STORIES WORTH TELLING:
MARKING 20 YEARS OF “THE GREATEST GENERATION”

The University of Iowa Libraries
Main Library Gallery
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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.
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.

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

“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)
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.

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.

Glenwood Tolson
the community leader

Evelyn Crary Bacon
the frontline healer

Dick Hayashi
the immigrant’s son

Stewart Stern
the young artist
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
"I was unprepared for the magnitude of the book’s popularity and for the emotional reaction it triggered across generational lines..."

–Tom Brokaw
“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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And of course, a thank you to those of “the Greatest Generation” for inspiring so much.

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.
