Epilogue

The day after I found John Gergen's manuscripts, I went back to the dumpster in the alley behind 916 Allen Avenue to see what else I could find. This time I drove. I took with me two cardboard boxes. After I parked in the alley, I threw the boxes on top of the debris in the dumpster before climbing in. It wasn't easy. The walls of the dumpster were ten feet high, and once I got up the side, I found the pile of debris inside uneven and unstable, difficult to walk on. But of all the trash piles that I have looked into, this was the best that I had ever found or would ever find. I scanned the surface of the debris for more of John's schoolwork. There wasn't any, so I began to gather up other things.

It appeared from the pile that the dirty recesses of the house—the closets and attic and basement--had been cleaned out last. The oldest materials were on top, and the further down I dug, the newer the trash became. To work my way down was to go forward in time. It was a world upside down, with the past resting upon the present.

First, I removed the section of the barrister bookcase that I had seen while I was jogging the day before. The glass front was intact, and the mechanism that allowed it to open worked. It was difficult to get down to the ground. I rested it on the dumpster's edge, climbed halfway down, then took it in my hands and jumped. Like everything else that took hope that day, it was filthy, and it took me a long time to get it clean. Now it sits on the mantle of my fireplace and holds a collection of black Bibles, including a German one that was printed in St. Louis in 1901. It is more beautiful than I first realized: the sides are made of quarter-sawn oak, and the front glass panel is a little wavy, like the glass in old windows.

There was an enameled metal basin, a little smaller than the one that I had found the day before, round, about the size of a Dutch oven. Like the larger one that I had carried the

manuscripts home in, this one was in good shape—just a few small chips in the enamel on the bottom. I think it is old enough to have been used by John Gergen, or, more likely, by his foster mother, Rose. Now it stays in the kitchen, and I sometimes use it when I'm cooking, usually to thaw frozen meat. The larger enameled basin stays by my front door beneath an old wooden bench that I pulled from a dumpster in St. Louis's loft district in 1999. Year round it holds the gloves and scarves.

There was a silver-plated teapot, heavy and in perfect shape, undented, though very tarnished. I could not believe that it had been thrown away. Now I keep it on a shelf in my office, and I have never polished it. The design is Victorian: the vessel is shaped like an amphora with a symmetrical spray of leaves and cattails etched into either side. The handle is high with a curve and right angle. The lid is beaded around the edge, with a finial of four long leaves sprouting from the top. On the bottom is stamped "Middletown Plate Co, Triple Plate, 1882."

There were two old bottles, unbroken, that I also keep in my office. The larger of the two is clear glass and fourteen inches high, with a gallon capacity. The mold seam that terminates at the shoulder, the hand-blown neck and lip, and the large bubbles frozen in the glass indicate that it dates from around 1910. Embossed on the glass are the words "St. Louis Crystal Water and Soda Co." But the bottle was dangerously repurposed to hold not water but ammonia, for on the back is a paper label, partly torn off on the right side:

-AMMON[IA-]

FOR HOUSEHOLD USE

DIRECTIONS:

FOR LAUNDRY—To each [illegible word]

of water add 1 tablespoon of AMM[ONIA.]

Soak clothes in the usual manner. [illegible word]
by using this ammonia best results are
obtained.

CLEANING WOODWORK, PAINTS AND
WINDOWS. Use 4 tablespoonfuls to
each bucket water.

A. FISCHER

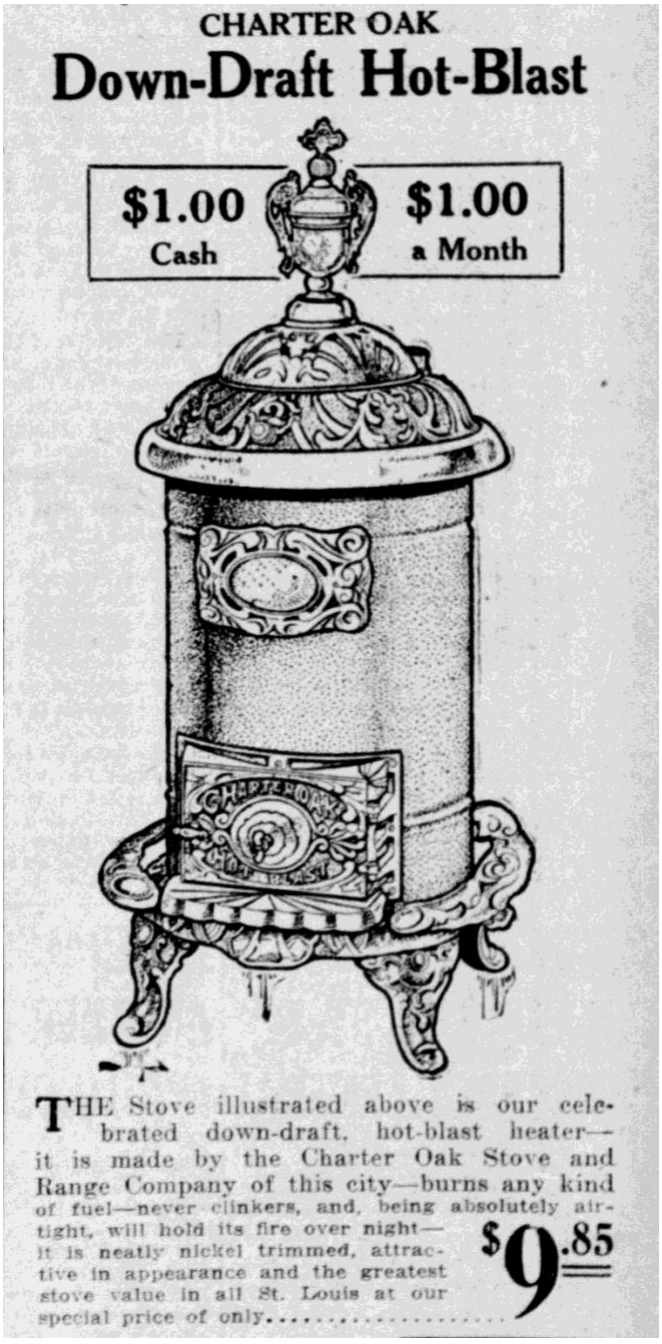
3137 IOWA AVENUE, ST. LOUIS, MO.

A. Fischer—Anton Jacob Fischer—was living at 3137 Iowa Avenue with his wife and children by 1916. He specialized in the manufacture and sale of stove polish, but he made other things as well, and he bottled ammonia for sale. While the Gergens were living at 916 Allen Avenue, A. Fischer, one and a half miles to the northeast, was enjoying a mild level of success as a manufacturer. In 1919, his daughter Helen's fifteenth birthday party was reported on the society page of the St. Louis *Post Dispatch*, and in 1922 A. Fischer served as the Democratic election judge for his precinct. A biographical sketch found in the *History of the Archdiocese of Saint Louis* identifies A. Fischer as one of the "leading manufacturers of St. Louis" and notes his "fine residence."[1] But the building at 3137 Iowa Avenue is gone now. It was torn down in the 1940s when the land became part of Valley Farm Dairy. Now the dairy is gone too.

The second-largest bottle was clear when I found it, but in the years since I retrieved it from the dumpster, it has begun to acquire a light lavender hue: sun-colored amethyst, a product of ultraviolet rays reacting with the selenium that was once used to make class clear. "Ginger Cordial," reads the front label; "bottled and guaranteed by J. Simon and Sons, St. Louis, Mo." An "old immigrant," Jacob Simon migrated from Germany in 1858. He lived first in Kentucky,

where he fathered five children, but by 1900 he was living in St. Louis and working with sons Julian, Ira, and Herbert as a liquor distributor. Jacob died in 1910 at the age of sixty-seven, and shortly thereafter his sons ran afoul, at least twice, of the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act: once, in 1911, for selling an aphrodisiac called Sporty Days Invigorator[2] and a second time, in 1912, for shipping absinthe that contained wormwood, thought to be posonous.[3] By 1922, during Prohibition, the sons turned to selling "strictly pure altar wines, dry and sweet," advertising them in the Catholic *Fortnightly Review*: "for particulars apply to J. Simon and Sons, 1201-3-5 Franklin Ave., St. Louis, Mo." Meanwhile, some 222 cases of the Simons' liquor lay in storage in a warehouse on South Grand Avenue. On August 31, 1929, the contents—"some of the choicest products of Spain, France, Italy, Portugal, and the Rhineland"—were poured into the sewer by federal authorities.[4]

Next I picked up what I thought was a brass trophy that read Charter Oak, but I would soon learn that it was neither brass nor a trophy. Instead it was the very dirty steel finial from an antique stove manufactured in St. Louis by the Charter Oak Stove Company. A few minutes of scrolling through microfilms of the *Post-Dispatch* led me to the make of stove that the finial came from: "the celebrated CHARTER OAK Down-Draft Hot-Blast," which could be had for $9.85, or a dollar down and a dollar a month. The stove was advertised numerous times in full-page ads between 1906 and 1914, and it could burn either wood or coal. It may well have been the stove the Gergens used. The Charter Oak Stove and Range Co. was formed in 1896 with the purchase of the failed Excelsior Manufacturing Co. and named after Excelsior's best-selling product, the Charter Oak Stove. By 1899, the stove works, located near the Mississippi River by the intersection of North First Street and Florida Street, covered more than two city blocks—about five acres. Wrote one journalist, "The plant throughout is a marvel. The pattern and plating



Detail of advertisement by the Charter Oak Stove Company. St. Louis Star*, October 14, 1914.*

departments alone would be large plants if detached and the sample room contains a most complete array of stoves of every size and description. Here the prospective purchaser can see 300 stoves, no two of them alike."[5] In 1910, the company opened a new, more efficient factory at 281 Thatcher Avenue, but competing technologies were on the rise, notably centralized steam heating. The Charter Oak Stove Co. obtained its last patent in 1931[6] and produced its last stove in 1949.[7] The factory at 28 Thatcher Avenue still stands. It is used for storage by A.A. Importing Company, Inc. but it has the look of abandonment, surrounded by a high barbed wire fence.

Near the top of the debris in the dumpster was a scattering of toys, and it is not inconceivable that they belonged to John Gergen. There was a blue wooden toy horse cart about the size of an abridged dictionary; it had red wooden wheels, one missing. There was a child's hoe and rake, each eighteen inches long, with wood handles and heads stamped out

of sheet metal. There were two miniature baseball bats, about a foot long; one was manufactured, with smooth even milling, and the other appeared home-made, hand-carved, perhaps in imitation of the first. There was also a strange, unhappy-looking wooden man carved from a curved tree branch of wood about fifteen inches long—unpainted, unvarnished. A bit of decay had set in, smoothing the features and making them even more lifelike. All of the toys now sit on the shelf in my office. The wooden man stares out into space, the curve of the back melding with the curve of the tree branch from which he is carved. He grimaces, and his right hand, touching his stomach, seems to point toward a rotted gouge that runs along the grain, from collar bone to navel, as if he had just had surgery.

A little further down into the detritus, there was a curious wooden block, walnut, about the size of two decks of cards laid end to end. There were six square holes cut all the way through from side to side, and three of them held little glass vials filled with what looked like water dyed blue, each shade progressively lighter. In gold lettering, above the vials, were the numerals 20, 40, 60, and 80. Above the numerals were the words Ameroid Comparator PPM as PC_4. A little piece of paper wrapped around one of the vials read HIGH PHOSPHATE 40 PPM. I have since learned that the instrument is a Lovibond comparator, a kind of colorimeter first introduced in 1885 by James Williams Lovibond as a means for testing the quality of beer. This particular comparator was used for measuring phosphates, the shades of blue representing a scale for determining the concentration of phosphorous in water when using a chemical test known as Deniges' method, which dates to 1920.

There was a three-sided wooden architect's ruler, also called an architect's scale, used for making scale drawings. It was a little worn but entirely legible, each side color-coded with a yellow, red, or green stripe.

There was also a red wooden test tube rack, with holes for six test tubes and dowels for drying them. Amazingly, all six glass tubes were also there, unbroken. Into the wooden rack was pressed the single word Aloe. The A.S. Aloe company was founded in St. Louis by Scottish immigrant Albert Sidney Aloe in the early 1860s. The firm prospered until the Depression as a producer of surveying instruments and laboratory supplies; later it survived as a distributer of medical equipment. In 1949, the firm moved into a sleek new facility at the corner of Olive Street and Nineteenth Street, only to be purchased ten years later by the Brunswick-Balke-Collender Company of Chicago.[8] In 1996, the building at Olive Street and Nineteenth Street was razed to make room for a parking lot. Now the test tube rack sits on the shelf in my office next to the teapot, the two bottles, and the wooden man.

A bit deeper in the debris were belongings from later years—from the 1930s and 1940s, well after the Gergens had moved out of the house. They were the sorts of things that John Gergen might have owned had he lived.

There was a commemorative Hadson cigarette lighter, too rusted to be of any use or value. It bore the miniature likenesses of the starters for the 1958-1959 St. Louis Hawks, who that year had won the NBA championship, beating the Celtics by winning four of six games. There are five faces on one side of the lighter, six on the other, with their nicknames etched below: Big Blue, Cliff, Dugie, Easy Ed, Jack Mac, Chuck, Muggsy, Si, Win, Hub, and Boom Boom. Robert Lee “Big Blue” Pettit had scored fifty points in the championship win over the Celtics; in 1996, he was named one of the Fifty Greatest Players in NBA History.[9] Clifford Oldham "Cliff" Hagan played ten NBA seasons and averaged eighteen points in 745 games; in 1994, the University of Kentucky named its baseball field after him. Slater Nelson "Dugie" Martin, Jr., went on to become head coach of the Houston Mavericks; he died in 2012 of a

sudden illness while living in a “skilled nursing home” in Houston.[10] Charles Edward "Easy Ed" Macauley became the youngest player ever admitted to the Basketball Hall of Fame; he died in 2011 in St. Louis, after becoming an investment banker and a deacon in the Catholic Church.[11] John Joseph "Jack Mac" McMahon went on to a successful coaching career and died in 1989 in his sleep with an open book on his chest.[12] Charles Edward "Chuck" Share was team captain during their championship year; he played one more season for the Minneapolis Lakers, founded a company that manufactured corrugated containers, and died in 2012.[13] Albert R. “Muggsy” Ferrari went on to play for the Chicago Zephyrs and sell insurance; he died in St. Louis in 2016.[14] Hubert F. "Hub" Reed went on to become athletic director at El Reno High School in Oklahoma, where he earned a new reputation as a gentle disciplinarian.[15] Clyde “Boom Boom” Lovellette, who had won a gold medal in the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, was elected sheriff of Vigo County, Indianapolis, in 1966, where he soon earned a new reputation by shutting down brothels and gaming dens; Lovellette died of stomach cancer in 2016.[16] Sihugo “Si” Green, the only African American on the team, was the first to die—in 1980, of metastasized lung cancer, at age 46; he was serving at the time as vice president of the Associated Linen Supply Company in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.[17] Alva Winfred “Win” Wilfong became a greeting card salesman; he died in 1985 of cancer. Years later, his nephew recalled that he had trouble letting go of the attention and “looked back at his 20s as the best period of his life.”[18]

There was a small but thick octagonal clear glass ashtray. On the bottom, in black, were the words “The Chase-Park Plaza Hotels, St. Louis, Mo.” The Chase Hotel and the Park Plaza Hotel merged in 1961, and I suspect the ashtray was made about that time, since it features, alongside the lettering the emblems of both hotels: A hunter’s horn encircling an ornate C for the

Chase, and to stylized *P*s topped by a crown for the Park Plaza. It was the height of the hotels' grandeur. The cheapest room, according to a St. Louis tourist brochure, was $11.50.

There was a key ring attached to a metal rectangle about an inch long and a half inch wide. When I hold it, my fingers quickly pick up the brassy smell of cheap metal, like the odor of corroded pennies. On one side of the square tag are the words "Sears N.A.A.G. 1968." On the other side is an etched profile of Faneuil Hall in Boston, with its cupola and three stories of seven windows. It is a cheap souvenir, considering the moment it represents. The sixty-second annual meeting of the N.A.A.G.—the National Association of Attorneys General—took place in the Sheraton Boston Hotel from June 8 to June 12 of 1968 (the morning session of June 11 took place in Faneuil Hall). A pall hung over the meeting. The published proceedings of the conference record the awkward words of newly elected Boston mayor Keven White when he addressed the convention on June 10, four days after the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. "I suppose it becomes redundant but it is, nonetheless, unfortunate and maybe a painful irony of sorts that you should hold this meeting here in this city a very few days after the tragic death of Robert Kennedy. I do not mean to dwell on something that has been talked about and mourned over the past few days, but there is some significance that he was both an Attorney General and one of this city's most illustrious sons."[19]

Near the key ring, there was an oblong stainless steel die-cut disk, probably a key tag, roughly two inches in diameter. Into it was stamped the word "CYCLOPS," and then, in smaller letters, "Empire Detroit Steel, Mansfield, OH." Cyclops acquired Empire Detroit Steel in 1970, and with it the Mansfield plant,[20] a rolling plant that, according to a Cyclops advertisement, produced sheet steel: hot and cold rolled carbon sheet, cold rolled silicon sheet, galvanized steel sheet, and die stampings.[21] In 1992, Cyclops was in turn acquired by Armco.[22] In earlier days,

the plant had been known as the Empire Sheet and Tinplate Company, and, when it was founded in the 1920s, the Mansfield Sheet and Tinplate Company.[23] Now the plant, much expanded, is run by AK Steel. 1.6 million square feet of manufacturing space house two electric arc furnaces, a ladle metallurgical facility, an Argon-Oxygen Decarburization unit, a thin slab continuous caster, a walking beam slab furnace, and a six-stand hot roll mill that together produce "cold rolled chrome, high chrome ferritics and martensitic stainless steels."[24]

There was a small deep-green wine bottle and a miniature clear wine glass that had a little dried residue in the bottom. The label on the wine bottle was mostly intact: "Pombal Rose Wine, Product of Potugal, Contents 6.5 fl. ozs., Alcohol 12% by volume. Shipped by Caves Campo, LDA." Because the bottle is so small, I suspect that the wine, along with the wine glass, was part of a gift package that included some cheese and crackers. It was, in any case, imported by Parliament Import Company of Arlington, Virginia, which remained active into the 1980s but is now out of business. At the center of the label is a sepia-colored print of an ancient-looking gate, with the vineyards barely visible inside. "Quinta Do Pombal, 1797," reads the caption. It is a grand emblem to append to so modest a bottle that once held so modest a wine. Rose wine, in the 1960s and 1970s, was fast becoming a leading seller in American grocery stores. In 1971, a fifth (about 25 ounces) could be had for $1.59 at the 905 Liquor Store, according to an advertisement in the *Post-Dispatch*. By this measure, the wine in my small bottle was worth about fifty cents.

Another layer down into the debris, I found a stack of nylon bumper stickers, all identical, with black block letters on a yellow background: "LET ALL PROCLAIM To The Glory of the FATHER JESUS CHRIST IS LORD"—and, at the bottom, in tiny lettering, "HOUSE OF PRAYER EXPERIENCE. XAVIER CENTER. CONVENT STATION, NJ

07961." The Xavier Center was once a retreat center run by the Sisters of Charity, near the College of St. Elizabeth. It is now defunct.

Near the bumper stickers was an oversized wooden nickel with the head of an Indian chief on one side. On the other side, in large letters, was printed he word TUIT; around the TUIT, in smaller letters, was an evangelical version of a bad pun that I first recall having heard in 1976, when I was in ninth grade: "Are you putting off Jesus Christ till you get a round tuit? Here's one."

A little further down were some cheap plywood kitchen cabinets. Rust was showing through the bright finish of the imitation brass hinges. I pulled one of the cabinet doors open. There was still food inside—two boxes of Hamburger Helper and two glass jars of Armour Dried Beef. The dried beef looked desiccated, even for dried beef. I left it alone. Nor did I take a small plastic trophy that was awarded to someone in the Coast Guard in 1978.

Beside the trophy was a small glass bell that would have been at home on a gift shelf in an interstate truck stop. Molded onto the surface of the glass were the beginning and the end of the 23rd Psalm: "The Lord Is My Shepherd, I Shall Not Lack….May Only Goodness And Kindness Pursue Me All The Days Of My Life, And I Shall Dwell In The House Of The Lord For All Days." The psalm had been edited to fit on two square inches of glass, eviscerated of any reference to death, evil, or enemies. The glass bell itself was made without a clapper, never to be rung. It is difficult to imagine anything less useful. Even so I took it, and I keep it in the same box that holds the comparator, the cigarette lighter, the round tuit, the diminutive wine glass, the small dark-green wine bottle, the 1968 key chain, and the stainless steel disk that says CYCLOPS.

Also in the box are a few small pieces of metal that I found near the plastic trophy, though I think that they had fallen down from a higher layer of trash due to their weight: three water faucet handles shaped like Swiss crosses with balls at each end, a curved brass bar that looks as if it had been a machine part, and a small brass cup with the word CHINA stamped on its bottom. The cup is deeply tarnished and in places corroded; I think that it was made in the time before Mao, before trade with China ceased in 1949 following the Communist takeover. The purpose of the little cup remains a mystery: it is too small to hold a plant, too shallow to be a vase, and too wide to drink from without spilling. Perhaps it held a votive candle. Inside the cup, in the bottom, two Chinese characters are lightly etched, one superimposed over the other. For years I wondered what the characters meant, until a Chinese friend told me: "long life."

Near the cup, resting on the broken fence boards that filled the bottom four feet of the dumpster, was a small leather zippered pouch that looked like a change purse. It felt heavy, and I thought there might be coins inside. As I tried to unzip it, the stitches holding together the underside broke apart, and out slipped a shiny stem-wound pocket watch, gold colored but not heavy enough to be gold. The brand was Illinois, and the hands were stopped at five minutes before five on an unknown day. They have not moved since.

Over the years, I have spent hours studying and researching the watch. When the case is opened, the intricate works are visible. It was made in Springfield. It has fifteen jewels, and the serial number—2308907—dates it to 1910. On the inside of the back cover are stamped the words Illinois Watch Case Co.—Elgin—U.S.A.—BONA FIDE—GUARANTEED 20 YEARS. Around the edges of the inside covers are scratched tiny watch repairers' marks, minuscule numbers and letters constituting some long deceased craftsman's code that will never be broken. On the back is a monogram that I have never been fully able to decipher, etched as it is with

flaring strokes and curling serifs. A friend told me that the monogram is either MHB or MHL, but I have never been able to discern it. Like the watch repairer's marks, it remains inscrutable.

I stood on top of the debris pile and looked down into the dumpster. Near the bottom were the dismantled boards and posts of a wooden fence, new and barely weathered. Beneath them, on the metal floor, were a few tree branches, recently cut, the limp leaves still green but dying. I thought about digging into them to see whether anything might have dropped down, like some loose pages of John's schoolwork. But it was hot, and I had had enough.

I loaded everything into my trunk and got into my car. I looked at my shirt and saw how dirty I had gotten. Everything that I had taken from the dumpster was covered in a thin layer of grime: antique house dust and the fine soot left over from the days when burning coal heated the houses and polluted the air up and down the river valley. I started the car, which had been sitting in the sun. My damp hands left dirty prints on the steering wheel.

History, I have learned, is what we call the absence that was once the lives of other people. When I got home, I washed my hands, sat down at my computer, and began to see what I could find out about John Gergen.

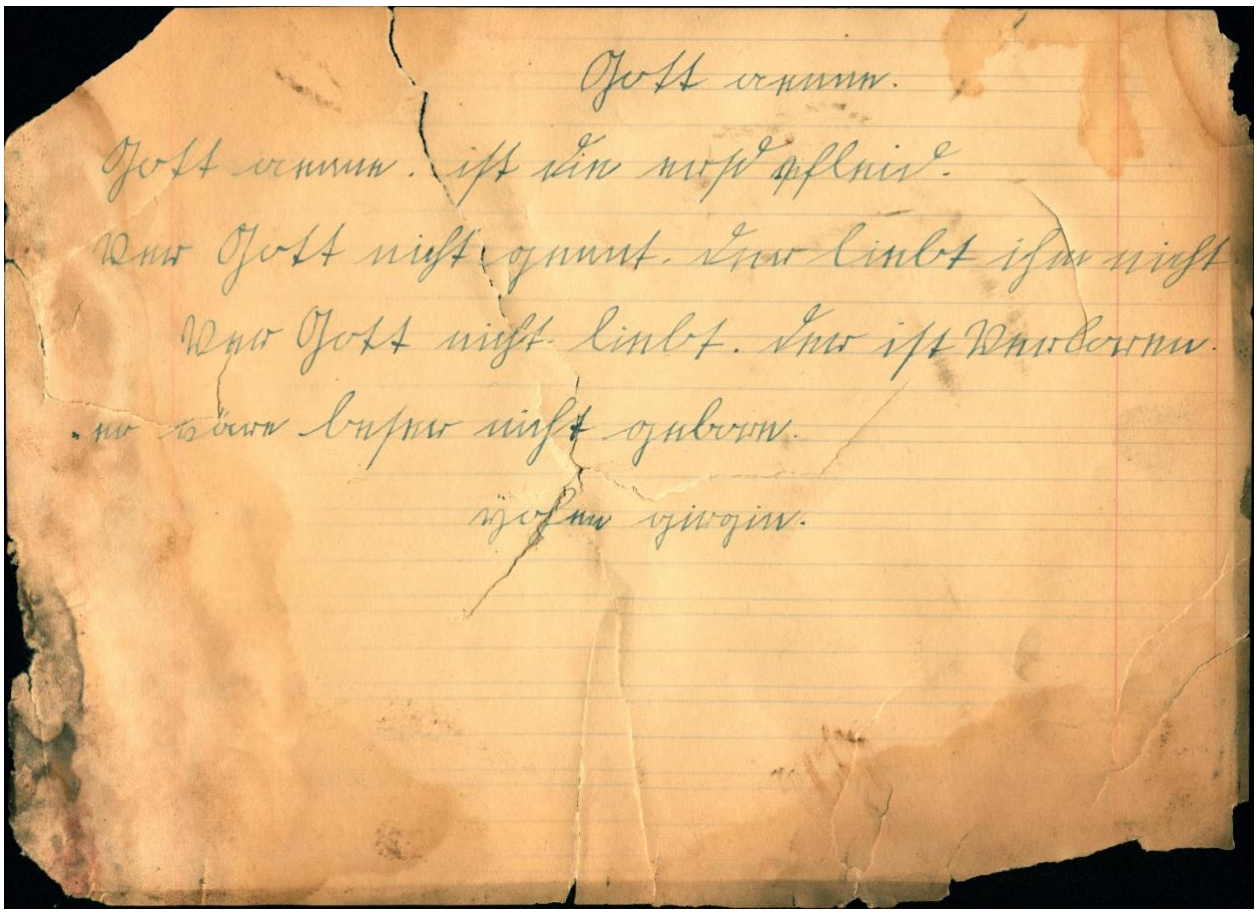


Figure 15.3. Page of John Gergen's schoolwork.

[1] *History of the Archdiocese of Saint Louis: A Condensed History of the Catholic Church in Missouri and Saint Louis* (St. Louis: Western Watchman Publishing Company, 1924), 21.

[2] "Misbranding Of A Drug Product 'Sporty Days Invigorator,'" *Pure Food and Drugs Act: Hearings before the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce*, Volume I (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Congress, 1912}, 164-165.

[3] "Adulteration of Absinthe," *Pure Food and Drug Act: Notices of Judgments 2251-2500* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1914).

[4] "Pre-war Liquor Stock, 222 Cases, Poured in Sewer," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 1, 1929,.

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[9] "O Pearl: These Guys Could Really Jam!," Des Moines Register, October 30, `1996.

[10] "NBA Guard Earned Hall of Fame Slot," Los Angeles Times, October 20, 2012.

[11] Tom Timmermann, "SLU Great Ed McCauley Dies," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 9, 2011.

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[17] "Sihugo Green Let His Playing Do the Talking," *Pittsburgh Press*, October 6, 1980.

[18] Geoff Calkins, "Team Tragedy: '85 Tigers Had Talent, but Troubles Haunt Them," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 3, 2008.

[19] *Proceedings: Sixty-Second Annual Meeting National Association of Attorneys General June 8-12, 1968* (Chicago: The National Association of Attorneys General, 1969), 1.

[20] "Cyclops Completes Det. Steel Takeover," *Detroit Free Press*, November 13, 1970.

[21] Mansfield *News-Journal*, November 17, 1970.

[22] Tom Boyle, "Cyclops Acquisition by Armco Now Complete," *Titusville Herald* (Pennsylvania), April 25, 1992.

[23] Virgil Stanfield, "Union Helped Steel Mill Survive Great Depression," Mansfield *News-Journal*, September 22, 1974.

[24] "Mansfield Works," *AK Steel*, http://www.aksteel.com/production_facilities/mansfield.aspx.