



# STORIES WORTH TELLING:

MARKING 20 YEARS OF "THE GREATEST GENERATION"



The University of Iowa Libraries  
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*Twenty years ago*, *The Greatest Generation* hit book shelves, becoming a sensation across the American landscape almost overnight. The response to the book was overwhelming, as waves of letters came pouring into Tom Brokaw's office. These letters spurred two more books, *The Greatest Generation Speaks*, and *An Album of Memories*. It seemed that a generation had found its voice.

*Stories Worth Telling: Marking 20 Years of "The Greatest Generation"* utilizes text from Brokaw's book to help tell of the sacrifices and contributions made during World War II. Original papers, artifacts, and photographs document the events leading to World War II and reveal the research used to create the bestseller.

The exhibit also shares the experiences of those with local Iowa connections who fought on foreign and domestic fronts. Drawing from the collections of the University of Iowa Libraries' Special Collections and Iowa Women's Archives, the African American Museum of Iowa, and the State Historical Society of Iowa, *Stories Worth Telling* brings to our current moment a generation both familiar and overlooked, offering opportunities to consider what "The Greatest Generation" means today.



# WRITING ABOUT A GENERATION

In the spring of 1984, Tom Brokaw went to Normandy, France to work on an NBC documentary on the 40th anniversary of D-Day. While on assignment, Brokaw met with several veterans and listened to their stories. It was on the "beaches of Normandy, [Brokaw] began to reflect on the wonders of these ordinary people whose lives [were] laced with the markings of greatness." (Brokaw, xxix)

Brokaw began researching WWII and found more individuals and more stories. While many people were reluctant to talk, eventually the words began to flow. The more Brokaw came to know about this generation, the more it left an impression on him.

*"I underwent a life-changing experience." (xxvi)*

During an episode of NBC's *Meet the Press* dedicated to the 50th Anniversary of D-Day, Brokaw looked out at the crowd made largely of veterans and declared, "I think this is the greatest generation any society has ever produced." (xxxviii) While a bold statement, Brokaw has stood by it over the years, becoming an advocate for a generation not his own.



Brokaw interviewing veterans on the beach of Normandy in 1984, Tom Brokaw Papers msc1053



Young Tom Brokaw, Tom Brokaw Papers msc1053



Brokaw during the 50th Anniversary of D-Day, Tom Brokaw Papers msc1053



# ★ AMERICA IN TRANSITION

★ 1920 was “an auspicious year for a young person to enter  
★ the world as an American citizen.” (4)

The Roaring Twenties brought an idea of prosperity that seemed without end. Women gained the right to vote, the great experiment known as Prohibition started, and broadcast radio signaled in a new era. Of course there were cracks in this American facade. Not everyone was living with equal rights, organized crime was corrupting large urban areas, and the economy was not as strong as it appeared. By the age of 10, the American born in 1920 was about to enter the Great Depression.

From this crumbling state came Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal, “declaring to a nation with more than fifteen million people out of work, ‘The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.’” (6)

At the same time, Adolf Hitler took office as chancellor of Germany, turning on the Jews and stripping them of rights and voices, while seizing neighboring countries for the Nazi regime.

Those Americans born in 1920, who had seen so much already, found themselves at the frontlines of an impending war.



1917 Suffrage Poster, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City



1930s-era radio, David McCartney personal collection



Carrie Nation's call to arms postcard, Peggy LeBold Autograph Collection msc1052



J. Richard Feeley Papers msc 0166

*"Pearl Harbor? But that's in Hawaii! ... What's going on?"*

*...Yesterday I just couldn't work...  
I could only sit down and listen to  
the radio."*

Notes written by 14-year-old Claudine Harris on  
December 7th and 8th, 1941 during a school study period.  
(Translated from French)

*On December 7, 1941,  
the Japanese attacked  
Pearl Harbor. The news  
went out on the radio,  
and nothing would ever  
be the same.*

7 Décembre 1941  
Pearl Harbor? Mais c'est à Hawaï! Ça  
alors l'Quoi? — Shh!! — Qu'est-ce qu'il  
y a? — — — Il est 2<sup>h</sup>30 un bulletin spécial  
vient de nous parvenir par CBS. F.D lui-  
même ne l'a appris qu'à 2<sup>h</sup>25. 5 minutes  
après nous le savons aussi. Et maintenant  
c'est comme pendant la bataille de France  
en Mai, on passait toute la journée à  
écouter la radio, sans arrêter pour ne  
pas manquer un mot important et que  
pourrait tout changer. Ici c'était pareil  
hier, nous sommes restés, suspendus, pour  
ne rien perdre. Chaque fois que quelque chose  
arrivait au studio, le speaker nous en  
faisait part, en improvisant. Tous les cor-  
respondants à l'étranger que nous avons  
entendus hier soir étaient, Honolulu,  
Manille et ~~deux~~ fois Londres. Plusieurs fois  
les émissions des Philippines ont été inter-  
rompues. "Go ahead, Manilla" disait le speaker  
inutilement. Les nouvelles se succédaient rapi-  
dement, bateaux coulés, raids, vagues d'aviation,  
débarquements, black out. ~~Il était fatigué,~~

Claudine Harris Papers IWA 0446



# ORDINARY PEOPLE WHO DID EXTRAORDINARY THINGS

Taking a page from Brokaw's "The Greatest Generation," this exhibit highlights just some of the stories of people whose everyday lives turned upside down after the start of the war. This small selection of ten men and women, all of whom have an Iowa connection, represent the far-reaching implications of war and what the human spirit can truly accomplish. In the end these are tales of ordinary people, but their stories show just how powerful ordinary people can be.



*Glenwood Tolson  
the community leader*



*Evelyn Crary Bacon  
the frontline healer*



*Dick Hayashi  
the immigrant's son*



*Stewart Stern  
the young artist*

Clockwise from top left: African American Museum of Iowa, Cedar Rapids; Evelyn Crary Bacon Papers IWA 0012; Stewart Stern Papers msc 0440; Evelyn Birkby Papers IWA 0126.





Constance Frick Irwin  
the eyewitness



Blanca Vasquez Gaines  
la aventurera/the adventurer



Magdalena "Helen" Tylee  
the homefront soldier



Jackson Hyde  
the boy next door



Carroll Steinbeck  
the devoted writer



Allen Goff  
the bird's eye



# LETTERS OF A GENERATION

## A NOTE FROM THE CURATOR

In 2017, I became the Graduate Research Assistant for the Tom Brokaw Papers: A Life & Career. It was a thrill to dive into the collection, and one of the first places I started was the material surrounding his book *The Greatest Generation*.

Within this collection there are boxes and boxes of letters from people who read *The Greatest Generation* and felt compelled enough to write Brokaw. I was surprised by the emotional impact these pieces of paper would have on me. Stories of hope and anger, sadness and pride emanate from these letters. Within them are stories of wives listening to their husbands' nightmares, children trying to understand distant fathers, veterans reflecting on painful memories, and others who feel forgotten by history and time. Some of the experiences and heartbreak contained on floral stationary and notebook pages, written in shaky cursive, or typed out on a computer left me in tears as I processed them.

That is why at the heart of this exhibit I have chosen to highlight some of these letters. What makes *The Greatest Generation* a bestselling book is the power behind a collection of many different voices coming together to tell a larger story about the American experience. In *The Greatest Generation Speaks*, Brokaw remarks that it was "an avalanche of letters" that arrived after the release of his book, showing how a few stories can ignite reactions of remembrance.

What I find compelling in these letters is the cathartic release that is felt in finally sharing stories that have been kept locked away in the recesses of personal memories. It is humbling to read these accounts. One letter from a woman talks about her daughter teaching in France in 1998. The daughter made a trip to Normandy and Omaha Beach with her German companion. They stood on the shores of the infamous beach together, both feeling the weight of their family's histories. The daughter remarked to her mother, "we've come a long way."

We share personal letters, memories of so many Americans, to add to our understanding of a complex history. We share their stories not only to remember where we've been and how far we've come, but also to face, with clear eyes and resolve, how far we still must go.

—Elizabeth Riordan, Curator



2/18  
Dear Mr. Brokaw,  
I am not to tell you  
I enjoyed your latest  
book, The Greatest Generation  
again you have  
piqued the interest  
of everyone of us who  
of that time frame.  
with so much  
written.  
A particular is of  
interest to me, the  
of Cambridge, Mass.  
advantage of the  
my years in the  
attended the University  
is. During my four  
years I played baseball.  
I kept a  
program of games  
and scores and  
I look at  
however, I remember  
played in baseball.  
I live in a retirement  
home "The Greatest Generation"  
has received your  
book in our library.  
I hope that you saw me  
the more I read your book  
I have restricted my  
I have experienced the  
jobs were scarce, but  
Ellis-Fisher bookkeeper  
a salary of twelve dollars  
a year makes more than 20  
years T. Williams, served  
served 3 years in the  
the early Vietnam thing  
therefore there were  
nephews, etc. galore  
We were lucky to have  
piece - only 2 or 3  
POW for awhile.  
A beautiful young man  
lives giving it all  
for America.

As a member of the "66" group,  
now 75½ years old, I relived so many  
of the events described in your book.

As a retired instructor of  
mathematics (G.I. Bill) I too found that  
many of today's younger people, while  
respectful, show little interest in what  
we went through.

I intend to pass along your book(s)  
to my grandchild as soon as I finish  
reading them.

As a veteran of the great depression  
and WW2, I thank you most sincerely.

Dear Sir,

Being a World War II Vet I really  
enjoyed reading both your books.

I was a member of the 11th.

**"I was unprepared for the  
magnitude of the book's popularity  
and for the emotional reaction it  
triggered across generational lines..."**

**—Tom Brokaw**

Many tears but deep  
satisfaction.

My husband  
was born in 1920. I was  
born in 1924. Both of  
our parents were  
Jewish immigrants  
escaping from the  
Russian Tyranny.

Your book should  
be required reading

Dear Mr. Brokaw:

As I was watching the news last night, I thought that I would  
like to express my thanks to you for the features you have had  
during this year on World War II. Then later in the evening, I saw  
you on Larry King. I determined to follow through on my impulses.

I have really enjoyed the segments on those who served during  
the war and feel they have been very helpful in reminding us of the  
cost for the lifestyle we now enjoy. We need to be reminded  
especially as the years go by. It was so uplifting especially to  
hear about the high school students who were forming relationships  
with veterans and learning to appreciate their sacrifices. We must  
never forget!

My father was drafted when my mother was 6 months pregnant

Dear Mr. Brokaw,  
Read your book on World War II.  
Felt that you left Black Americans  
out of the loop. Read up on the  
Harlem Hellfighters that were sent to  
France to fight. The 369th & The  
99th Central Postal Directory. Watch Black Warriors,  
Two Wars To Win on the History Channel  
& learn about Black people that have  
given their souls & body for this country



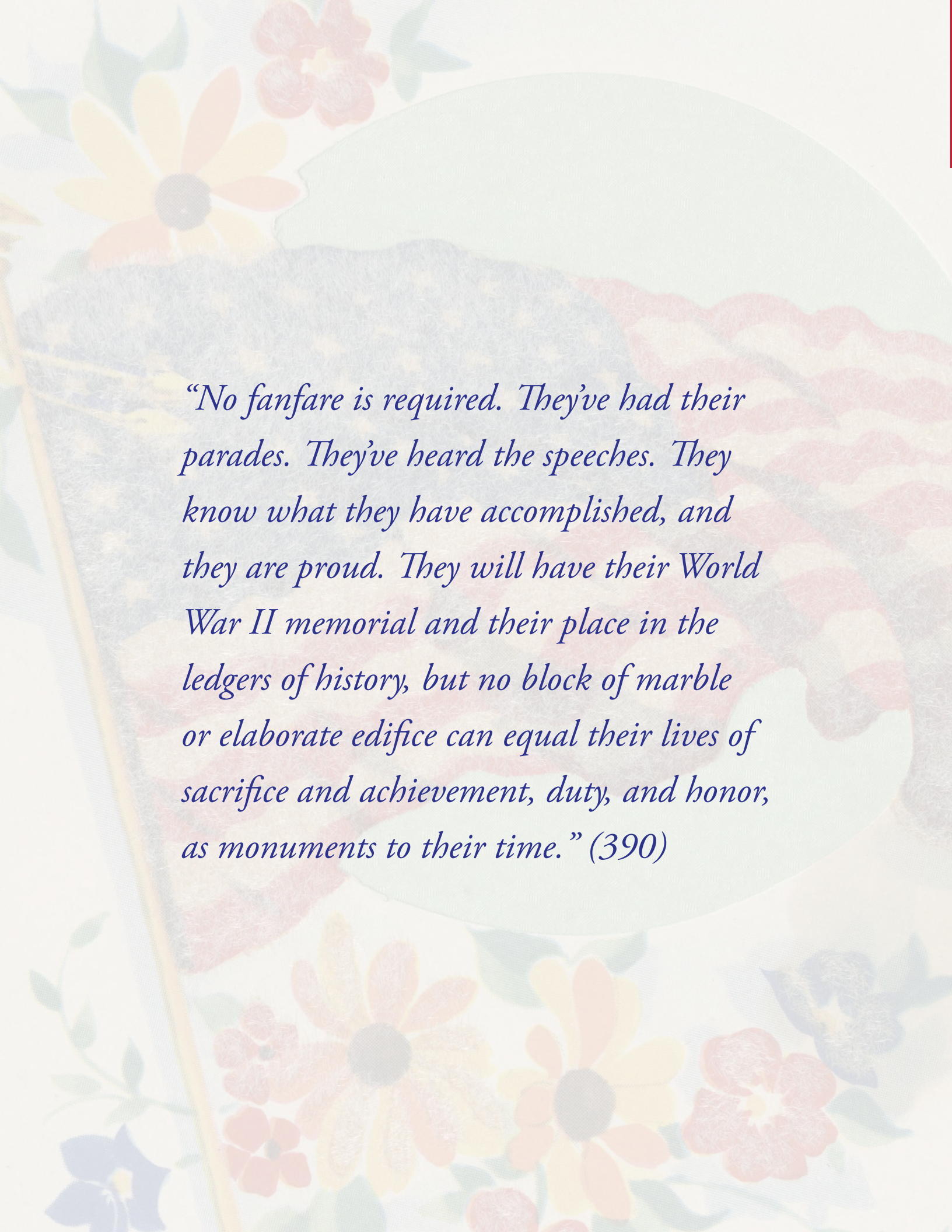
and still treated  
like second class  
citizens. Also your net  
work never leaves out  
good things that black  
do in our daily lives.  
Hoping things will be  
better in 2000.

Still Hoping,

I could not read The  
Greatest Generation and the  
Greatest Generation I speak without  
all the brave  
people, and all the memories.  
I was 8 years old when  
Pearl Harbor was attacked. My  
father was a Merchant  
Marine as a Lieutenant at 38,  
only 20 years after he  
pulled off as a seaman to see  
the world. He was the father  
of 5 but felt he had to go,  
anyway. My Mom was a Rosie  
(the riveter). Two future brothers  
in law served one in the Pacific  
on a ship, one 'crawling on his  
belly' through Sicily. A cousin  
died just 2 days before Japan  
surrendered. As a girl scouted  
collected scrap metal and used

Dear Mr. Brokaw,  
Your book is a  
husband and I are of that  
fact my husband, Richard Elmer  
was in the Normandy Invasion  
he saved some newspaper clip  
many with pictorials of  
distribution any thing





*“No fanfare is required. They’ve had their parades. They’ve heard the speeches. They know what they have accomplished, and they are proud. They will have their World War II memorial and their place in the ledgers of history, but no block of marble or elaborate edifice can equal their lives of sacrifice and achievement, duty, and honor, as monuments to their time.” (390)*



# EXHIBITION CREDITS

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Most of the text in the exhibit comes from the book *The Greatest Generation* by Tom Brokaw, marked by quotations. Stories of individuals with Iowa connections were written by the curatorial team. All items, unless otherwise noted, are from the University of Iowa Libraries' collections.

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