

PICTURES FROM AN EXHIBITION,



LESSONS FROM A GENERATION

BRIAN HORRIGAN

A FRONT-PAGE NEWSPAPER PHOTOGRAPH of Walter Washington Williams—reputed to be the last surviving veteran of the Civil War—is one of my strongest childhood memories. The veteran is on his deathbed in a hospital in my hometown of Houston, Texas, and he is being serenaded by the singer Johnny Horton. It is 1959, I am nine years old, and the former Confederate soldier is said to be 117, a claim later debunked. But true or not, this was big news in Houston, and after the old soldier died, he was laid in state in a downtown hotel.

While I was writing this piece, the number of surviving American veterans of the next “Great War”—the one we now call World War I—dropped from two to one. As of this writing, the only remaining combat veteran, Frank Buckles of Missouri, is still alive. He was born in 1901 and enlisted in 1917 after lying about his age. So it’s likely that living memory of military service in that war will soon cease, too.

These thoughts about the passing of entire generations came to me while I was working on the Minnesota’s

Greatest Generation project. I was alive when the last veterans of the Civil War and World War I died, and I may yet live to see the end of “greatest generation,” the men and women who came of age during the Great Depression and war.

When the idea of creating a comprehensive project devoted to capturing the memories of this generation was first proposed at the Minnesota Historical Society—perhaps as early as 2003—skeptical comments were muttered (some of them, I think, by me), most of them along

ABOVE: *St. Paul siblings Ann, Marge (with hair bow), Helen, and John Kufner, 1927. Tomboy Marge, scowling because she hated dressing up, worked in defense aviation plants during the war and in 1944 joined the Women’s Marine Corps.*

Brian Horrigan, an exhibit developer at the Minnesota Historical Society, is the curator of the Minnesota’s Greatest Generation exhibit, opening at the History Center May 23.

the lines of: “Isn’t it a little late to be looking for people who are *that* old?” and “You really should have done this ten years ago, when World War II celebrations were at their height, and most veterans were still only in their 70s.” Mortality hung over this project’s beginnings like a gray cloud.

We soon learned that, far from being a rare species, mentally acute seniors still live in great numbers in Minnesota. So great, in fact, that we despaired at the number of people we would never have time to meet or interview.

It is safe to say that not a single project meeting went by without some reference to people’s ages—ours and our subjects’. We eventually came to see this focus on age and aging as an inevitable by-product of our singling out a group of people because of the timing of their birth. Coming of age—a process that occurs for most people between ages 18 and 25—is an important concept for defining generations, which are often named after major historical events. Having lived through the depression, war, and the boom years that followed, this generation was dubbed (not without some controversy) “the greatest.”¹

The Minnesota’s Greatest Generation project became for me a project not about the dying but about the living, about remembering defined not as a nostalgic mourning for a lost time but as one of our vital signs, like our

temperature or blood pressure, indicating just how alive we are right now. This also became a project focused on stories and storytelling, about individual people narrating the stories of their lives, and, collectively, creating a history, an American history, that spans nearly a century. The group photograph became not just a sought-after visual storytelling device (we collected hundreds of them), but also a metaphor for what we were creating. Or rather, not what we were creating at the Minnesota Historical Society, but what our subjects were shaping for us—a vast, collective portrait of a generation, defined simply as a group of people, born about the same time and moving through years and events together.

“CHAPTER ONE: I AM BORN.”

The memorable first words of *David Copperfield* came to mind when we began this journey with “our” generation. As David begins to tell us his life story, he wonders “whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life,” a phrase that echoed through my mind as I listened to and read more life stories than I can ever remember or summarize. We knew we wanted to expand the greatest generation’s story beyond its conventional wartime frame, to



Babies at Maternity Hospital, Minneapolis, about 1925

These babies are our
people . . . our soldiers
and sailors and miners
and farmers and riveters
and “government girls.”

spend some time with these people as children and teenagers. And so we started with babies, with pictures like this one, taken at Minneapolis's Maternity Hospital in the mid-1920s (a decade when, increasingly, babies were born in hospitals).²

These babies are our people, we thought, our soldiers and sailors and miners and farmers and riveters and “government girls.” Of course, none of our informants had actual memories of infancy; like the rest of us, however, they grew up hearing stories that they played back when we asked. An amazing number of these 80-somethings still had their baby pictures—troves of them, both snapshots and yearly studio portraits (many, surprisingly, from families who were hardly members of the leisure class). I began to wonder if these kids—and (further out on a limb here) especially the boys—were exceptionally treasured? Their parents, born in the 1880s and 1890s, might have held painful memories of sisters and brothers carried away not only by a heartless overseas war, but also by the influenza epidemic of 1917, which generally attacked men and women just striding into their hopeful 20s.³

“MOVIES WERE OUR CULTURE.”

This photo has been at the top of our list since the project began. Arrayed before us in crisp detail are more than 40 members of the generation, standing in front of a movie theater, looking for all the world like Hollywood child actors—check out those tough guys on the left, or the charming girl stepping off the curb, or the confident stare of the boy front and center. It's winter: everyone's dressed in coats and hats (some of them the leather “aviator” helmets popular with kids since the Lindbergh craze of 1927).

The photo, long a part of the Minnesota Historical Society collections, is sparsely identified: “Children in front of a movie theater, about 1930.” It's been assumed that the theater is in a big city (it has 4,200 seats!), and now we can identify it with certainty as the famously lavish Minnesota, which once commanded the corner of Ninth Street and LaSalle Avenue in downtown Minneapolis. The movie announced on the marquee, *Over the*

“Movies were our culture,
which means they were
the set of examples and
symbols by which we
understood our world.”



Children outside the Minnesota Theatre, Minneapolis, December 1931

Hill, opened there on Sunday, December 20, 1931—it was the theater’s “yule offering,” a talkie remake of an earlier tearjerker, according to the *Minneapolis Star*. “See this Picture and Peer into the Soul of Humanity,” the ad copy read. “Youth . . . heedless, hasty, sometimes unconsciously heartless . . . so eagerly reaching for tomorrow.”⁴

See that notice on the marquee about vaudeville? The Minnesota was known for its stage shows, by 1931 perhaps a little retro or nostalgic. The December 1931 show, “Tin Types,” featured “a host of acts,” including my personal favorite: Harry Moore, “Paper Wizard,” who entertained the crowd by “tearing paper in all sorts of shapes.” The other notice, barely visible, says that admission is “30 cents before 1 P.M.”

And there’s something else that perhaps survives only in personal memory. Ed Sworsky, who grew up in Northeast Minneapolis (and walked downtown to the movies because he didn’t have carfare), recalled:

Downtown the theaters always had . . . I don’t know if it was the day before Christmas . . . but they had one deal where you could go. I remember especially the Minnesota Theatre, that you could go and you’d get a bag and get an orange in there and an apple and some other stuff. You’d see the movie and that was it.⁵

So many of our interviewees talked about movies and movie-going as kids and teenagers! And many also remembered how specific movies shaped their attitudes. On the one hand, there was *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), which sparked anti-war feelings, and on the other, there was *Dawn Patrol*, cited by interviewee Harold Brown as the thing that inspired him to become a fighter pilot. (He served with distinction with the Tuskegee Airmen.)⁶

When I asked Sam Hynes to talk about the movies he remembered as a kid growing up in Minneapolis in the 1930s, he said:

Ours was called the New Lake, at maybe Blaisdell and Lake Street. And I remember the marquee. It had icicles hanging from it, cut out of cardboard, I suppose, and a sign above it said, “Artesian Cool,” and another sign that said, “Movies are your best entertainment.” They might just as well have said, “Movies are your only entertainment.” . . . Movies were our culture, which means they were the set of examples and symbols by which we understood our world.⁷

“I WAS TWENTY . . . AND KNEW NOTHING.”

Unlike most old photographs, this one is stamped with an exact date: February 13, 1941. Everybody in the photo—along with the other 15,000 students then enrolled at the University of Minnesota—was thus a charter member of our generation, although, to be sure, college attendance was hardly typical. While land-grant schools like Minnesota certainly attracted students from a wider socio-economic spectrum than private schools, and though tuition in 1941 was less than \$500 annually, one would still have to look at these fun-loving young people and see a fairly elite crowd.

The world that these kids lived in was about to change radically, something they could not have known as they were frolicking, half-naked, in the dead of winter. There was a lot this crowd didn’t know. In 1946 noted journalist Eric Sevareid succinctly described both himself and his fellow first-year students at this same university in the early 1930s: “I was twenty, and like most of my classmates of twenty, knew nothing.”⁸ I’ve looked at this photo many times, and wondered what (besides sex) might be on these students’ minds, what they feared, what they believed. War had been raging in Europe since September 1939, but in early 1941 more than 80 percent of Americans still opposed U.S. involvement in “Europe’s war.” Minnesota’s own Charles Lindbergh had been speaking



Splash party, University of Minnesota, 1941

out for more than a year against intervention, both on the radio and at massive America First rallies in major U.S. cities.

Looking back a decade later, Severeid remembered his college days as filled with “emotional exhaustion, not from singing about the ‘dear old college’ but from public debate.” To him, the university seemed to have been in a “state of intellectual ferment, and we were fortunate to be students at this particular moment. . . . The place was a kind of fortress for us, and periodically we sallied forth to do battle with evil.” Transforming himself during his years at the U into a social activist, supporter of workers’ rights, and an intellectual, Severeid might not have recognized himself in the carefree horseplay of this photograph, but elsewhere in his book he articulated a worldview that was, perhaps, more pervasive in young people of the day: “We refused to believe that any people in the world desired war, with us or with their neighbors. . . . The whole effort, the whole meaning of our own lives in our time must be to improve the material and spiritual condition of man in society.” Still, in the face of Hitler’s rise in the 1930s, he wrote that “while we began to accept with dismay the probability of a European war, we remained desperately anxious to keep America out of it, to preserve at least one oasis of sanity in an insane world.”

“IT’S AMAZING WHAT HUNGER CAN DO.”

Looking at those young, perfect bodies that would soon be thrust into war, I thought about another photograph of “student bodies.” This one documents the famed semi-starvation study conducted at the University of Minnesota in 1944–45. Dr. Ancel Keys had founded his Laboratory of Physiological Hygiene in 1938 and, during the war, enrolled 36 young conscientious objectors from the Civilian Public Service, the national program of nonmilitary work. The intention was to study the effects of malnutrition and starvation, in anticipation of post-war food-supply problems in Europe. The men were put on carefully controlled diets in several phases and were monitored daily for signs of physical and mental deterioration. We interviewed two survivors of the program, Henry Scholberg and Max Kampelman, both of whom have also written about their experiences in memoirs.

Scholberg considered the experiment “the noblest and most decent thing I ever did in my life.” “Emotionally, we were in a constant state of lethargy and depres-



*Volunteers in the University of Minnesota
semi-starvation study, 1945*

sion. . . . One of the most depressing sights was to see where someone had spilled an ice cream cone on the sidewalk. Here was all this food going to waste. Why don’t I just eat it off the ground? But I’m not allowed to.”⁹

Kampelman (a New Yorker who came to Minnesota expressly to enroll in the study) wrote: “It’s amazing what hunger can do. You focus on food. You daydream about it. You read cookbooks and books on nutrition. You go to bed at night thinking of food and wake up in the morning thinking of food. It is boring, if virtually unavoidable. My night dreams were not of sexual fantasies but of candy bars.” He filled his empty hours taking classes in the university’s law school. When I interviewed Kampelman in 2008, he said: “I would not have gotten through the starvation experiment—they told me I was the least damaged of the people there—if I had not taken that those courses. That’s what saved me, really.”¹⁰

"I'M DOING THE SAME JOB."

The Twin Cities Army Ammunition Plant in New Brighton is a vast complex that during the war was one of Minnesota's most bustling spots, employing thousands of men and women. Known at the time as Twin Cities Ordnance, the plant had its moment in the sun in 1944, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt visited to praise and exhort the workers.

The army closed the plant some years ago, and in 2006 turned over many of its records to the MHS. We were invited to the abandoned plant to see if there were other items we wanted to salvage. On a chilly winter day, a small posse of us went through the plant's empty, eerily quiet, broken-windowed buildings. There were still big clocks with frozen faces and corroded signs reminding workers in this once volatile place not to light any matches. A punch clock remained on the wall, with a nearby rack for timecards. And there was the employee cafeteria, where in this captive universe everyone ate every day.

We interviewed several men and women who had been wartime workers at this and other plants in the Twin Cities. I loved listening to Myrtle Hoppe who worked at the ammunition plant and later enjoyed a dancing career on early television in Minneapolis. And Kae Vandeputte, who moved to the cities from St. Cloud at age 21, lived in an efficiency with a Murphy bed and two roommates, and found work at Northwestern Aeronautical, which was building the so-called "Waco" gliders for the army. The company newsletter described Kae as the "first girl inspector at Northwestern Aeronautical."¹¹

And we interviewed a real "Rosie the Riveter," the feisty Ferne Krans, who worked on the riveting line at De Ponti Aviation in Minneapolis. Ferne (nickname: "Irish") arrived from North Dakota in 1936 when she was 18 and worked in a Dinkytown five-and-dime until she "heard about this glider factory and they were paying a lot more

than I was getting." Her father had been a carpenter and she knew about "hammers and pliers and stuff like that."

Well, they just knew that I knew a few things about tools that most girls didn't and they assigned me to this one section and they taught me how to rivet and I riveted. I was with another girl for awhile and we made aileron tubes for the gliders. And then this girl left and then I had a man come, and I taught him the job and when it came payday I found out he made more money than I did. And that made me mad. And he said, "After all, I have a wife and a child," and whatnot, and I said, "I don't care. I'm doing the same job, I even taught you your job, and I get less money than you do?" And he said, "Well, after all, why don't you join the WACS?" And I said, "I wouldn't join the WACS. If I went in the service I'd join the Marines." He said, "You'd never make it in the Marines." And I said, "We'll see." On my way home from work that day I stopped into the Marine office, and within a week I was a Marine.¹²



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"IF WE COULD ONLY SEE THE END OF THIS WAR."

For nearly four years a cardboard box has sat in my office, filled with nearly 400 neatly stacked letters written during the war by a Minneapolis man, Paul Graftsland, to his wife, Grace. The letters, apparently an orphaned collection, had been found in a garage after a house sale and had come to us through a series of emissaries. We read the letters, hoping to find diamonds in the rough. But nothing much happens. Paul, already married to Grace, enters the Navy in early 1942. There's a baby on the way, and by November a Western Union telegram to Paul announces the happy news: It's a boy, and they name him Richard. Paul is eventually posted all over the states but apparently never overseas. They reunite when he's on leave, and he writes to Grace almost every day. The last letter is dated February 25, 1944: "Oh, how I wish I could come home every night and be loved. This being away from you day after day is getting me down in the dumps. I get so tired of everything, whatever I do seems to be a waste of time. If we could only see the end of this war soon, then it wouldn't be so bad." He closes with a P.S.:

A small sampling of the letters, cards, and drawings ("Homesick Graftsland") Paul Graftsland sent almost daily to his wife, Grace



"Does my boy remember his daddy or doesn't he know he's gone again?"

The ordinariness of ordinary lives: No drama, no revelations, no gruesome descriptions, nothing that would catch the attention of a Ken Burns. But collectively, as a single artifact, the letters tell an eloquent, if commonplace, story—of loving you, and missing you, of boredom, and laundry, and gossip and the weather, and how's the baby?

Not everyone was intent on keeping letters or other keepsakes. I was dismayed (to put it mildly) when Sam Hynes told me that he destroyed all of his wartime letters that his parents had "proudly presented" to him upon his return. "It was a gesture meaning, 'That's over. Life begins from here. I'm a civilian. I'm going to finish college. I'm going to become a teacher. That's another life. I don't need this, and I don't even want it.'"¹³

But somebody—Grace, probably—held onto Paul Graftsland's letters for a long time and kept them neatly arranged in their carefully opened envelopes. Sadly, such collections are of little use to historical societies. But to open up the brittle envelopes and unfold the letters is to journey back 60-plus years and feel the rhythms of people's lives.

As I was putting the final touches on this article, I began to wonder about that "orphaned collection" story and whether we might be able to find Paul or Grace or a close relative. I asked my colleague Ben Petry to give it a try, and in less than 20 minutes he found Paul and Grace's baby, Richard, alive and well in Florida. Grace had died in 1990, but Paul had lived to be nearly 90, dying in 2001. I knew a lot about Paul and Grace, at least for two years of their young and hopeful lives, so meeting their son, if only by phone, was an awkward but moving moment. I'm grateful to him for allowing me to share his family's no longer mysterious story.

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"I saw two airplanes
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And very scary."

*"Glaser's Crew," 491st Bomb
Group of the Eighth Air Force,
in England, 1945. Staff Sgt. Joe
Garelick is at back, right; pilot
and crew commander First Lt.
Bob Glaser is front, right.*

"THEY'RE PRAYING. I'M PRAYING."

People are sometimes surprised to hear how long it takes to produce a major exhibit like *Minnesota's Greatest Generation*. And sometimes the end product barely resembles the original concept. Or rather, it's like a beach strewn with pebbles: the curves of the landscape stay the same, but the little stones shift places or even disappear.

If there was one person who remained a sure bet from the beginning to the end of the exhibit process, it was Joe Garelick. In so many telling ways, Joe's life encapsulates the experiences of this generation—growing up poor on St. Paul's West Side ("But everybody else was poor, so it didn't matter"); entering the service during the war and serving as a B-24 ball-turret gunner in 34 bombing missions over Europe; and after the war, building his own house in Highland Park and starting a business with his brother making ladders that hooked over the sides of recreational boats. It doesn't get much more perfect than that.

Joe is a great storyteller and is especially animated—like many of our interviewees—when it comes to recalling the good times of childhood, like his coasting to victory in the 1938 Soapbox Derby in St. Paul. But I want to share one of his war stories. Like all men in combat,

whether in a platoon or a bomber crew, the men Joe flew with in 1944–45 became an especially tight-knit group. "Glaser's Crew," named for their commander, have maintained friendships for more than 60 years. I was struck with how closely the "casts of characters" in many of the stories I heard from Joe and other vets resembled those of World War II movies—the bunch of guys from different backgrounds thrown in together and needing to find ways to learn from each other and get along.

Well, of course our dogtags . . . you had an H on it for Hebrew. And on my crew I never had a problem. I never had a problem with anybody in the service because I was Jewish.

Another mission we went in at low level. I saw two airplanes blow up. There was a lot of that. And very scary. And on our crew we had a Southern Baptist. We had a Mormon. We had a Catholic. We had a Protestant and a Methodist. Forget what else. And a Jew—me. So when we got on the identification point that you have to go straight from that point right to the target, that could be ten minutes. And during that time nobody says a word. They're praying. I'm praying. I used to tease all the boys that we made it because of me, praying in the back of the plane in God's own language.¹⁴

"I USED TO CARRY ONE ON EACH HIP."

Listening to war bride Lee Sworsky's 2008 interview, you're immediately struck by her still strong, working-class British accent. Lee had married Minnesotan Ed Sworsky—a veteran of both the D-Day invasion and the Battle of the Bulge—while he was stationed in England toward the end of the war. Back in Minneapolis after the war, they had something of a rough go of it at first, living with relatives for a while, then in a converted chicken coop. In 1947, through some political string-pulling, the Sworskys got into a Quonset hut development at 34th and Buchanan Streets Northeast in Minneapolis. By then, they had twin boys. ("That was a big surprise," Ed said. The hospital charged 65 dollars for delivering a baby, and there was no discount if you had two). Each hut—with running water, a bathroom, windows that couldn't be opened, and frost forming on interior walls in the winter—was home to two families. Some of the men were going to school at the university, but, even with the G.I. Bill, Lee said they couldn't afford to have Ed in school. "Because we had the two boys. He got the job at the gas

company. He worked; he worked hard. He'd take the boys to the drug store. He'd put them on his shoulders and take 'em to the drug store. I used to carry one on each hip and take 'em all over."¹⁵

Lee shared this photo with us of the "Quonset gang": seven moms, nine or ten babies—that's Lee sitting on the ground, second from the left, with the twins. I love everything about this photo: the moms look relaxed in their summer dresses (one fashion-forward mom is in pants), their nearly identical hairdos, their easy, joking ways. Wash hangs on a line slung between two of the huts—wasn't there always washing to do with babies around? There's one of those wooden-slat playpens that you're not supposed to use anymore, and a couple of strollers that today would also be condemned as lethal. Oddly, it reminds me of a time (real recall is surely impossible) when my young parents lived in the Arrowhead apartments—hastily built after the war but still standing as of a few years ago. I was an infant, my brother a toddler, and—according to my Mom in one of her rare moments of nostalgia—my parents were having the "happiest days" of their lives, surrounded by other couples just starting to create families and the future.



Each hut—with running water, a bathroom, windows that couldn't be opened, and frost forming on interior walls in the winter—was home to two families.

"Quonset gang" and children, including Lee Sworsky (seated, second from left) with her twin boys

"AND THE G.I. BILL PAID FOR IT."

A truly iconic photograph in the MHS collections shows "Fathers in caps and gowns with their children, University Village, St. Paul" in June 1951. It's hard to imagine another picture that could so clearly enunciate both "baby boom" and "G.I. Bill"—the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. This bill had an enormous impact on the University of Minnesota, which by 1946 boasted the highest veteran enrollment of any school in the country.¹⁶

I initially associated the success of the bill with exactly that kind of statistic: the 2.2 million men (and a much smaller number of women) who took advantage of it to earn college degrees, many in the classic boom-era majors of engineering and business. It's likely that only a small percentage of these vets could have even considered college without it. I was unaware of the amazing diversity of options that the bill covered. After all, 7.8 million veterans signed up for benefits. What were the rest of them doing, if not posing for cap-and-gown pictures?¹⁷

Two stories, from our interviews: Ernest Olson, a member of the Grand Portage Band of Chippewa, was born in Duluth in 1927 ("In a hospital. I was the first one in the family") and raised on a homestead outside of Grand Marais. Ernie got into basic training for the army just as the war was ending in 1945 and served in occupied Europe in 1946 (see page 204).

When he returned, he went back into the family business of commercial fishing on Lake Superior. But he had seen the world and worked with some fairly advanced technology in the army. He was intrigued by radio and even more so by the futuristic promise of television.

I was able of course to use the veterans schooling. That was very helpful, getting the G.I. Bill of Rights. You could get training when you got home. You could go to college. I didn't have the background enough to go to college or I would have. They allowed one course. Whatever you wanted to do. Go to a regular school, or taking a correspondence course was another route. That's what I took [radio and television repair], and the G.I. Bill paid for it.

At the time I was commercial fishing with a tug. We'd go out thirty-five miles one way. . . . You had to go that far. . . . So on the way out there I would work on my correspondence course. It worked good because it was like four hours. We'd dress the fish on the way back. Could take up to three hours. Most days I could get back to



Alvin Del Chamblee entertaining at a pops concert, Chicago, 1954

my coursework a little bit before we got back to Grand Marais. It was really strict. You had to apply yourself. That's for sure. I wanted to learn.¹⁸

Ernie earned a certificate in electronics, opened a radio repair business in Grand Marais, and later became the first television retailer and repairman on the North Shore. The sign from his TV business will be featured in the exhibit, along with his "fish story."

The second story was also revealing. Alvin Del Chamblee had served with the army in an all-black regiment and also—since he was a terrific singer—entertained the troops from time to time. After the war, Del returned to his native Chicago, went to work for the Veterans Administration, and then decided to pursue music seriously. He enrolled in the Chicago Conservatory of Music and studied voice and composition with several noted teachers. With the help of the G.I. Bill, Del got both a bachelor's and master's degree in music. He even sang

with the Metropolitan Opera on tour. In 1952 he moved to Minnesota, gave up on a musical career, and took up painting (several of his works are in MHS collections)—but he saved his student composition projects from his conservatory days, which he dug out and shared with me last year. Del represents two relative rarities: a black man on the G.I. Bill (it was notoriously difficult for African Americans to get the same benefits as white veterans) and, instead of an engineering degree, two diplomas from a prestigious music conservatory!¹⁹

"YOU GOT MARRIED WITHOUT REALLY THINKING."

Visitors to our exhibit may be surprised, when they pass a photomural of a V-J Day celebration, to find about a third of the exhibit left to see, including a large section on the boom years of 1946 to about 1970: a cluster of televisions, a hospital nursery window with an "endless babies" vista (think: mirrors), a 1958 Ford on a turntable, and an array of kitchen appliances. The young men and women of this generation, exhausted by years of economic depression and war, were impatient and eager "to put all that behind them," as so many of them told us, to get married, make some money and make some babies, move into a dream house, and get on with life.

This photo shows Jennie Hsiao, recently come to Minnesota from her native Taiwan in order to marry



Jennie Hsiao and her brand-new refrigerator in her equally new Richfield home, 1958

Fred Hsiao, whom she knew only from long-distance correspondence. She's showing off the refrigerator in her first house as a married Minnesotan—a brand-new (1958) two-bedroom "starter" on Newton Avenue in Richfield. Lots of people posed for pictures with their new possessions: cars, televisions, and glittering appliances. Those first purchases of what economists call durable goods were well remembered by the people we spoke to and have been woven for decades into family lore. Millie Johnson, who worked as a riveter on airplanes at St. Paul's Holman Field during the war and became a happy Northfield housewife and champion bowler, told us her refrigerator story.

Percy and I were married in 1949 at St. John's Church. . . . When Percy asked me to marry him he was managing the Mobil gas station and I was working for Serge Electric. We had appliances and so forth downtown. And of course, money was a little scarce in those days, and you got married without really thinking: wow, where are we going to live, what are we going to do? Anyway, when he asked me to marry him, he asked if I wanted a ring or a refrigerator. And I took the refrigerator. I worked for this appliance store and they had refrigerators, so I got it for a good discount. So I got the Crosley refrigerator. And then in '55 at Christmas then he gave me the diamond ring.²⁰

"I STILL WONDER. . ."

One of our interviewees, Gertrude Esteros, provided a title for the final section of our exhibit—"The Whole World"—when she confided, "The war made me aware of us as part of the total globe, of the whole world. That was the biggest thing."²¹ The war had indeed flung millions of members of this generation to all parts of the world, millions who had never before ventured even beyond the county line. Most of these men and women, after returning home, settled back into familiar boundaries and patterns—kids, mortgages, jobs, schools, clubs, churches. But we were also struck by how many were affected by a consciousness of the larger world.

I first encountered Minneapolis native Marianne De Vay Hamilton in 2007 through a short film submitted to the Greatest Generation project's Moving Pictures film competition, and we later interviewed her. Marianne was inspired to become active in the peace movement by letters her soldier husband, Norman Hamilton, had written

"War is no way to solve problems.
You got a problem, then talk it
out, figure it out, but don't kill
each other for it."

during the war about the awful devastation in Europe. She and Norman eventually had eight children who kept them busy, but she continued her anti-war work. In the 1970s she traveled several times to Southeast Asia as part of peace missions associated with Christian organizations, even visiting with officials in North Vietnam at the height of the war. That's where this photo was taken. In the 1980s she and several others founded WAMM—Women Against Military Madness—still one of the country's most active peace groups. In our interview, she left us with these closing thoughts:

We met American officials in Vietnam just because we made appointments with them to go and complain. A lot of people were sympathetic; they understood that war is a terrible thing. And that was the point we were trying to get across, that war is no way to solve problems. You got a problem, then talk it out, figure it out, but don't kill each other for it. It still gets me, I still don't quite understand it. I still wonder, "What are you killing each other for?"²²

Good question. I was surprised—but shouldn't have been—about how often today's conflicts and today's soldiers came up in our discussions of a war that ended more than 60 years ago. The past, we quickly learned, is never just about the past. Our memories are constantly refracted through what we know and fear about the present.

* * *

WHAT OTHER LESSONS did I learn from all of these witnesses? I learned that history filtered through memory is not always the same as that found in books. Seems obvious, but historians usually expect living narrators to confirm the expectations we form in academic reading. In her sesquicentennial state history, *Creating Minnesota*, Annette Atkins writes about telling "history from the inside out."²³ That phrase rang true for me: the tellers of the tales we assembled for this project were not his-



Marianne De Vay Hamilton on a peace mission in North Vietnam, 1970s

torians looking in from the outside but participants who lived history from the inside. Many of my expectations were controverted, or at least dialed back: The depression, for example, was not depressing, at least not for most of our informants, who were children and young people at the time. I know from my reading that 1933 was the absolute nadir of the Great Depression, and so I found the following statement, from Henry Scholberg's memoir, simply astounding: "Of all the years between 1929 and 1936, I think the happiest was 1933. These were not the days of wine and roses, but of innocence and fun. I had made many new friends, and life seemed grand. We were too young to worry about the future, and too immature to care about the past."²⁴ Life seemed grand? Really?

I was also surprised to learn that war was not hell, not most of the time. Of course, there are horrific stories of combat and sorrow and loss woven throughout the vast collective saga that this project has amassed. But more often, there are stories of wartime as an empire of bore-

dom, routine, and uneventfulness. Or even—and our veterans are sometimes reluctant to say it: “We had a pretty good time.” Repeatedly, our interviewees would return to the subject of youthful comradeship, of unexpectedly close—and now long-lost—bonds with fellow soldiers or other “girls” on the factory floor, or with other moms and dads hauling kids around the neighborhood.

At the end of most of my interviews for this project, I would always ask about the term at its heart: greatest generation. One eloquent 91-year-old man, instead of addressing the question in the general terms I had come to expect, began to speak about the people he had grown up with, now all gone. Instead of talking about being the greatest, he talked about being the oldest: “Nobody told me what it’s like to be 91. It just happens.”²⁵ So it’s probably not accidental that, in the last year alone, I’ve reconnected with at least three of my own long neglected, formerly close friends. Was it just my own “pushing-60” status? Perhaps, but it also comes from being part of a project aimed at recovering past associations and memories.

I learned important lessons about memory and fallibility and invention, too. Of the books I read this past year, I had not expected Jane Austen’s *Emma* to be work-related. But I marked the page with this aphorism near the end of the novel: “Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken.”²⁶ In my work with this project’s myriad “human disclosures,” I learned not to worry too much about the details of fact but rather to listen for something perhaps best described as emotional truth. “Memory,” someone once pointed out to me, is precisely what a computer does *not* have. Memory is not retrieval of stored information from the past but, rather, an act of creation in the present.

ABOUT TEN YEARS AGO, I was visiting my parents in Houston. This was about two years before my dad started what turned out to be a fairly swift descent into dementia. On this visit, all appeared to be normal. At one point, I picked up a magazine Dad had been reading and saw that he had written three words on the margin of a page: “Remember sea stories.” Nothing else, just that three-word injunction to his fading mind.

Frank Horrigan was born in 1924 on a farm in Iowa and later moved with his large Catholic family to Denver. The sole fact I ever knew of his wartime service was that as a land-locked teenager he had joined the Merchant Marines. Like many other veterans, my dad never talked

about his experiences, and I had never asked, either. I remember thinking as I was growing up that the words “Merchant Marine” had been story enough: there was nothing heroic to report, no Audie Murphy action, no Omaha Beach or Okinawa. It wasn’t until recently that I learned that the Merchant Marines actually had the greatest percentage of war-related deaths of all of the services. Being a Mariner may not have involved combat, but it was dangerous nonetheless.

Dad did have sea stories, it turns out. He had sailed the world and spent time in exotic places. I learned this only last year, a full eight years after his death, when, on another visit to Houston, I found, tucked away in the back of his tool cabinet, an ashtray in the shape of Australia inscribed “1944,” with a kangaroo figurine and an airplane attached. My mother said she didn’t know anything about it. My brother later told me he had asked about it once; dad had said that he had gotten it in Australia during the war but hadn’t said much else.

SOMETIMES I WONDER how I ever got interested in history, since neither of my parents ever spoke much about the past, and my mom still resists entreaties to tape an interview. (“I can’t imagine why anyone would want to read anything like that.”) Like a lot of us aging baby boomers, I’ve become alarmed at what we seem to be losing as our parents’ generation slips away. My dad’s note to himself, written, perhaps, as he realized how much he was forgetting, can stand as a useful reminder: Let’s remember stories. □



Visit the Minnesota’s Greatest Generation project’s comprehensive, award-winning website, at <http://www.mnhs.org/people/mnngg/index.htm>.



Frank Horrigan’s souvenir ashtray, stamped with a palm tree and “Australia, 1944”

Notes

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1. Brian Horrigan, "Of Generations and Greatness," *Minnesota History* 60 (Winter 2006–07): 148–57.

2. In 1900 less than five percent of all women gave birth in a hospital. By the 1920s, half of all births in major cities were in hospitals, and by 1939 50 percent of all women and 75 percent of urban women were delivering in hospitals. Richard Wertz and Dorothy C. Wertz, *Lying In: A History of Childbirth in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 133.

3. John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* (New York: Viking, 2004).

4. Here and below, *Minneapolis Star*, Dec. 21, 1931, p. 13. Thanks to Randal Dietrich for suggesting that the theater was the Minnesota.

5. Edmond Sworsky, interview by Doug Bekke, Oct. 18, 2006.

6. Harold Brown, interview by Brian Horrigan and Ben Petry, May 1, 2008.

7. Samuel Hynes, interview by Brian Horrigan, Mar. 26, 2008.

8. Here and below, Eric Sevareid, *Not So Wild a Dream* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1946), 49, 57, 51, 61, 64.

9. Henry Scholberg, *That's India: The Memoirs of an Old India Hand* (New Delhi: Bibliophile South Asia, 2002), 79. Scholberg grew up in various towns in Minnesota, as well as in India, where his parents were Methodist missionaries.

10. Max Kampelman, *Entering New Worlds: The Memoirs of a Private Man in Public Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 52; Max Kampelman, interview by Brian Horrigan, June 16, 2008.

11. Kae Vandeputte, interview by Brian Horrigan, June 7, 2007.

12. Ferne Krans, interview by Ben Petry and Andy Wilhide, June 9, 2008.

13. Hynes interview.

14. Herbert Joe Garelick, interview by Brian Horrigan, Apr. 20, 2007.

15. Edmond Sworsky interview; Lee Sworsky, interview by Linda Cameron, Sept. 10, 2008.

16. Al Sandvik, "The Legacy of the G.I. Bill," *Minnesota* (alumni magazine), March–April 1999, p. 30.

17. The 7.8 million on the G.I. Bill represented slightly more than half of the more than 14 million who served; Suzanne Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7.

18. Ernest Olson, interview by Brian Horrigan and Karissa White, Aug. 10, 2006.

19. Alvin Del Chamblee died in December 2008. I am grateful to him and to Rosa Chamblee for their help with our project.

20. Millie Johnson, interview by Ben Petry and Andy Wilhide, July 18, 2008.

21. Gertrude Esteros, interview by



Prized possessions: The author with his precious Froggy, Roy Rogers cowboy boots, six gun, and sombrero, posed by the family's first TV, Christmas 1953.

Thomas Saylor, Feb. 27, 2003.

22. Marianne De Vay Hamilton, interview by Ben Petry and Brian Horrigan, May 21, 2008.

23. Annette Atkins, *Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), xiii.

24. Scholberg, *That's India*, 37.

25. Earl Wigand, interview by Brian Horrigan, Nov. 13, 2008.

26. Jane Austen, *Emma* (New York: New American Library, 1964), 343.

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