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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 final 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 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 Dono’ or ‘Major’ for short. Brophy’s correspondence begins in 1903 in the unsteady hand of a child: “My foster father keeps a fish market. [He] gets drunk every night, [and] Thursday and Friday I have to walk 8 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 teenage Jerry reestablished a friendship and contact with Day in 1908 by going straight to the Carney Hospital in South Boston saying: “I got a cut on my hand that would not heal and my foster father…sent me a postcard. [He] said I was to go to this hospital and have the cut treated. As this was my first visit to the hospital, I was surprised to find many people there. The nurses were very kind and the nurse in charge named me Nazareth and operating under the auspices of the Daughters of Charity. They kindly sent me what little information there was on Jerry.

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 four years be 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 me 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 special 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. Am coming back to Boston.’ scrawled across it.

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 well come of it than if I tried to climb out of my sphere in life.” Eventually, Jerry was discharged from the hospital after being discharged. The notation under the photograph simply identifies ‘Jerry Brophy Sr.’

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....
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Jeremiah Brophy was born around 1885 and surrend- ered to Boston’s Home for Destitute Catholic Children (HDCC) by his father in 1890. 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, 1905 and was ultimately returned. Prior to these placements, he had met Day while work- ing 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 Domus’ or ‘Major’ for short. Brophy’s correspondence begins in 1903 in the unsteady hand of a child: “My foster father keeps a fish market. [He] gets drunk every night, [and] Thursday and Friday he have to walk 5 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 teenage 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, promising 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 1909, 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 on various jobs includ- ing chopping wood, cutting ice, and general mainte- nance 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 testified 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, shylike time he had spent in Maine became the inspiration for evocative images of his memory of the brief, idyllic time he had spent in Maine became the inspiration for evocative images of Washington’s portrait of Franklin Pierce. As his writing ability improved, due in part, according to authorities, to “cover the necessary expenses” for him to attend Amherst Agricultural College.

After a gap of almost four years, the teenaged Jerry reestablished contact with Day in 1910: “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 1910, Jerry was working on a farm in 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 I can save some money this winter I shall go to it when the spring term starts and after four years I shall 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 of 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 wrote to Day 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 special attention, and when I reached 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 College 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.

His hopes dashed, Jerry searched for steady employment but as the rejec- tions 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 diffi- cult. 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 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 Overseas Expeditionary Force (WW1) uniform. His notation under the photograph simply identifies ‘Jerry Brophy Sr.’

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
Two years later, in June of 1925, Day was able to re-establish contact with the Brophys somehow provided them with the sense of reuniting a family and, perhaps, in some way, seeing Jerry home. Patricia Fanning is Associate Professor of Sociology and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review.

At two o’clock, on a cold February afternoon in 1996, a fourteen year old boy walked into his Washington Junior High School and behaved in a way that his teacher could never have anticipated. Armed with two guns, he shot and killed two of his classmates and his teacher. Had that teacher had the right kind of professional training, she might have been able to recognize the student’s emotional and behavioral problems, and might also have been able to intervene. Eight years later, the United States is reeling from a series of school shootings and requiring teachers, more than ever, to understand and intervene with students who have behavioral problems leading to violence.

K–12 educators today know that their job is not what it was two decades ago. For example, what should a fourth grade teacher do if she or he discovers that one of the students in the class has been extorting money from another student, threatening the victim with a beating if the money is not paid every week? Despite their hunger for training in behavioral problems and aggression, most teacher-training institutions, including Bridgewater State College, do not offer systematic education about childhood aggression. This remains true despite a renewed emphasis on researching the causes of childhood aggression among higher education faculty and other researchers. Psychology programs often offer elective courses focusing on this topic, and my own book, Understanding Violence, focuses entirely on a review of the vast array of experimental studies examining the causes and contributing factors to such behavior. However, many K–12 educators leave their training with little understanding about this topic, despite their desire to know more. During their professional lives, little knowledge filters down from the scientific journals in which most researchers publish such information. My awareness of the extent of this problem is the direct result of the response I received to my book on violence. It clarified for me the education profession’s lack of understanding of the causes of violence in children. For the last few years, much of my professional effort has been aimed at increasing the access K–12 educators have to expertise I have in this area. In September 2000, I formed a group of concerned experts which was known as the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Partnership (MARP). The partners in this group were myself, other BSC faculty, experts in law and sociology, entertainers focusing on children’s aggression, and educational groups. Facing History & Ourselves. MARP gave a Conference, here at BSC, in January 2004. This conference, which was essentially the kickoff for the group, was successful in tapping into an area of great need. Its coverage by the Boston Globe and other local papers and drew a large response, and we were ultimately filled up and obliged to turn away interested potential attendees. During the conference, breakout sessions were designed specifically to cater to different educators’ needs (e.g., some breakout sessions were appropriate for K–8 educators, others for high school educators). We conducted outcomes assessment for research purposes. This data is awaiting analysis now and will be used to mold future workshops and conferences.

In March of 2004 I proposed to the President of Bridgewater State College, Dr. Dana Mohler-Faria, a year-long project aimed at setting in place a new BSC Center, the logical outgrowth of that Partnership, which would focus on a broad array of knowledge that could be successfully communicated to K–12 educators in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. I was thrilled to be awarded this first Presidential Fellowship. The Fellowship was created by Dr. Mohler-Faria to free a faculty member from all teaching responsibilities to pursue a project of value to the campus, in the form of a major research, scholarship or service project. The new Center I proposed was to include collaborations both within campus and with external partners (the Attorney General and the Plymouth County District Attorney), student research opportunities, mechanisms to attract external funding, and significant service to education in Massachusetts.

Presidential Fellow
Progress at MARC: The Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State College
by Elizabeth Englander

Edward Brophy, 5 years old, and J. Brophy, Jr., 8 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.

Sometimes 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 widow, requesting that “if Jerry should happen to wander anywhere in the mining region of Pennsylvania and more: “I am not only not married but have a little tow-head to carry the name on.” 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 on the coal mining region of Pennsylvania and more: “I am not only not married but have a little tow-head to carry the name on.” 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 on the coal mining region of Pennsylvania and more: “I am not only not married but have a little tow-head to carry the name on.” 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 on the coal mining region of Pennsylvania and more: “I am not only not married but have a little tow-head to carry the name on.”

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