutt spotted a complex sixteen-cylinder engine and began talking theory about its operation to one of the instructors, explaining things about the engine that the instructor didn't even know. The instructor told his boss, and pretty soon Joe was made an instructor.



"Since he and I roomed together, with his influence they eventually made me an instructor too. I taught the theory of operations of aircraft engines and how to dismantle them. Later I became head of the inspection department and instructed all of the inspectors who had to work at Middletown Air Depot."

When Brownsville residents visited Jack Purcell's National Pike radiator shop

years later, few realized that the man to whom they entrusted their cars' balky radiators was also an expert on aircraft engines.

"The military operated that school, but you yourself were not in the military?" I asked.

"Not yet. I was deferred because I had that instructor's job, and if I'd had half a brain, I could have avoided military service entirely by keeping that job. After a couple of years at the air depot, though, I decided to quit. They threatened to draft me if I quit, but I had already failed the physical for the Flying Cadets due to a prolapsed mitral valve in my heart. I had tried to join the Flying Cadets in order to get a free education.

"So after I failed that physical, I continued to work at the air depot for a while, then one day I just up and quit. Sure enough, they drafted me despite my heart problem. Even though I had papers recommending me for the Air Force, they put me in the Navy working on landing vehicles, which had aircraft engines in them. By early 1944, I was stationed in Hawaii.

"Eventually my unit got orders to go to Guadalcanal, and fortunately most of the fighting on that island had already been done. Since I wasn't married, I knew I would not get out of the service until six months after the war was over."

"And that put you in line to participate in the expected invasion of Japan, right?" I said.

"Right. We were practicing for it. I was practicing with the 88th Amtrack Marines to land 86 miles below Tokyo, with very high casualties expected. At that time we were on Guam, just a few miles from a little island called Tinian.

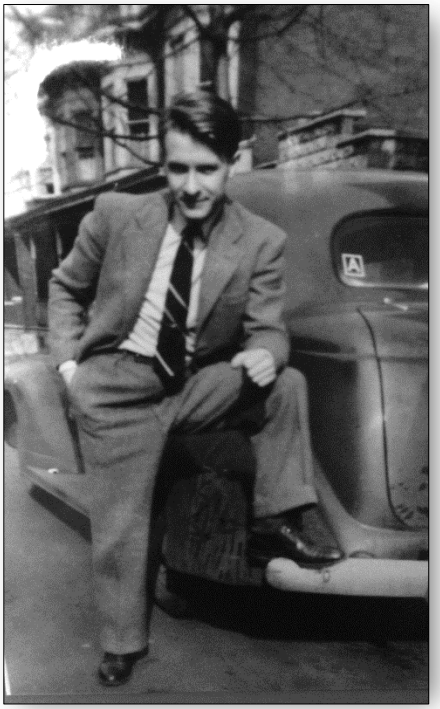
"We knew something big was happening on Tinian, because there were lots of guys wearing suits, and everything was hush-hush. Tinian is the island from which the atomic bomb plane later took off. We never had to make that invasion of Japan."

A few months after World War II ended, 27-year-old Jack Purcell was discharged and returned to Brownsville. He had promised himself a

six-month vacation if he made it home alive, so he moved into his parents' 619 Green Street home and began enjoying a well-deserved rest.

It would be his last lengthy vacation for more than half a century. Just around the corner lay a trip down the aisle and the beginning of his unexpected career as Brownsville's guru of radiator repair.

JACK PURCELL: EXPERT ON RADIATOR REPAIRS, ANTIQUES, AND COLLECTIBLES



When 27-year old Jack Purcell returned from the Pacific after World War II, he was looking forward to enjoying the six-month vacation he had promised himself.

"Dumbest thing I ever did," Jack confided to me, shaking his head. "After being discharged in 1946, I loafed for six months and lived with my parents on Green Street."

"And when you'd had your fill of loafing, what led you to enter the radiator repair business?" I asked him.

"After my vacation was over," Jack said, "I went up on the hill [Broadway] to see my buddy Joe Nutt, who was running the National Pike Garage. Joe suggested that I buy Earl Brooks' radiator shop at the corner of Third Avenue and Brashear Street. He said the fumes were bothering Earl.

"'He'll sell cheap,' Joe told me. So we went down to see Earl, and I bought myself a radiator shop, just like that! I made a deal with Earl that if he would stay with me for a week, I would buy the place and all of his equipment."

Jack chuckled, "I had never repaired a radiator in my life."

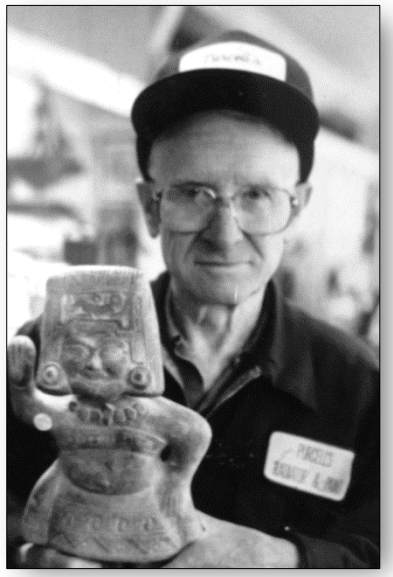
"Many folks remember your radiator repair shop on Old National

Pike hill coming out of Brownsville," I said. "When did you move your shop up there?"

"In 1950 Joe Nutt went out of business, so I moved into Joe's former place."

"How old is that building?"

"That place, which is Talbert's auto repair shop now, was built in 1914 for a Chevrolet dealership. I eventually bought it from Elson Hommell, who had rented it to several different people before I finally bought it from him."



"How long were you in business at the National Pike location?"

"For about forty years. I had a heart operation in 1991 and turned it over to my employee, Herman Talbert, and he and his sons run it today."

"As a radiator shop?"

"No. That is a trade that very few people have, even though that was the type of work on which I made more money than anything else. I had customers from as far away as Waynesburg, Charleroi, Monongahela, and Uniontown."

"Why was radiator repair so unusual an occupation? Didn't you learn how to do it from Earl Brooks in just one week?"

"Well, remember, I had garage experience from before, and I knew how to weld. Plus, radiator repair methods changed. Originally radiators ran with gravity flow and didn't have any pressure in them. The old Model T didn't even have a water pump. Then around 1935, they started making radiators that operated under high pressure with pressure caps.

"The old guys who had been in the business couldn't handle it; they were sort of lost. Since I knew how to do the repairs, there were many days when I stood with a big ball of solder and a torch in my hand for eight hours a day."

"You made a good living doing that until 1991," I said. "But when you got rid of the radiator shop, you didn't really retire. How did you get into the antiques and collectibles business next?"

"I had open heart surgery for the damaged mitral valve they had

found during my wartime military physical," Jack said, "so under doctor's orders, I was taking a walk on the North Side one day, and I spotted Joe Zosky, Jr. at the Superior Auto building on Market Street.

"I knew Joe from when I coached him in Little League, and I asked him what he was doing. He said, 'I just bought this building, and I'm going to run an antique shop.' I said, 'Joe, do you want somebody who will work for free? Pro bono?' He laughed and said, 'I'll take a free guy any time.' So the next day I went over there, and I didn't miss a day for the next ten years!"

"I had always assumed that you owned that shop."

"I ended up owning it," Jack explained, "but at first, I worked with Joe."

"What got you interested in selling antiques?"

"Antiques and 'junk,'" Jack amended, laughing. "Over the years my wife Anna and I had bought things for our house. I always had the interest, but I never had the time. As I got older, I started buying and selling antiques and junk while I was still running the garage. I had a lot of signs, bells, and other items that I sold up there."

"I recall that when you were in business on Market Street," I noted, "you often displayed merchandise on the sidewalk in front of your store."

"That's right. One day I put some items outside on the sidewalk, and I started making more money than I could make inside! So I continued that practice."

"I guess you have learned a lot about antiques while running your business."

"You never know everything," Jack replied, "but I have learned a great deal. Wherever I go, people want me to appraise items. I have a lot of books to do research if I need to look up anything."

"The Market Street building where your antiques and junk business was located," I observed, "is now Scott Bowman's insurance and real estate agency. Although you no longer have your shop there, do you still buy and sell antiques and collectibles?"

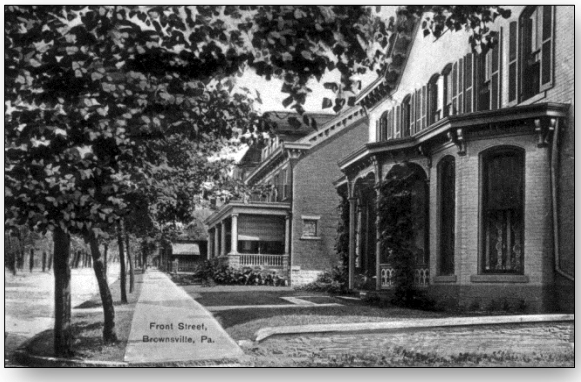
"Oh yes. I buy or sell something almost every day, here at my house. My shop is in the basement. Dealers come here to do business with me."

"Do most people have a good idea of the value of items they bring to sell to you?"

"Well, they watch the *Antiques Road Show* on television, and they often have inflated ideas of what their item is worth. They go to auctions and buy something, then bring it here and try to sell it to me. Often I can't even give them what they paid for it, because they paid too much at the auction.

"How do you decide how much to offer?"

"I follow the guideline that with anything I buy, I should be able to double my money, because some things you may have to throw away, some may break, and some nobody wants to buy. I always try to be fair with my customers. If you have a good reputation, they'll believe you when you tell them something and they'll come back."



The Front Street home of Jack and Anna Purcell

"Is the quality of antiques for sale in small towns like this comparable to what you might find in an urban area?"

"No, because you couldn't demand the prices here that you might get in an urban area. Most customers shopping around here are not prepared to spend that kind of money. And don't believe what you see on the *Antiques Road Show*. Those appraisals are way too high and are certainly not representative of what you would get for that item in most places. Maybe in a large auction house in a major city, but not in Brownsville."

As we concluded our conversation, I asked one final question of this gentleman who has lived in Brownsville for most of his eighty-five years.

"Jack, would you say you are optimistic or pessimistic about Brownsville's future?"

"I think it will stay the same," he replied without hesitation. "Nothing changes so much as it stays the same. If any gambling comes to this area, my guess is that it will probably be up at Nemacolin Woodlands."

He paused. "But I would like to see *something* happen in town --- *anything*."

If and when that "something" happens, something tells me that Jack Purcell, who has not slowed down one bit in life, will find a way to be a part of it.