



Minnesota's Greatest Generation

GROWS UP

DAVE KENNEY

THE CATAclysm of World War II left a powerful imprint on the generation of men and women who came of age during those years. Just as critical, however, to shaping this “greatest” generation’s character were their experiences as children and adolescents during the Great Depression. The depression grabbed hold of Minnesota—and the rest of the country—during the earliest months of the 1930s and did not let go for nearly a decade. The joys and heartaches of growing up in Minnesota during those years stayed with the survivors over the decades as they

ABOVE: Coming of age: Teenagers posed on a car, St. Paul, 1937

BELOW: Barefoot boy at work, 1920s

fought a world war, built careers, and raised families of their own.

On its simplest level, the Great Depression was an economic crisis. Between 1929 and 1933, the average family in the United States saw its income drop by more than one-third. The national jobless rate, which stood at about three percent in October 1929, reached at least 25 percent less than four years later. The numbers in Minnesota were comparable, although residents in some parts of the state—the Iron Range, for example, where the unemployment rate hit 70 percent—suffered more than others.¹ Children saw their fathers come home with news of layoffs and their mothers struggling to make a few days’ food last an entire week. Illnesses went

untreated. Clothes wore out and were seldom replaced. Many kids scavenged for food. Others took low-paying jobs to help their families survive.

Josephine Sletto of Alexandria recalled that the depression, coupled with a serious drought, made it difficult for her family: “We managed to get along. . . . It seemed like we had meat. We had our eggs. I know my mother tried to raise a garden but she didn’t get much out of her garden at that time because it all just dried

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Children of farmers who sought state aid, Hollandale, 1929

up. And we had storms that you just wouldn't believe. We couldn't even see the barn at times because of the dust storms." Nelson Peery of Wabasha remembered well how the depression took a toll on his father. "Pop got another wage cut and, for the first time, I saw him come home drunk. He tried hard to walk straight and to talk normally, but he didn't fool us. Even though we laughed about it, deep down it hurt. Somehow we understood that our Pop wasn't as strong as we had believed."²

Children of the Great Depression quickly became adept at the art of getting by. Mike Kosiak and his siblings in Chisholm added to the family income by accepting a job full of "suspense, intrigue, and excitement":

they delivered illegal moonshine house-to-house for a neighborhood "distiller." Richard Hall made ten cents a sack when he collected the chunks of "free" coal that inevitably spilled on the ground when workers loaded and unloaded trucks at the Austin rail yards. For the kids of the 1930s, pinching pennies became a habit they never outgrew. "The depression was the origin of my thriftiness," Walter Benjamin recalled of his boyhood in Pipestone. "[It was] the source of my feeling guilty about spending money on luxuries, throwing away left over food, discarding clothes before they are worn out,

wasting hot water, burning unneeded electric lights, having more shoes or clothes than I can use, having the house temperature above 68 degrees . . . the list is endless!"³

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THE GREAT DEPRESSION permanently changed the relationship between the American people and their government. Immediately on taking office in 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched a series of innovative programs to help Americans cope with what was turning out to be an intractable economic calamity. Under this New Deal, the federal government assumed an active role in the lives of many, if not most, U.S. citizens.

The first New Deal program to get off the ground was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which eventually was to employ more than 3 million young men on conservation and park-construction projects.⁴ Thousands of Minnesotans enrolled in the CCC during the nine years it operated. Officially, recruits were supposed to be between 18 and 25 years of age, but it wasn't uncommon for a 15- or 16-year-old to bluff his way in—or to have his parents help him lie about his age.

George Morrison, a member of the Grand Portage band of Ojibwe, was only 17 when he joined the In-

To read additional personal accounts of the era, visit "In Their Words: Stories of Minnesota's Greatest Generation" on the Society's website at www.mnngreatestgeneration.org.



dian Division of the Civilian Conservation Corps in Grand Portage. “One year I worked in the kitchen. Then I worked outside in the woods. Foresters were the foremen and told us what to do. We spent every day pulling up small trees that were beginning to be diseased. . . . We pulled them out of the ground so the disease wouldn’t spread.”⁵

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In other parts of Minnesota, CCC recruits were sent to hastily constructed camps where they soon settled into a vaguely military regimen. They planted trees, improved land and streams damaged by soil erosion, and built firebreaks, fire towers, dams, forest roads, and

campgrounds. They enrolled for half a year and were paid 30 dollars a month, 25 of which went directly to their families. The young Minnesotans who joined the CCC learned lessons that stayed with them for many years to come. For those who went on to serve in the armed forces during the war, the CCC served as a kind of warm-up. “I must say it taught me the respect of authority, of individual responsibility, how to work and get along with others,” recalled R. John Buskowiak of St. Charles. “My days in the C’s developed me into a man.”⁶

EVEN AS CHILDREN and adolescents struggled to cope with daily deprivations during the 1930s, they embraced new consumer products and new forms of entertainment—especially radio—that helped them feel connected to likeminded youngsters elsewhere in the United States. While sales of most consumer goods dropped after the stock market crash in 1929, radios continued to fly off the shelves. As the audience grew,

Ojibwe CCC workers, Grand Portage stockade site, 1937. In two seasons of archaeological work, corpsmen uncovered evidence leading to the reconstruction of the Northwest Company fur post.

broadcasters added more programming—including shows targeted directly at children. Programs like *Jack Armstrong*, *The All American Boy*, *The Lone Ranger*, and the *Little Orphan Annie Show* riveted young listeners. Sponsors, looking to develop a new generation of loyal customers, offered kids prizes in exchange for boxtops and other proofs of purchase. Pipestone’s Walter Benjamin was among the many young Minnesotans who succumbed to the relentless radio pitches.

Each program urged listeners to “SEND THOSE BOXTOPS IN!” in order to earn a special prize that would be mailed to us. I had a tough time securing the proper boxtops because Father decreed that the Benjamin breakfast had



to be hot—oatmeal, Malt-O-Meal, or rye—liberally laced with raisins that had been soaked overnight. I begged Mother to buy the proper cold cereals on the sly so that I could get the prizes.⁷

Other forms of entertainment reinforced the common national culture that developed as the depression slogged on. Children flocked to the movies when theater owners lowered admission prices in response to worsening economic conditions. Any kid with a dime to spare could spend an entire afternoon or evening watching the same films that other Americans were watching—monster flicks like *Frankenstein* and *King Kong*, western serials with Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, and gangster dramas like *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface*. Some of the top box-office stars of the decade were children or

adolescents—Shirley Temple, Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, Deanna Durbin. Other youngsters spent their precious pennies on another new form of entertainment: comic books. In 1938, D.C. Comics published the first issue of *Superman*. In the years that followed, publishers introduced hundreds of other comic book superheroes. Kids were entranced. Many parents were appalled. “Although other kids had comic books (which they read surreptitiously in study hall), Mom would not let us buy them,” wrote Earl Reitan, recalling

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Youngsters gather around the radio at Sheltering Arms, a Minneapolis home for orphaned and dependent children.

his childhood in Alberta, Minnesota. “She said they were a waste of money. I suspect she thought they would have bad moral effects.” Oscar Backlund remembers exactly what he was doing when, as a 15-year-old, he heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor: “I was reading a *Batman* comic book, sitting in a booth at Tibb’s Pharmacy at the corner of Thirty-Eighth Street and Bloomington Avenue.”⁸

THE DEPRESSION did not make it easy to be a child, forcing many to grow up rather quickly. But looking back, most members of Minnesota’s greatest generation say that they did not feel completely seized by hard times. As Mary Joy Breton, who lived in the then-barren landscape of Eden



Children outside an unidentified but grand theater—4,200 seats—showing *Over the Hill*, a 1931 melodrama

Prairie, remembered: “This childhood experience during the Great Depression sometimes seemed miserable to me, but it taught us kids important lessons about the work ethic, sharing, self-sufficiency, teamwork, resource conservation, and the value of money. And there were many fun times too, in spite of it all.”⁹

THE MINNESOTANS who grew up during the Great Depression were part of the generation that went on to face many things in war and peace. Some lived lives of quiet dignity and grace, and others continued to battle adversity throughout their adult lives. Their experiences during the Great Depression were instrumental in shaping them into the people they became. □

Notes

1. Kriste Lindenmeyer, *The Greatest Generation Grows Up: American Childhood in the 1930s* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005), 15; David E. Kyvig, *Daily Life in the United States, 1920–1940: How Americans Lived During the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 221; Norman K. Risjord, *A Popular History of Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005), 192; Theodore C. Blegen, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), 524.

2. Josephine Sletto, interview by Patrick J. Moore, Aug. 4, 1980, transcript, copy in Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; Nelson Peery, *Black Fire: The Making of an American Revolutionary* (New York: New Press, 1994), 9.

3. Michael Kosiak, *Growing Up in Chisholm on the Mesabi Iron Range* (St. Cloud: North Star Press, 2005), 210; Richard E. Hall, *Child of the Great Depression* (Austin, MN: Mower County Historical Society, 1991), 67; Walter W. Benjamin, *The Magical Years: A Boyhood Remembrance* (Edina, MN: Beaver's Pond Press, 1999), 115.

4. David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York: Oxford

University Press, 1999), 144.

5. George Morrison with Margot Fortunato Galt, *Turning the Feather Around: My Life in Art* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1998), 46.

6. R. John Buskowiak, “My Days in the C.C.C.’s,” typescript, 1993, copy in Minnesota Historical Society.

7. Benjamin, *Magical Years*, 234–35.

8. Earl A. Reitan, *Crossing the Bridge: Growing Up Norwegian-American in Depression and War* (Rochester, MN: Lone Oak Press, 1999), 90; Ronald G. Perrier, *A Sense of Honor: Remembrances of World War II Veterans* (Minneapolis: Archie Publications, 2005), 195 (Backlund quote). See also Lindenmeyer, *Greatest Generation Grows Up*, chapter 4.

9. Mary Joy Breton, “Part VII: Recovery and Relief,” *Share Your Story*, www.mnhs.org/people/mnngg.

All images are in MHS collections.

St. Paul's Architecture: A History

By Jeffrey A. Hess and Paul Clifford Larson

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

278 p. Cloth, \$34.95.)

St. Paul's Architecture was years in the making. So many years, in fact, that some probably wondered if it would ever be finished. The book resulted from the St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission's desire to showcase the splendid architecture of the capital city through historical narrative, an approach that is a step up—a giant step up—from the “field guide” format many cities adopt to showcase community architecture. The narrative stems from the city's Historic Sites Survey, a 1980s study that involved examining the built environment on virtually every street. In essence, its goal was to pin down precisely what St. Paul offered in the way of structural legacy. With survey in hand, Hess and Larson set about producing the most thorough account of St. Paul's architectural story.

Although the book took longer than many, including the authors, had hoped, the finished product demonstrates what can be accomplished with rigorous research and meticulous writing, characteristics that are hallmarks of both authors. Hess is a cultural historian who founded one of the country's earliest historical consulting firms in the Twin Cities, while Larson is a Minnesota public historian with several architecture-related books to his credit. Both intimately understand St. Paul's built heritage.

This intimate knowledge is evident early and often, as the authors write as if articulating the life story of an old friend—which is precisely what they are doing. The prose is sharp and witty. For instance, while describing the towering profile of the St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse, that wonderfully Moderne monument, Hess observes that the structure terminates “in a thin frieze, as if the building might momentarily resume its vertical growth.” Such witicism is peppered throughout the lavishly illustrated book.

The stars of this work are the buildings of St. Paul, of course, and numerous public, commercial, residential, and spiritual structures are highlighted, including prominent ones like the U.S. Courthouse and Post Office (Landmark Center), the Cathedral of St. Paul, and the St. Paul Public Library and James J. Hill Reference Library. But plentiful lesser-known buildings are also here, such as the delightful William H. and Ida Garland House and the organic-looking Bethlehem German Presbyterian Church, as well as the New York Life Insurance Company Building, a fantastic dual-



towered Renaissance-Revival edifice that was razed in the 1960s to make way for the less-is-more philosophy of modernism. Like this building, some of the structures featured in this book are now gone, yet many remain.

Hess and Larson do not treat the buildings in isolated vignettes but weave each into a tapestry that is the tale of St. Paul's architectural maturity. Indeed, the authors employ the city's architectural components to move the narrative forward through time, seamlessly blending the record of one into the next. Moreover, the authors ensure that the architects who shaped St. Paul receive substantial acknowledgement for their labors. They, too, are vehicles that help advance the story of St. Paul's architectural journey from rawness and crudity to early Classical Revival, Victorian, and Picturesque styles, progressing to the modernism of the recent past and, finally, to the architecture of today. In a sense, what we end with is an eloquent history of St. Paul told through its structural face.

A thoroughly informative and enjoyable read, *St. Paul's Architecture* is a must for those who view architecture as a reflection of societal disposition. Even more, the work should be on the shelf of any who call St. Paul home, for it is their story, emanating from the facades of the neighborhoods and commercial districts that make up one of America's most attractive major urban centers.

Reviewed by Denis P. Gardner, *author of the award-winning Minnesota Treasures: Stories Behind the State's Historic Places (2004).*

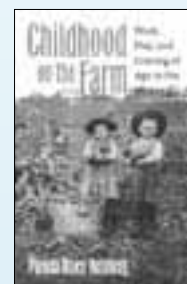
Childhood on the Farm: Work, Play, and Coming of Age in the Midwest

By Pamela Riney-Kehrberg

(Lawrence: University Press of Kansas,

2005. 300 p. Cloth, \$34.95.)

Through extensive and painstaking research, Pamela Riney-Kehrberg has written the story of the children who grew up on midwestern farms between 1870 and 1920. She tells the story neatly in chapters devoted to work, play, education, child welfare, and growing up and leaving the farm for the city. This is a tough subject to research, but she has done a fine job of locating children's diaries, letters, memoirs of adults who grew up on farms, and documents created by their parents, teachers, and government agents who looked after their well being.





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