

FOCUS ON FINE ART

The Photography of Jerome Liebling

FOR NEARLY three quarters of a century the pages of *Minnesota History* have reflected many facets of the progress of photography, "one of mankind's most astonishing and versatile discoveries . . . an art form, an avenue of communication . . . a scientific tool, and window into unseen and lost worlds."¹ The quarterly has published everything from daguerreotypes and ambrotypes to documentary photography and family snapshots, collected for 120 years by the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) and its audio-visual library.

Among the society's photographic holdings are a number of major collections, one of the most recent being the fine art photo collection that was begun in 1981 and now contains over 200 images. In honor of photography's sesquicentennial anniversary and to bring this small but important collection to light, the following pages focus on the work of Jerome Liebling, who was one of the early fine art photography instructors at the University of Minnesota.

LIEBLING was born in New York City and attended Brooklyn College before serving in the United States Army during World War II. He returned to that college in 1946 where he studied design, majored in photography, and "really absorbed the formalism of the Bauhaus training . . . still strong in my work." Along with his teacher, Walter Rosenblum, however, Liebling was also interested in documentary work that he thought could present social issues "more strongly."²

At the age of 25, Liebling was invited to join the faculty at the University of Minnesota. There he worked closely with photographer Allen Downs and also with John Szarkowski, then staff photographer at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. In addition to his teaching duties, Liebling free-lanced, specializing

in photographs of politicians and political life in the state. He recalled that "[W]ith the beginnings of my making pictures in Minneapolis which included Presidents . . . people of some importance and reputation, I felt there was that combination of my own keen interest in what goes on. . . . I could be there and see it and try to reflect upon it." He added that there were moments in the "normal situation of two politicians meeting one another, saying hello, where I sensed something else was happening. There was more insight, a revelation, an understanding about who these people were. You had to demystify them, who they were, and what they were doing and what was going on."³

During his Minnesota years, Liebling developed a number of projects—"totally my own, unassigned"—that took him around the state as well as the metropolitan area. As a transplanted New Yorker who had had great familiarity with the tensions and problems that were "more apparent and exposed for me in New York," he continued to seek out issues. This led him to Red Lake, for example, where he collaborated with Allen Downs to make the films *A Tree Is Dead* (1955) and *Pow-Wow* (1960), which won a number of awards. The two men also produced *The Old Man* in 1965, a documentary film on the Blackfoot Indians of Montana; the project was funded by a Hill Foundation grant. Liebling noted that "There were some opportunities for me to do some work at Red Lake," and he visited there many times. He explained that his photography has "always been around a place or around a theme."⁴

In the southern part of the state, the photographer spent part of 1953 in Le Sueur, where he "went to Green Giant [workers] mostly because I'd heard they were migrants." The result was a fine series of images of migrant workers that reflected Liebling's social concerns. Another facet of such concern appears in a 1965 series of photographs that he shot on assignment at the state hospital in Faribault. "I had never visited a hospital of that kind. . . . a place that houses people who were mentally disturbed, distressed, injured . . . I think it's the greatest test of society: what do you do

¹ Ed Holm, "Photography: Mirror of the Past," *American History Illustrated*, September/October, 1989, p. 21.

² Unless otherwise noted, quotations in this article are from transcriptions of oral interviews of Liebling by Bonnie G. Wilson, curator of MHS sound and visual collections, June 12, 1986, and May 27, 1987.

³ Interview, May 27, 1987, p. 10.

⁴ Interview, June 12, 1986, p. 6, 9, 10, 11, 15.



with the injured and the infirm without going through a Hitler? . . . I was trying to deal with the human problem of this injury without being accusatory.”⁵

The stockyards in South St. Paul were the nucleus of another of Liebling’s “unassigned” projects. He described the “tremendous skill of the men who were working and what they *had* to do. The visceral, tactile, sensual, visual material that was there, both the animals, the blood, the liquid, the pulsation, the transcendental moments. You recognized that you were surrounded by life that was just leaving you as you watched it. . . . I was affected by what was going on, and so were [the workers] because they could be in-

jured, they were injured. Their life was deeply affected and tied to this killing.”⁶

Liebling dealt with other injuries in a series of photos on Minneapolis’s skid row. He said that his general comment through the medium of film was that “America is not the rosy flow. I mean the gold is not on the streets, it’s a hard life for a great many people. . . . I was not prepared for the level, I mean the society. . . . The people [on skid row] were so anonymous I really couldn’t get close.”⁷

⁵ Interviews, June 12, 1986, p. 7, May 27, 1987, p. 15, 16.

⁶ Interview, May 27, 1987, p. 5, 6.

⁷ Interview, May 27, 1987, p. 17, 18.



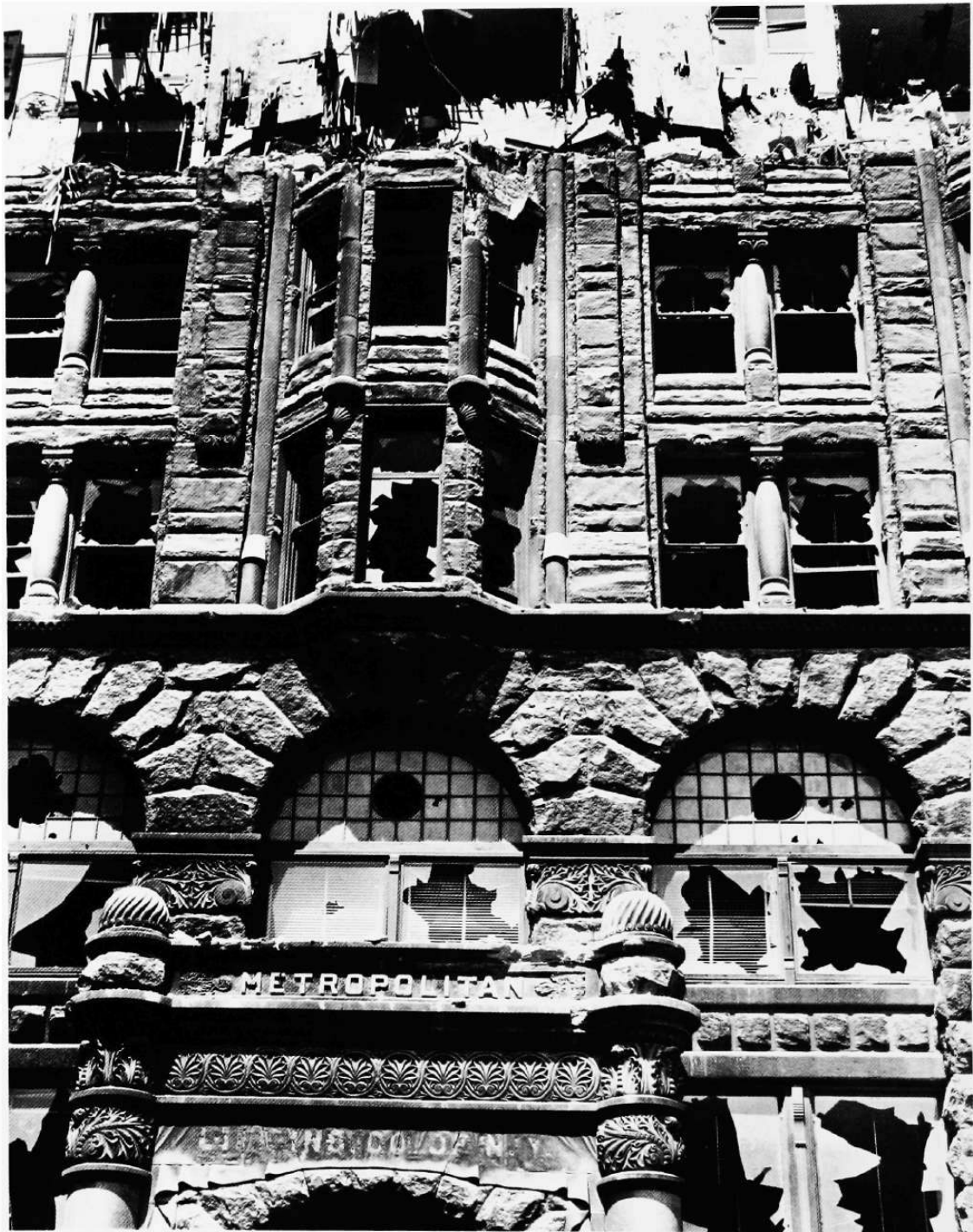
President Kennedy, 1962

Opposite: DFL rally, St. Paul, 1958

Jerome Liebling worked in Minnesota during a period of creative ferment in the arts, and he contributed substantially to that milieu. The photography program at the University of Minnesota became firmly established in the art curriculum, and a number of the artist's students have achieved success in the field. Liebling's own work was exhibited in one-man shows at the Walker Art Center in 1950 and 1963, at the University Gallery in 1952, and in less formal places such as the

⁸ *Light of Our Past, 1947-74: Minnesota Photographic Heritage* ([Minneapolis]: Film in the Cities, 1983), 4, 6.

West Bank Gallery. His photographs illustrated *A Century of Minnesota Architecture* (1958) and *The Face of Minneapolis* (1966). After two decades in Minnesota, Liebling moved back east, teaching at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. For 20 years he had been "the major force and influence on the photography program at the University." As one authority said, "Jerry had a hidden message in all of his teaching. That is—if you're going to make pictures it needs to be of subject matter that makes some kind of difference. It is an occasion to engage your values tangibly." The Minnesota Historical Society's collection now contains 30 Liebling photographs; they speak for themselves.⁸

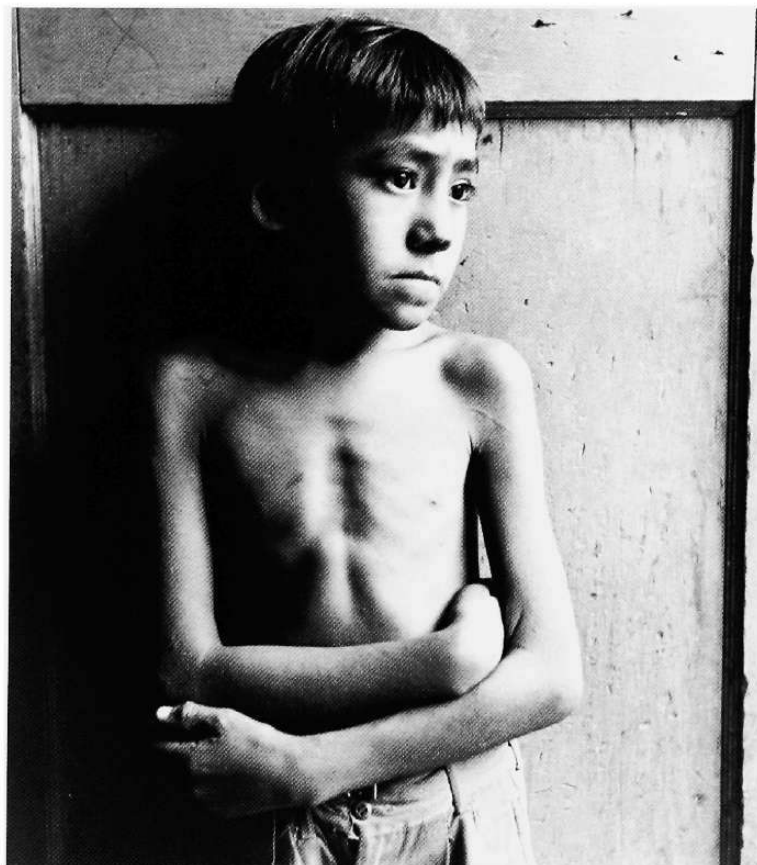


Destruction of the Metropolitan Building, 1961?

*Young girl, Red Lake,
1953*



Red Lake, 1953: Jacob





Green Giant worker, Le Sueur

Migrant, Green Giant, Le Sueur, 1953

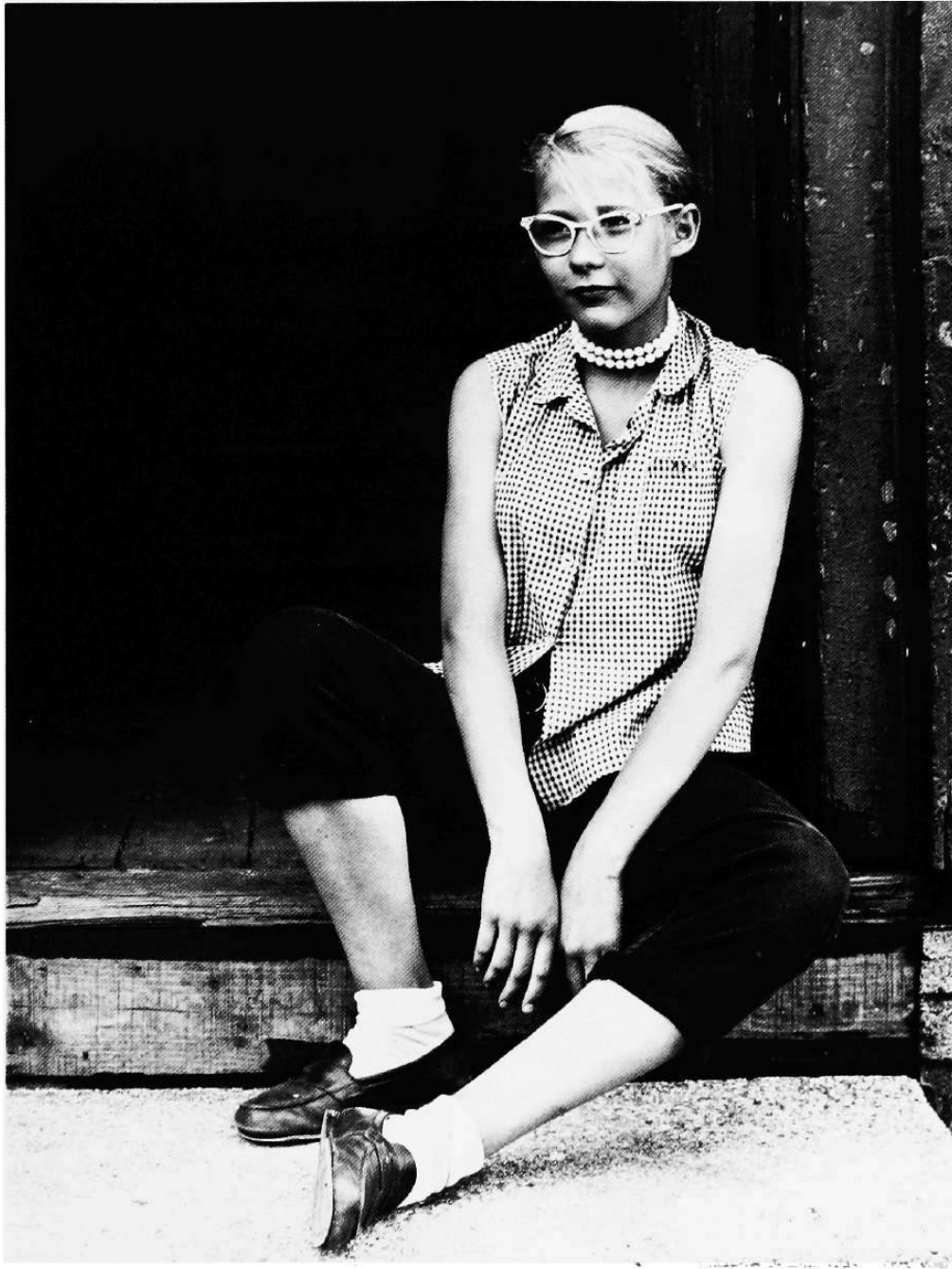




Migrant worker at Green Giant, 1953



Faribault, 1965

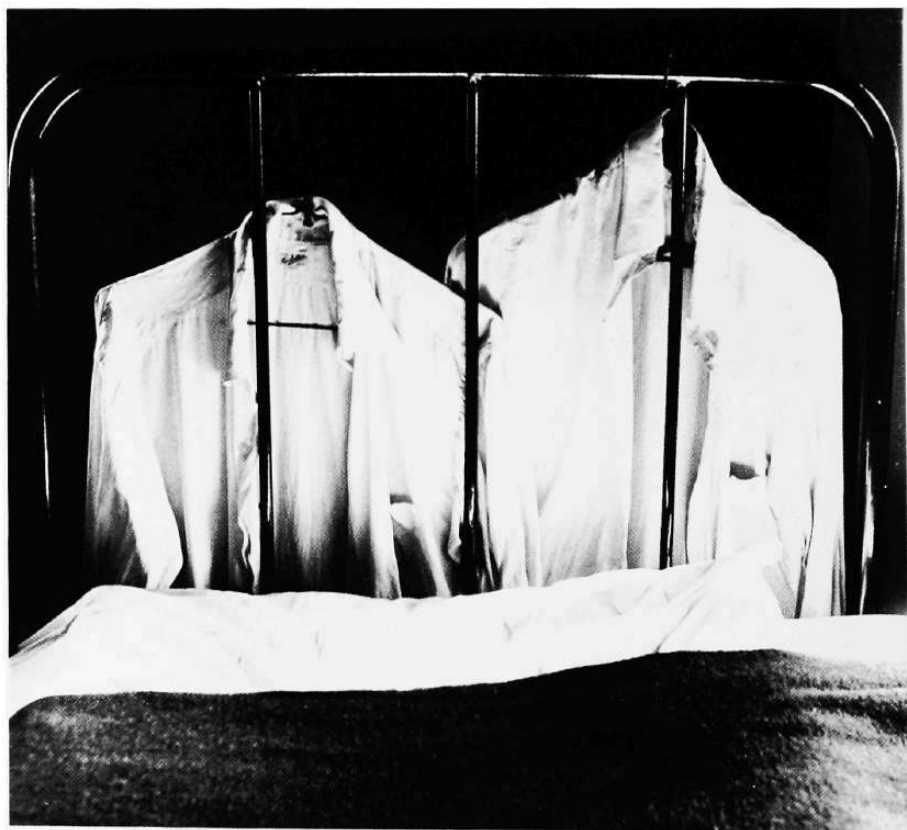


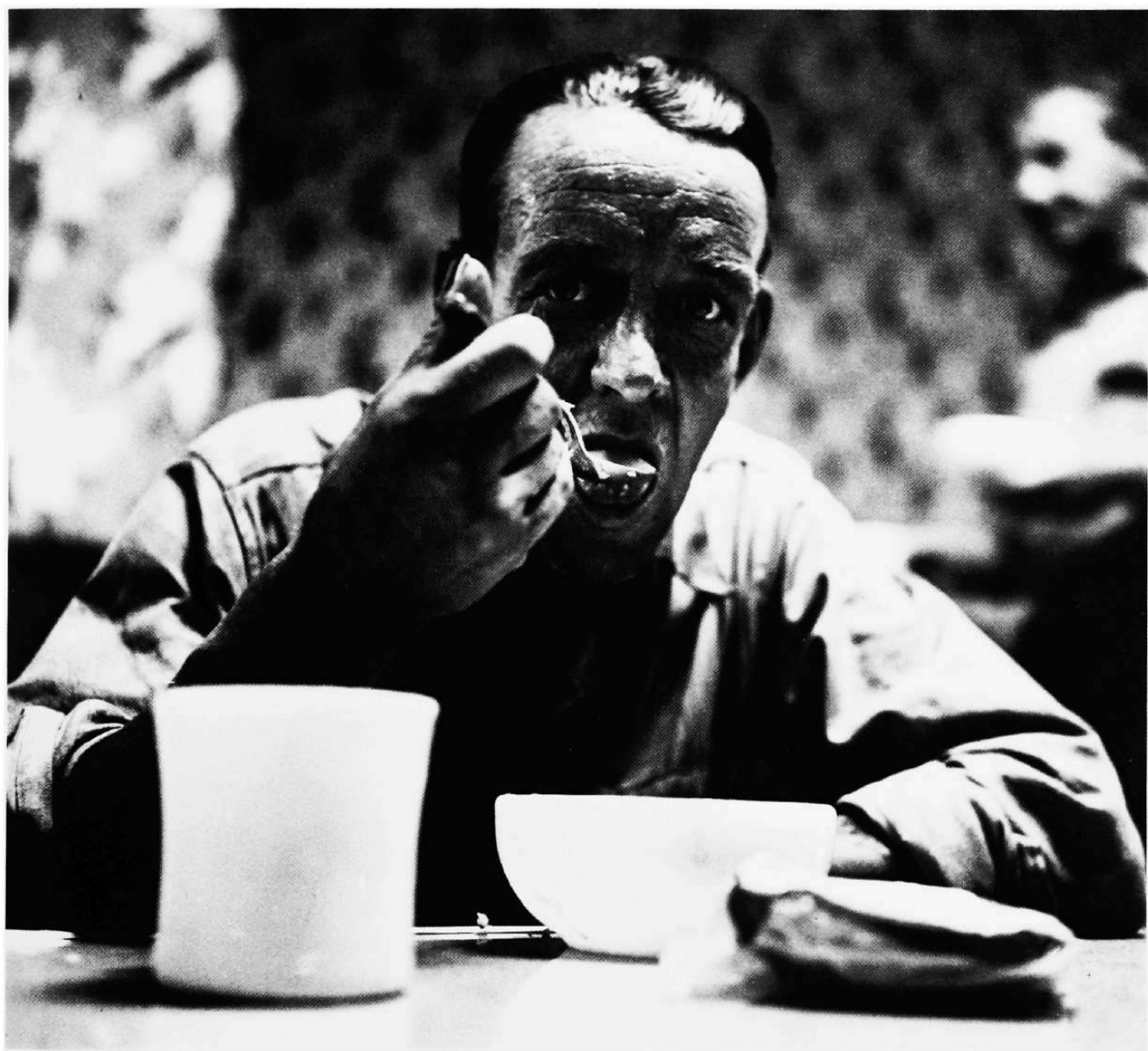
Young girl sitting in a doorway



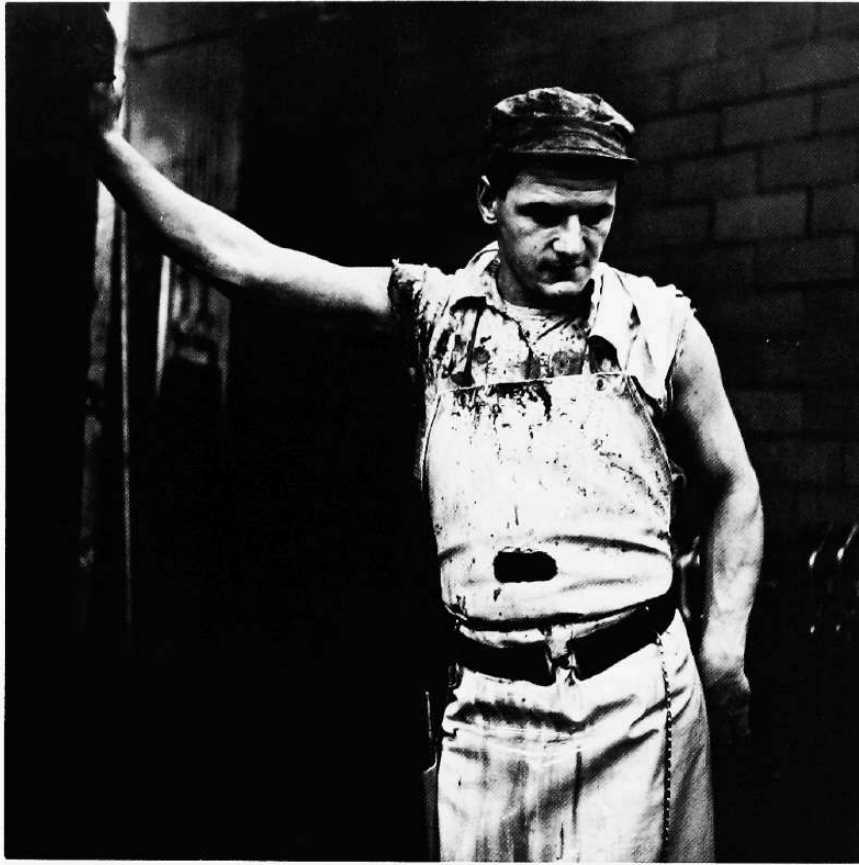
*House of Charity,
Minneapolis, 1959*

Skid Row, Minneapolis, 1959—Salvation Army Shelter





Skid Row, 1959



*Pig sticker, South
St. Paul Stockyards*

South St. Paul, 1962—Packing House





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