

THE BANKER AND THE LIBRARIAN THE STORY OF THE BROWNSVILLE FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY



Brownsville Free Public Library in a bygone era

In Brownsville's Snowdon Square, a small one-story building is perched along an embankment overlooking Dunlap Creek. The flat-roofed brown brick structure stands at the corner of Charles and Seneca streets, directly across Seneca Street from the Brownsville Post Office. Viewed from either side or from the rear, the building is plain with an unimaginative square design, but a walk around to the front of this building reveals a surprisingly elegant stone facade.

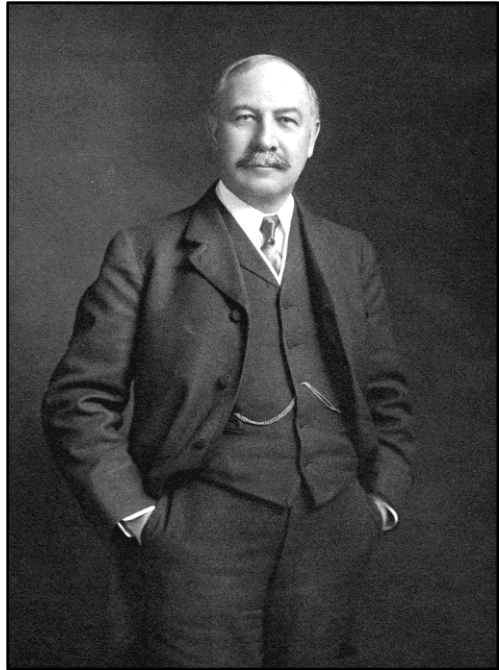
A large modified bow window features a colorful display of library books and seasonal decorations. Carved above the window are the words

“Brownsville Public Library.” The supportive stonework below the display window is embellished with intricate relief carvings. To the left and right of the window are tall heavy wooden doors, each flanked by a pair of round stone pillars crowned by decorative capitals.

What is such an impressive facade doing on such an otherwise plain-looking building? Within the answer to that simple question lies the tale of a generous gift and the sad twist of fate that befell its giver.

The Brownsville Free Public Library building was constructed for the community in 1927 by one of the town’s leading citizens, Charles L. Snowdon. Snowdon built it and immediately leased it to the borough for one dollar per year. It was his way of thanking the citizenry for its many years of supporting his businesses.

Charles L. Snowdon’s Monongahela National Bank had been the pride of the Brownsville financial community since the bank was founded in 1812 by Jacob Bowman and his associates. The bank was located on Front Street until 1873, when it moved into new headquarters on the corner of Fourth and Market Street on the town’s North Side. Upper Market Street had become the town’s business center by the late 1800s, and the bank operated at its second site from 1873 until 1900. That building later became the home of the Rose family.



Charles L. Snowdon, banker, community leader, and benefactor who created the Brownsville Free Public Library in 1927

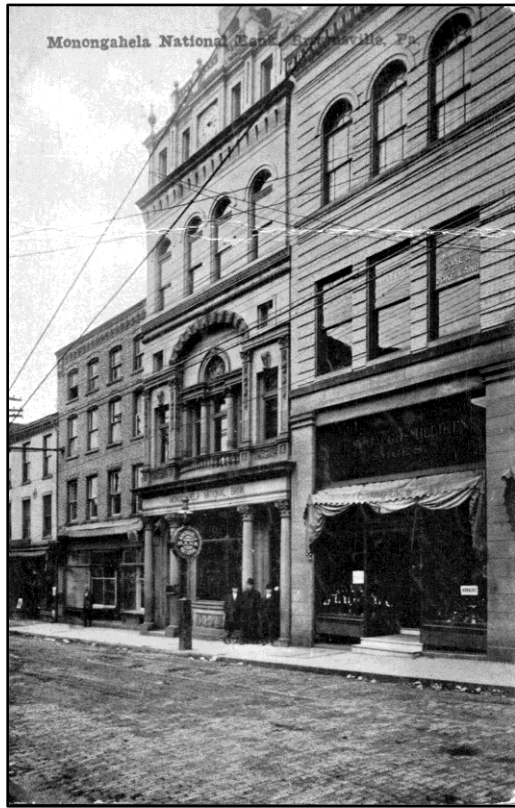
By 1900, the “place to be” for new businesses in Brownsville was along the Monongahela River in the “Neck.” The Neck consisted of downtown Market Street and the buildings on each side of the street from the Flatiron building to Dunlap Creek. To follow the clientele, the Monongahela National Bank moved from upper Market Street down to the Neck, opening for business on the west side of Market Street, two buildings to the left of Union Station. The impressive bank

building sported a dome atop its fourth floor. The dome is no longer there, but its brick exterior featured trim of richly colored stone that can still be seen today, with the exception of the first floor facade, which was removed.

As illustrated in a photograph shown here, the ground floor facade consisted of four columns, two on the left and two on the right, with a door at each end. The center of the facade featured an angled bow display window, and above the window were the words “Monongahela National Bank.” It was an impressive entrance to Snowdon’s new bank, and the bank thrived at that location from 1900 until 1924.

During the second decade of the twentieth century, the demand for business property within downtown Brownsville was high, but very little property in the Neck was available for purchase or rental. The imaginative Charles L. Snowdon devised a plan to meet that demand. He would *create* land to add to the downtown business district, transforming a nearby area whose topography had not favored construction of buildings into a piece of prime real estate.

The area where he planned to create this new land lay immediately behind the buildings that fronted on the eastern side of Market Street in the Neck, where the ground fell away sharply beneath the buildings and sloped downward to Krepps Bottom. The rear portions of these buildings were supported by tall posts that were anchored far below in



The center building was the third site of the Monongahela National Bank from which the first floor facade was transplanted in 1927 onto the new Brownsville Free Public Library. All three pictured buildings are still standing in Brownsville’s Neck.

the rich soil of Krepps Bottom.

Krepps Bottom was a flood plain created by the two branches of Dunlap Creek that meandered through it and occasionally overran their banks. The flat bottomland hosted visiting circuses, religious tent revivals, amateur and semi-professional football and baseball games, and even an ice-skating rink. It was much lower in elevation than the Neck.

Some folks assume that the Neck got its name because traffic through the downtown business district was funneled through the narrow gullet of Market Street. While it is true that this is the tightest spot on the National Road between Cumberland and Wheeling, that is not how it got its nickname.

Prior to Charles Snowdon's creation of Snowdon Place in 1916, the Neck area of Brownsville was a narrow elevated peninsula, protruding like a "neck" from the main body of land lying to the north. On all three sides of the peninsula, the land fell away toward lowlands or waterways. Along the northwest side flowed the Monongahela River. Past the south-



This rare c. 1870 photograph shows a flooded Krepps Bottom. To the left is the Cast Iron Bridge over Dunlap Creek, still in use today. Visible are the "stilts" which supported the rear portions of buildings along Market Street in the Neck. In 1916, Charles Snowdon converted this flood-prone bottomland into an elevated piece of real estate that he named "Snowdon Place."

west tip of the peninsula ran Dunlap Creek, beyond which lay the borough of Bridgeport. To the southeast, many feet beneath the rear of the buildings on that side of Market Street, lay Krepps Bottom.

It was Krepps Bottom that Charles Snowdon had his eye on.

Snowdon bought Krepps Bottom. He then had hundreds of tons of dirt and slag dumped on it, raising it and creating a plateau with its surface level with the Neck. He erected buildings on his new real estate, named the area Snowdon Place, and opened it for business and traffic in 1916.

Since there had been a solid wall of buildings along the southeast side of Market Street, it became necessary to create an opening through which a new street could lead into Snowdon Place. Accordingly, Brownsville Avenue was laid out, intersecting with Market Street directly opposite Snowdon's Monongahela National Bank building. A soaring iron arch was built over the entrance to Brownsville Avenue. It was adorned with the words "Snowdon Place."

To ease the resulting congestion at the new intersection of Brownsville Avenue and Market Street, Snowdon later created a second entry into Snowdon Place by building a bridge over Dunlap Creek near



In this 1927 photo the decorative iron arch spanning the Brownsville Avenue entrance to Snowdon Place can be seen. The fourth and final location of the Monongahela National Bank was the impressive eight-columned structure in the center of the photo, later occupied by the First National Bank of Washington.

the present-day library. The new Charles Street bridge connected Charles Street with Bridgeport Borough's Bank Street.

Snowdon Place was an instant success. Many buildings, including the Plaza Theatre, were constructed there during the 1920s.

In 1924, with America's economy sailing full steam ahead, Charles Snowdon's bank changed locations for the last time. The bank moved into a structure almost directly across the street from the building that it was vacating. The new location, still standing today, was known in later years as the First National Bank building. The last of the four sites of the Monongahela National Bank, it was an impressive brick structure fronted by a magnificent granite facade and eight towering granite columns. It symbolized the solid-as-a-rock stature of Snowdon's financial institution. The bank moved across the street into its new headquarters in 1924.

Three years later, Snowdon decided to bestow a generous gift upon his home town. The area's population was enormous due to the coal, coke and rail operations centered in the Brownsville region. Yet something was missing from Snowdon's town, something he felt was a basic need of any solid community – an adequate public library.

There was still a vacant site in Snowdon Place upon which a library could be built. The spot was at the corner of Charles and Seneca streets near the north end of the Charles Street bridge. Snowdon paid for the construction of a one-story square brick library building on that site.

He also directed his builder to remove the first floor facade from the vacated Monongahela National Bank building and install it – bow window, columns and all – on the front of the new library. The stone above the window that had been inscribed with the words “Monongahela National Bank” was replaced with stone bearing the inscription “Brownsville Public Library.”

That is the reason why the Brownsville Free Public Library, a simple building, has such an elaborate facade. In May of 1927, Snowdon arranged to lease the library building to a newly created library association for one dollar per year. Under terms of the lease, it would be up to the community to finance the operation of the library, including acquisition of materials and payment of salaries.

The library opened to the public in September, and less than one month later, Miss Anna Shutterly was named librarian. She was to become a guiding force in creating a library of which the region could be proud.

Charles Snowdon's unique gift to Brownsville came in the nick of time. Two years later in October 1929, the New York Stock Exchange suffered a disastrous crash and the nation's economy slid into the Great Depression. A valiant personal attempt by Snowdon to weather the

national economic storm failed.

On a Monday morning in April 1931, Snowdon's venerable Monongahela National Bank failed to open its doors for business. The bank became one more victim in the cascade of collapsing financial institutions that preceded the New Deal. Snowdon's financial assets, including ownership of the library building, was placed into receivership.

It would remain the task of the fledgling library's board of directors to find a way to keep the library's doors open.

***LIBRARIAN'S DARKEST HOUR BROUGHT
A RAY OF HOPE FOR BROWNSVILLE***

*"When the Lord closes a door, somewhere he opens a window."
– Maria in "The Sound of Music"*

She might have started crying right there in his office, but she was too shocked and too angry to allow him to see how badly he had hurt her.

Anna Shutterly had been librarian at the California State Normal School library for forty years. Now, as this college administrator told her the bad news, she could not believe her ears. It had to be a mistake.

"Not qualified?" she asked him.

The man patiently explained it again to the tiny dignified woman with the bun in her silver hair. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania had decreed that all members of the college faculty, including the librarian, must have a college degree. Anna had forty years of experience at building and running a college library. But she did not have a college degree.

True, she had been indispensable in getting the library at California, Pennsylvania's Southwestern State Normal School (as it was then known) on its feet. When she had begun working there in the 1880s, there were one hundred books in the entire library. Now, after she had devoted heart and soul to greatly expanding the library's collection and helping generations of students learn to use it, a bureaucrat had decided that Miss Anna Shutterly was not qualified to be a college librarian.

She left the administrator's office and walked home in a daze. What would she do now?

She was only sixty-two. She was not ready to retire, but that

decision had been made for her. She had lived all of her life in California and had never wed. Her marriage had been to her work.

How would she support herself? She still could not absorb what had happened. Without warning, on one unbelievable morning, the door to her beloved career as a librarian had been slammed shut.

While Anna Shutterly sat in her home and wondered about her future, three miles up the Monongahela River, a Brownsville businessman had given his hometown a generous gift. Charles L. Snowdon, whose Monongahela National Bank was Brownsville's biggest, had built a new brick library in his privately owned Snowdon Place.

On May 29, 1927, that building was offered to a select group of citizens assembled in the Monongahela Hotel. Snowdon proposed to rent the building to a library association for one dollar per year. Eventually he intended to deed the building to the borough, once a library association could handle the financial obligations that ownership would bring.

On June 29, 1927, a library association was formed with Charles A. Miller as President. Its most urgent task was to hire a librarian, so the library board approached the Pennsylvania Library Association, which sent Miss Evelyn Matthews to Brownsville. She was appointed librarian and set out to organize the new library in a professional way. After weeks of preparation, an open house was held at the library on Thursday, September 1, 1927.

"No books will be circulated," the Brownsville *Telegraph* stated in announcing the reception, "but patrons will be registered, and tomorrow it will be possible to take volumes out." The newspaper reported that books were already being donated to the library at such a pace that "additional shelves have been ordered, as the number of volumes on hand is already greater than the space arranged to accommodate them."

The library's board encountered its first bump in the road within a month of the library's opening, but surprisingly it had nothing to do with finances. Librarian Matthews shocked the board by announcing that she was leaving, effective immediately, to take a position with the Pennsylvania Library Association in Harrisburg. Her decision left the infant library reeling without a librarian at the very time it most needed professional guidance.

The library board was stunned and disheartened. Yet although no one realized it, when Evelyn Matthews resigned, a window of opportunity began gently sliding open for the Brownsville Free Public Library and for a heartbroken lady who sat in quiet solitude in her home in California.

Within days, the Brownsville library board learned of Anna Shutterly's dismissal by the college, and the library board wondered if she might agree to help Brownsville's fledgling library in its time of need. The decision to contact her may have been the most important move the board has made in the seventy-two years of the library's existence.

When Miss Shutterly was asked if she would be interested in the librarian's job, she must have wondered at the coincidence. Here was a new library to be established, a library in need of a firm knowing hand. She had done it successfully once before. And now she had been judged by the state as unqualified to run a college library.



Miss Anna Shutterly, the librarian who guided the Brownsville Free Public Library through its formative years from 1927 until her death in 1943.

Without hesitation, she accepted the challenge. On October 7, 1927, a Brownsville *Telegraph* article reported that the library's board of directors had elected Anna B. Shutterly of California as librarian. She arrived for work at the Brownsville library on October 8, 1927, and she never retired.

Anna Shutterly brought determination and drive to her work every day as she built the library into one of the best in the region. On September 1, 1928, the library's first anniversary, the collection had already grown from nothing to 4,800 volumes. In its first twelve months of operation, an amazing 50,450 books were circulated among 2,550



Margaret Karpchack (left) and Eleanor Junk, assistants to librarian Anna Shutterly.

registered borrowers.

In 1929, the remarkable success of the library led Miss Shutterly to seek an assistant. She asked an acquaintance's daughter, a girl named Eleanor Junk, if she was interested in the job. Eleanor, a 1928 graduate of Brownsville High School, accepted the position, not realizing she was beginning a library career of her own that would span nearly half a century. Seventy years later, Eleanor (Junk) Parrish is retired and lives near Brownsville. She shared with me her fond memories of those early days.

"So you were recruited for the job?" I asked Eleanor.

She laughed. "I was glad to get the job. I was never so proud in my life as when I brought that first check home."

"What was Miss Shutterly like?"

"She was one of my best friends, I can say that. I thought the world of her. She was very loyal to the library, and she gave the library a great many things. She needed a desk, so she bought one and donated it to the library. They are still using it today."

Money was always tight at the library, but Miss Shutterly pulled some strings.

"She was at the college so long and knew so many of the graduates, including some who became heads of big companies, especially coal companies," Eleanor explained. "She would call them and say the library needed coal, and she always got it! She went sometimes for

several months without getting paid a penny.”

“What about you?” I asked her. “You missed some paydays too, didn't you?”

“Sometimes they gave me half of what was due me.”

“Were you supporting yourself with your earnings at the library?”

“No, I was still living at home at the time. My parents were still living. My father was the assistant postmaster.”

“How did you and Miss Shutterly work together?” I asked.

“The library used to be open from ten in the morning until eight at night, six days a week. I always worked through to eight o'clock on Saturday. Miss Shutterly would usually stay until eight on the week nights. She could get a ride to and from her home in California with Dr. Henry, a dentist who lived in California.”

“Was the library busy in the evenings?”

“Yes. A lot of people came shopping in town in the evenings. I remember they used to have a man in Snowdon Square whose job it was to try to find parking places for people who had come into town!”

In 1934, the library got a much-needed financial boost. Bridgeport and Brownsville boroughs had just consolidated into a single borough, and an approved ballot referendum allowed the new borough council to levy a special one mil tax for library maintenance. It was an impressive show of support in the midst of an economic depression. The Brownsville *Telegraph* editorialized, “Only those who fully understand the vital work this institution has been doing in spite of its financial handicap can appreciate how much good this action promises.”

For fifteen years, the two women put in many long hours together. I remarked to Eleanor, “Miss Shutterly was nearly eighty years old when she died, wasn't she? And still working as librarian?”

“Yes,” Eleanor confirmed. “I'll tell you, the library would never have been there, because I couldn't have done what Miss Shutterly did. I could not have kept it going like she did. Yet she wasn't a young woman when she was let go by the college. I thought that was a terrible thing. And I think Miss Shutterly was hurt and she was angry, so she just showed them!”

“She certainly did,” I agreed. “And their loss was Brownsville's gain.”

Anna Shutterly served as librarian of the Brownsville Free Public Library from October 8, 1927 until her death at age seventy-nine on Thursday, February 11, 1943, following a brief illness. Following a funeral at her home, she was buried in Highland Cemetery in California.

For the community and for the Brownsville Free Public Library, which was firmly established thanks to her determination, an era had

ended. Next, our series concludes with a look at those to whom she passed the torch.

***RESIDENTS SHARE FOND MEMORIES OF VISITING
THE BROWNSVILLE FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY***

From the time the Brownsville Free Public Library opened in 1927, finding money to operate the library was a yearly challenge.

In 1934, borough voters helped out by approving a one mil annual tax for the library. But Charles L. Snowdon had passed away, and the deed to the library building and the land on which it stood was still in the hands of his estate. Ownership of Snowdon Square, which had been Snowdon's private property since he created it in 1916, had come under the control of others.

Snowdon had often said that he intended to deed the library to the people of Brownsville when the town could handle the financial responsibilities. In 1939, the borough approached the trustees of the Snowdon estate and the parties struck a deal. The estate's trustees agreed to deed the library building and real estate to the people of Brownsville. In exchange, according to a Brownsville *Telegraph* article, borough council agreed "to put Snowdon Square on the same basis as the rest of the community – maintaining and policing its streets, as is done elsewhere in the borough." By accepting title to the library, council also assumed responsibility for the streets of Snowdon Square.

There was another hurdle to clear. The title to the library was still tied up with the affairs of Snowdon's failed Monongahela National Bank. Good news finally arrived in a telegram from Congressman J. Buell Snyder.

"Glad to inform you," it read, "that comptroller of currency has authorized the receiver of the Monongahela National Bank to convey the title of the library property in Brownsville to the Brownsville Library Association."

Throughout this legal maneuvering, librarian Anna Shutterly continued to run an efficient operation. Mary Pursglove, a current library volunteer, remembers visiting the library as a teenager when Miss Shutterly was in charge.

"What do you remember about her?" I asked Mary.

"The only thing I remember," she laughed, "is that she was always

saying ‘Shhh!’”

It’s no wonder. The library was often crowded with young people, and they were not always in search of books. Ruthann Harris Richey, Brownsville High School Class of 1945, lives in Mt. Dora, Florida. Genevieve Sprowls Zulick now lives in Washington, Pa. The two childhood friends attended Girl Scout troop meetings in the library’s basement. Ruthann could not remember the troop leader’s name, but she thinks she belonged to Girl Scout Troop #2.

“In those days,” Ruthann explained, “kids would walk to such gatherings. Our fathers would pick us up when they were over. It would have been too dark to walk to Hiller where I lived or to Telegraph Road where Jenny lived.

“When I was a sophomore in high school, we moved to Pearl Street. It was really nice to be closer to the library. Jenny said she thought her mother and father had read most of the books in the library, as they were both teachers in the Luzerne Township schools.”

Jenny’s father was William Sprowls, who taught at the Allison and Maxwell grade schools starting in the late 1930s. Her mother Hazel did substitute teaching at Redstone High School and Redstone and Luzerne Township grade schools.

In February 1943, Miss Shutterly died unexpectedly, and her longtime assistant Eleanor Junk was appointed librarian. In 1946, to honor Miss Shutterly’s memory, Frank Melega, West Brownsville artist, painted a portrait of her and donated it to the library.

Melega had a studio across from the library where the Brownsville Post Office is now. He painted the portrait not from a live pose, but from a photograph of Miss Shutterly in which she is holding in her hands a



This portrait of Miss Anna Shutterly still hangs above the fireplace in the Brownsville Free Public Library.

children’s book. The portrait is true to the photograph with one exception. Melega chose to portray Miss Shutterly holding the 1946 Muriel Sheppard book *Cloud by Day*. The artist wanted to symbolize the

times during which Miss Shutterly had served her community. The portrait still hangs over the fireplace in the library's reading room.

With Miss Shutterly's death, the torch had been passed to Eleanor Junk, who became Eleanor Parrish in 1949. Many current residents remember Eleanor's years as librarian. With only a brief interruption in her service, she was assistant librarian, then librarian, from 1929 until 1975, a period of forty-seven years. Eleanor spoke with me recently about her years on Seneca Avenue.



Librarian Eleanor (Junk) Parrish

"Is the inside of the library still set up the way it was in the old days?" I asked.

"Just exactly as it was when I started to work there in 1929," Eleanor said with a smile. "There hasn't been a thing changed!"

"I notice they do not put the newspapers on those long wooden rods on a rack anymore," I said. "What was the reason for doing that anyway?"

"It made them handy and it freed the tables," Eleanor said. "Until they started libraries in the high schools, we did all of their reference work. We had quite a few students come in there after school, those who didn't have to travel on the bus. It was also a great gathering place for hundreds of students at noon. Most of them went to the restroom, but some of them did read the sports."

Newspapers and books were not the only attraction. The library also offered welcome warmth on blustery winter school days.

"Who was in charge of keeping the furnace going?" I wondered aloud.

“There was always a janitor,” Eleanor said. “The first one that I remember was George Daugherty. He was always there and got the place all warm and snug by the time we got there.”

Former resident Bill Patterson recalled, “By today’s standards, the library was really a bare bones operation, but it was always neat, clean, and warm in the winter. In those days, most of us walked to school. Some North Side students walked from the Union Street area or beyond to the high school on High Street and even went home for lunch.

“I lived on Playford Avenue and ate downtown in Mitchell’s Restaurant in the lower floor of the Flatiron building. There was no food service or any usable room for students to occupy at the high school during the lunch hour. We were on our own. So I was in and out of the library a lot, especially after school when one could dawdle for an hour or so before going home.”

Besides reading the sports pages, Bill discovered the worlds of Greek mythology, Edgar Allen Poe, poetry, and novels.

“Amazing,” he said, “what one could pick up just spending an hour after school hanging around the Brownsville Free Public Library.”

Another lure to young people was the Story Hour, which dates back to the library’s first year. Library records show that by 1928, an average of 180 children were attending Story Hour each week. Of course, those were the days before television.



The popular Story Hour, which was supervised for many years by Mrs. Betty Herbertson (right), introduced hundreds of children to the library.

“The story hours were always given by ‘outsiders,’” Eleanor explained. “No one employed by the library ever gave them. They always used that basement room right at the foot of the steps, the one they called the book room.”

By 1961, the regular Story Hours had lapsed. Mrs. Betty Herbertson of Pearl Street revived the program, holding a Story Hour twice a week after school. The first session in October 1961 attracted 56 children, and Betty held the sessions faithfully until 1990. Several other volunteers have carried on since.

For Eleanor Parrish, a long and enjoyable career spent entirely at the Brownsville Free Public Library appeared to end when she retired. But her exit was not to be that easy.

“You retired twice, didn't you?” I asked.

“Yes, I did. I retired in 1965. Mary Boyd took my job, and Mary Wood, whose husband ‘Junior’ had the jewelry store, became her assistant. But Mary Boyd soon quit to go to school full time, so Mary Wood replaced her. Meanwhile my husband became ill, and for financial reasons I asked if the assistant librarian job was available. When Mary Wood moved to Virginia, I became librarian again.”

Following Mrs. Parrish's second retirement in 1975, Mrs. Lela Giles was librarian from 1975 until 1978. She was followed by Mrs. Bertha Mae Sealy, who served until her death in 1994. Present librarian Barry Blaine, former head librarian at the Uniontown Public Library, was hired in October 1994.

Eleanor Parrish lives in well-earned retirement on Driftwood Road near Brownsville. Her health does not permit her to volunteer at the library anymore, but she can still clearly remember the entire lifespan of the Brownsville Free Public Library.

Betty Herbertson, who kept the Story Hour alive for so many years, still serves faithfully on the library board. She recently wrote an excellent history of the Brownsville Free Public Library. It can be read at the library and was a valuable resource in the preparation of this series of articles.

The history of the Brownsville Free Public Library spotlights dedicated and generous people, only some of whom have been mentioned here. Could they have dared to imagine that the library would be celebrating its diamond anniversary in 2002?

The story of Brownsville's public library illustrates how much can be accomplished by a community's determined and caring citizens. Next time you visit the library, you may want to give a surreptitious nod of gratitude to Miss Anna Shutterly, who still watches over the library from

her portrait above the fireplace.

But try to resist looking back if you hear someone say, “Shhh.”