

Jun-2005

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## Recommended Citation

Fanning, Patricia J. (2005). Research Note: Without a Trace: The Disappearance of Jeremiah Brophy. *Bridgewater Review*, 24(1), 24-26.

Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol24/iss1/11](http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol24/iss1/11)

# Research Note

## Without a Trace: The Disappearance of Jeremiah Brophy

by Patricia Fanning

*May 19, 1925 – McKeesport, Pennsylvania*  
*Disappearing last Saturday after telephoning that he was going to a dentist, J.J. Brophy, aged 30, an agent of the Western Pennsylvania Humane Society, has neither been seen nor heard from since and police were asked to search for him today. Brophy has a wife and three small children at his home in Douglas, Pa.*

Historical research often provides us with unsolved mysteries, some more intriguing than others. Every so often, if we're lucky, the story will lead us into the present. Several years ago as archivist of the correspondence of F. Holland Day, noted Pictorial photographer and philanthropist from Norwood, Massachusetts, I came across correspondence from one Jeremiah (Jerry) Brophy. The letters dated from 1903 until 1925 when the above newspaper article was sent to Day with a plaintive note from Brophy's wife, who feared, along with authorities, that "he may have met with foul play." I was charmed by Jerry, who kept up a lively, imaginative, and quite literate correspondence despite having little formal education. I followed the clues embedded in his letters, and pieced together the threads of Jerry's life. To my surprise, I even added a final chapter.

Jeremiah Brophy was born around 1895 and surrendered to Boston's Home for Destitute Catholic Children (HDCC) by his mother sometime after 1900. The HDCC, founded in 1864 by Boston's Catholic diocese, was an organization which placed needy or wayward children in foster homes. I contacted the HDCC, now called Nazareth, and operating under the auspices of the Daughters of Charity. They kindly sent me what little information there was on Jerry.

Jerry was placed in four foster homes between March, 1903 and September, 1904 and was always returned. Prior to these placements, he had met Day while working on a farm near Day's summer home in Maine. Jerry quickly endeared himself to Day and his guests, all of whom began to call Brophy the 'Major Domo' or 'Major' for short. Brophy's correspondence begins in 1903 in the unsteady hand of a child: "My foster father keeps a fish market. [H]e gets drunk every night, [and] Thursday and Friday I have to walk 3 miles taking orders for fish. It is tiresome work." From this New Bedford foster home, Jerry matter-of-factly reports he "went directly to the Carney Hospital in South Boston to be operated on for a severe cut in my left hand which

I received when I tried to stop a knife that was thrown at me." He was discharged from the hospital four months later and returned to the HDCC.

After a gap of almost four years, the teenaged Jerry reestablished contact with Day in 1908: "It is a long time since I have heard from you or written to you...." Day wrote back immediately, prompting a glad response: "Your letter filled my cup of happiness and I cannot tell you of the joy I felt when after such a long time I heard from you again." Bringing Day up to date on his foster home experiences, he reported that "I ran away from the home in Jamaica Plain and went to Lawrence to live with my aunt, since then I have knocked about sometimes working on farms and more often working in the mills," adding that "I have thought of you very often [for]... I have always thought of you as the kindest and best friend I ever had."

By August of 1908, Jerry was working on a farm in Boxford, Massachusetts. A short time later, Day offered to "cover the necessary expenses" for him to attend Amherst Agricultural College. But it was not to be. In the winter of 1909, Jerry worked at various jobs including chopping wood, cutting ice, and general maintenance while awaiting spring farm work. But by May, 1909, Jerry was in Concord Reformatory serving time for a series of break-ins at homes in Andover, Massachusetts. Day's lawyer represented him in court. At Concord, inmates were allowed to write one letter each month. Jerry's monthly letters went to Day and his memory of the brief, idyllic time he had spent in Maine became the inspiration for evocative images of peace and security: "I...never will forget the good man who was both a friend and a father to me during that happy summer which left some hidden energy in my mind which is forever recalling those bright scenes and the smell of the sea and the pines." Day supplied his young friend not only with much needed emotional support and encouragement, but magazines and books. In August, 1909, Jerry acknowledged one particular package:

Yesterday when I awoke I found under my door one of the books that you so kindly sent to me and I expect to pass many a pleasant hour in reading it. The one I refer to is Dickens *Tale of Two Cities* and I think you selected it as an appropriate one for me just at present. The

other I was not allowed to have, it being deemed inappropriate for me, by the officials of this prison...[note: the rejected book was *Tom Jones*.]

As his writing ability improved, due in part, according to the young man, to his studying Day's correspondence, Jerry began to work for *Our Paper*, the in-house Concord Reformatory newspaper, copies of which are housed in the Massachusetts State Archives.

Jerry was released from Concord in August, 1910, found work in a hotel, and, once again, began to plan for his future:

I am sending along the Colby Academy catalog which interests me very much. So much so that I think if I can save some money this winter I shall go to it when the spring term starts and after my four years are finished go to college. If others can do it, I know I can. I want to be somebody and of some use in the world....Read it over and tell me what you think about it and I will follow whatever advice you may give as I know it will be of the best.

Day approved, and renewed his offer to pay educational expenses. In December, Jerry met with the principal of Colby Academy but the news was not good: "He said it was unusual to take students in the middle term of the school year because such students needed especial attention, and when I broached the subject of working my way through he said that would be impossible. Jerry was understandably disappointed and discouraged. In desperation, he once again tried Amherst Agricultural but, after meeting with someone there, sent a postcard to Day with only the words: "No use. Am coming back to Boston." scrawled across it.



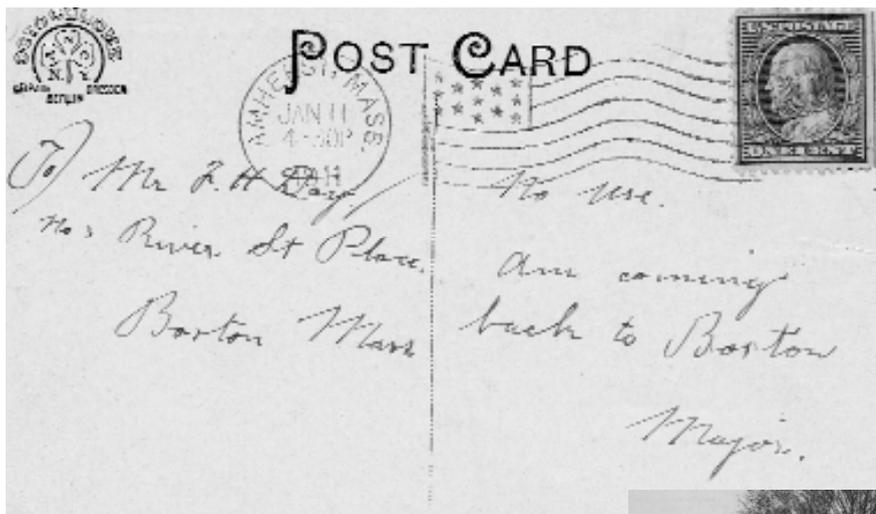
**Jeremiah Brophy in his Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force (WWI) uniform. The notation under the photograph simply identifies 'Jerry Brophy Sr.'**

His hopes dashed, Jerry searched for steady employment but as the rejections mounted, his confidence eroded. At his lowest point, he wrote: "I am afraid that I am but an ordinary young man destined always to remain so...However I think that if I try to do my best in an ordinary way more good will come of it than if I tried to climb out of my sphere in life." Eventually, Day paid Jerry's way to Chicago to join his older brother Tom. In October, 1911, the brothers were arrested and imprisoned in Kansas State Penitentiary for burglary and grand larceny. A remorseful Jerry, still only about 16 years old, wrote to Day in December: "Your sorrow at finding me here I can partly understand but your continued interest in me is something which I can hardly believe possible. ...I know it must be very discouraging to

you to see your hopes blasted, for I flatter myself that my hopes were yours."

Tracking down his records at Kansas State was not difficult. Jerry worked in the coal mines and, eventually, the print shop. He also joined the prison band and, once again, worked and wrote for the prison newspaper. Due to his age and good behavior, he was transferred to the State Industrial Reformatory. He gained an early release in 1915 due to financial assistance from Day and a faculty member from a nearby Kansas college who had expressed confidence in Jerry's abilities. After his release, he worked for the Rock Island Railroad and even won a short story contest in Pratt, Kansas, but he could not gain admittance to the local agricultural college without a high school certificate which he did not have. One year later, in December, 1916, Jerry enlisted in the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force and headed to Europe and World War One, noting wryly that "I suppose you had perhaps thought of me as being caught in the drag net of the U.S. draft. I hadn't the patience of a Wilson, so here I am. I presume it was the excitement which drew me, as it did many."

His wartime letters also remind one of who Jerry was, an intelligent, somewhat wild, but good-natured and well-intentioned young man, constantly striving and



Left, 1911 Postcard from Brophy to Day.

Inset below, front of postcard from Massachusetts Agricultural College (M.A.C.), now University of Massachusetts, Amherst.



just as consistently running into one obstacle after another. While awaiting combat, he wrote to Day: “In case I do not return, you will always know that, to the end, I was deeply grateful to you for showing me the best way to get the real good out of a life which could not have been anything but a miserable existence, had you not pointed my feet into a better path.” Jerry was severely gassed while fighting in France. During his convalescence, he transferred into the military band and remained there for the duration of the war. He returned to the United States and, in July, 1920, in a lengthy letter, brought Day up-to-date. He was working in the coal mining region of Pennsylvania and more: “I am not only married but have a little tow-head to carry the name on. He is three months old now. My wife...has helped me to get a little home together where we are happy and getting along splendidly.” He closed ebulliently, “As I have often turned to you in times of need, so when prospects are bright and the future full of promise, I turn again to you who were my boyhood ideal and who guided me in more ways than you guessed.”

Sometime in 1923, Jerry left the mines and began working as an agent for the Western Pennsylvania Humane Society, an association established to prevent cruelty toward animals, children, and the elderly. With this position, Jerry had seemingly come full circle, with a home and family of his own and a career dedicated to aiding the abused and “wayward” children of the next generation. Two years later, in June of 1925, Day received the final piece of correspondence from Jerry’s wife, requesting that “if Jerry should happen to wander and go in the direction where he has been raised, you will please watch and let me know. I do not think Jerry can be himself as we have been married six years and always got along good.” Enclosed was the newspaper clipping mentioned above and a second article which tells of his two sons waiting for their father at Douglas Station, near McKeesport, Pennsylvania:

Edward Brophy, 5 years old, and J.J. Brophy, Jr., 3 years old, accompanied by their pet “Prince” run to the station every time the train whistle is heard in the hope that their father and master may be one of the passengers. The boys every day have met with disappointment but are hopeful that soon they will meet their daddy.

I could not leave it at that and wrote to every Brophy in the western Pennsylvania telephone directory. Jerry’s daughter, who had been eleven months old when her father was last seen, and his younger son’s two children responded. They knew nothing of the details of Jerry’s early life, only that he had disappeared without a trace and was never found. I was told that Jerry’s widow, Charlotte, remarried several years after his disappearance. Jerry’s three children grew to adulthood. Edward died in the service during World War II and J.J. passed away in 1989. I sent copies of Jerry’s letters to his grandchildren and daughter. The correspondence helped them understand how difficult his life had been and convinced them that he had not left his family willingly. As for me, I will always treasure the Thank You note from Jerry’s daughter, Marion, who wept when I spoke with her on the telephone. She died a few years later. Making contact with the Brophys somehow provided me with the sense of reuniting a family and, perhaps, in some way, seeing Jerry home.

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