

Museum Visitor Studies, Evaluation & Audience Research

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Summative Evaluation:
Minnesota's Greatest Generation
Exhibition

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SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION

The Minnesota History Society (MHS) works diligently to “connect people with history to help them gain perspective on their lives” (MHS, 2010). *Minnesota’s Greatest Generation* is a stand-out exhibition that flourishes from the fruits of Minnesota History Center’s (MHC) labors in this area. The exhibition is highly engaging and truly helps visitors reflect, reminisce, and think about history as personal and relevant as evidenced by their responses to the interview questions as well as by the many stories and anecdotes that they shared in the interview process. Below, we unpack visitors’ experiences in the exhibition in the context of MHC’s mission and exhibition objective as well as in relation to existing knowledge about history museum visitors and people’s ideas about the Greatest Generation and generational identity.

The findings presented here are among the most salient. Please read the body of the report for a more comprehensive presentation of findings.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- ◆ About one-quarter of visitors said they came to the History Center that day to visit *Minnesota’s Greatest Generation*.
- ◆ When asked about the objects, stories, or parts of the exhibition that stood out to them, visitors talked about War exhibits most frequently (as opposed to Depression [pre-War] or Boom [post-War] exhibits); one-half of visitors named the multimedia show on the airplane.
- ◆ Visitors who experienced the multimedia show on the airplane talked about their appreciation for the Greatest Generation more than other visitors.
- ◆ The soda fountain did not seem to have a profound impact on visitors’ overall experience in the exhibition, although it did make some visitors think about simpler times.
- ◆ Almost all visitors said they read the text throughout the exhibition, and unprompted, more than one-third talked about the stories and firsthand accounts that they read. Most visitors—both prior to and upon prompting—said that they enjoyed the firsthand accounts because they are interesting, real, emotional, and personal.
- ◆ Many visitors said they talked with others in their visit group in the exhibition. Objects seemed to prompt the most conversation and, in particular, visitors frequently talked about objects in the Depression (pre-War) and Boom (post-War) sections because visitors remembered them from their own daily life or because they recalled what life was like back then.
- ◆ The exhibition message was mostly clear to visitors. Two-thirds talked about the Greatest Generation either explicitly (i.e., named the generation) or implicitly (e.g., talked about the people who lived through the Depression and/or World War II), while one-third talked about history in general as it pertains to the Depression, War, and/or Minnesota.

- ◆ All visitors spoke positively about the Greatest Generation and described them as “tough” and “hard-working” people who survived a great deal. Most visitors said that these were perceptions they had about the Greatest Generation prior to their visit.
- ◆ More than one-half of visitors said that the exhibition made them think about their generational identity although responses varied from no explanation, to considering the events that define their lives, to considering what a generation is. Visitors’ generation (e.g., Millennial, Generation X, Baby Boomer, or Silent Generation) did not seem to impact their responses.
- ◆ The idea of legacy (i.e., the actions of the Greatest Generation affect us today) did not really emerge, although it was hinted at in the way that some visitors talked about World War II.

DISCUSSION

VISITORS’ GENERAL EXHIBITION EXPERIENCES

Visitors seemed to have highly engaging as well as highly personal experiences in *Minnesota’ Greatest Generation*. While the World War II exhibits were most top-of-mind, visitors’ experiences with the Depression (pre-War) and Boom (post-War) exhibits were also significant. Interestingly, visitors’ experiences at the War exhibits were distinctly different from their experiences at the Depression (pre-War) and Boom (post-War) exhibits.

WAR EXHIBITS

Visitors’ experiences in the War exhibits were often marked by the firsthand accounts presented in the exhibition text and by the multimedia show in the airplane, which they felt provided a real and authentic account of what it would be like to have experienced World War II. Visitors’ accounts of their time with the War exhibits reflected interest in the War and war experiences as well as appreciation for what the generation had experienced, which came out most clearly in interviews with visitors who experienced the multimedia show. Interestingly, however, while visitors talked a great deal about their experiences at the War exhibits and sometimes talked about the War as it relates to their relatives in interviews, there was little conversation in these exhibits compared to conversation that took place in the Depression (pre-War) and Boom (post-War) exhibits, as reported by interviewees; this may be explained by visitors’ contemplative engagement with and abundance of stories in these exhibits.

As many have noted, there has been a consistent fervor for World War II, which some indicate surged in the 1990s around the fiftieth anniversary of the War (Horrigan, 2006; Van Ells, 2002). There are many explanations for the fervor around the War (e.g., decidedly justified war, affected many people, men/women involved in the war effort were entering retirement and suddenly had time to reflect, etc.), although one author also notes that firsthand accounts of the War were absent for so long. Author James Bradley, for instance, was inspired to write *Flags of Our Fathers* because John Bradley, his father and one of the men to raise the flag on Iwo Jima, rarely talked about his War experiences. As quoted in Van Ells (2002), “the veteran’s [John Bradley’s] silence gave World War II ‘a sense of unsolved mystery’” (Van Ells, 2002). This sentiment emerged explicitly from one exhibition visitor:

You know, it’s interesting because my father spent from the fall of 1940 until September of 1945 in Louisiana and then the South Pacific; and then finally came home in August of 1945. He never talked about the War, and we never understood it. [female, 62, not visiting with children]

Visitors’ experiences with the War exhibits provide a strong argument for presenting oral history, especially with World War II exhibits. This strategy—removing the curatorial voice in favor of oral history—has proven to be a very effective strategy for helping visitors make meaning, and as MHS attests, for helping visitors engage with history “on a personal level, both emotional and intellectual”

(Chew, 2002, 34-45; Filene, 2008). Also attesting to the effectiveness of oral history for meaning making is that, while not explicitly probed for in the interviews, the idea that the Greatest Generation is made up of ordinary people naturally surfaced; this is a very astute observation that shows that visitors are connecting history with the people who make history.

DEPRESSION (PRE-WAR) AND BOOM (POST-WAR) EXHIBITS

The Depression (pre-War) and Boom (post-War) exhibits book-ended the War exhibits—not only because they follow the life arc—but because they created a different type of exhibit experience that balances the quiet, contemplation in the War exhibits. In the Depression and Boom sections, visitors’ experiences were marked by conversation that spurred more from the objects than from the firsthand accounts. Visitors made many personal connections with the objects, specifically in the Boom section, since many of the objects on display were part of visitors’ daily life (i.e., things that they remember from their parents’ or grandparents’ homes). For instance, visitors remembered television sets from the 1950s, which didn’t have remote control, and the kitchen plates that look a lot like those of their grandmother. While the conversation in the exhibitions may be considered superficial at times, the objects provided stimulation for inter-generational conversation about family history.

VISITORS’ COMPREHENSION OF THE EXHIBITION THEME

MHS was particularly interested (and concerned) as to whether visitors understood that the exhibition followed the lives of one generation from the Depression, to War, and through the Boom (i.e., this isn’t just a World War II exhibition). In fact, many visitors did understand that the exhibition focused on the Greatest Generation—although the degree of comprehension varied; about one-third explicitly said that the exhibition was about one generation, while another one-third talked about the people who lived through the Depression and/or War. Overall, we consider this to be relatively successful since more than one-half of visitors had a clear sense of the thesis, and there were no visitors whose understanding of the exhibition was completely off-base.

VISITORS’ IDEAS ABOUT THE GREATEST GENERATION

Towards the end of the interview, visitors were asked, “After having seen this exhibition, how would you describe the Greatest Generation?” Visitors’ responses to this question were often immediate (few “uhs,” “hmms,” and other terms of hesitation) and mostly in keeping with the popular literature and depictions of the Greatest Generation (e.g., individuals who lived through the Depression and War, hard workers, tough, community-oriented, etc.). And, not surprisingly perhaps, visitors said that these were not new ideas for them. Rather, they said that they were familiar with the generation either because they lived through certain events described (e.g., the War or Boom) or recall a close family member who did. Additionally, there were a handful of visitors who were deeply interested in different events discussed in the exhibition, like World War II, or had read Tom Brokaw’s book, *The Greatest Generation*. In fact, one interviewee brazenly responded to the interviewers request to describe the Greatest Generation as such: “Read the book. I think that’s the name [of it—*The Greatest Generation*]. [It’s] by the newscaster—Brokaw.” While candid, his response implies, not so subtly, that the Greatest Generation is a familiar topic.

As many museum practitioners recognize, the notion of “familiar” is a double-edged sword. The benefits are that a “familiar” subject can be a jumping off point to bring visitors’ to a new or deeper understanding. However, the pitfalls are that visitors may arrive at an exhibition with strong perceptions that can deter them from accepting new or deeper ideas. In the case of this exhibition, it seems that the benefits outweigh the pitfalls. While most visitors said their ideas about the exhibition did not change, visitors seemed to have made more personal connections or revisited personal connections with the Greatest Generation. These types of experiences pertain to the History Center’s goals to prompt personal connections.

VISITORS' THOUGHTS ABOUT THEIR OWN GENERATIONAL IDENTITY

It did not seem that visitors left the exhibition with a greater sense of their generational identity. However, generational identity is a sophisticated idea that many visitors may need time to think about and consider, and some may refute completely. Some preliminary investigation into generations reveals that psychologists and sociologists ideas about generation vary by researcher. For instance, in psychology, there is a school of thought that promotes generational cohort theory, which argues that “changes across generation are primarily a function of social events rather than biological processes” (Psychlopedia, 2008). The contrasting argument is that “values, attitudes, beliefs, and inclinations are a function of age and maturity rather than generation” (Psychlopedia, 2008). Given psychologists are divided about the impact of generation, it is not so surprising that visitors' thoughts are varied too.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the exhibition is successful overall, the History Center may consider these recommendations:

- ◆ While the Soda Fountain exhibition does several things well, the Center may want to heighten the focus of the Soda Fountain so it does one thing great. Currently, the exhibition serves as an interactive space for children, a nostalgic space, and a poignant transition from the Depression to the War. However, there are conflicts among these conceptions. For instance, because the exhibition is child-friendly and interactive, the crowds of children that gather at the exhibit prevent some visitors from stopping and noticing the Pearl Harbor video playing behind the counter. If staff wishes to focus the Soda Fountain to achieve one particular end, they could use the primary objective of the exhibition as a guidepost for decision making—or staff may ask themselves, “If we want this exhibit to do one thing, what would it be?”
- ◆ If the Center wants to prompt visitors to think about their generational identity, at the end of the exhibition, it may want to pose questions for visitors to consider, similar to the discussion guide questions that are included at the end of many novels. Questions may include, “How would you define the word generation?”; “Are there events that you think will define your generation?”; and, “Do you feel like you are part of a generation? Why? Why not?” Further, this strategy will help visitors make connections between the exhibition and their lives, thus, bolstering the idea of relevancy.
- ◆ While the exhibition was very successful at helping visitors make personal connections, the exhibition may capitalize on the many visitor memories by including them in an oral history project. MHS is already capturing visitor memories through the “Share Your Story” feature on the exhibition’s Web site, so adding kiosks, comment books, or a computer station at the end of the exhibition may be an easy way to leverage existing efforts. Further, by including a “Share Your Story” feature in the exhibition, the Center can capture the memories in an immediate way—that is, as they are triggered by objects, stories, or other aspects of the exhibition.
- ◆ If the exhibition is to be translated into a nationwide traveling exhibit, designers may consider what people or objects may resonate with a national audience. The current exhibition successfully tapped into visitors’ Minnesota memories, giving them specific people, places, and local companies that they could relate to. If taken to a national level, the personal connections may be less frequent. To resonate with a wider audience, exhibit developers might want to carefully consider which stories and objects in the exhibition have the capacity to touch a broad audience.

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INTRODUCTION

The Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) contracted with Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (RK&A) to evaluate the exhibition *Minnesota's Greatest Generation (MGG)*. The exhibition traces the lives of a generation of Minnesotans born in the 1910s and 1920s. All data were collected through visitor interviews conducted between March and April 2010.

Specifically, the study's objectives explore:

- ◆ What do visitors find memorable / surprising (e.g., exhibition not just about the War) / evocative about the exhibition?
- ◆ What personal connections do visitors to the exhibition make (e.g., I lived this; I've heard these stories before; this is just like/quite different from what happened in other generations, etc.)?
- ◆ What types of exhibition elements help visitors connect to the stories in the exhibition (e.g., objects, quotes, photos)?
- ◆ Do visitors notice / appreciate the non-curatorial voice and sharing of authority and history (specifically present in the quotations)?
- ◆ What are visitors' experiences in the Soda Fountain (e.g., is it overwhelming, distracting, and what are visitors taking away?)?
- ◆ How (if at all) does the media program in the airplane affect visitors' experiences/take-aways?
- ◆ What is the nature of conversations among visitors and what role do they play in visitors' experiences in the exhibition?
- ◆ To what extent do visitors recognize the life arc presented in the exhibition: the depression, the War, and the boom?
- ◆ To what extent does the exhibition challenge/ adds to/ change visitors' understanding of the Greatest Generation?
- ◆ To what extent do visitors recognize the legacy of the Greatest Generation (e.g., do visitors understand that the events that took place during the lives of the Greatest Generation affect us today)?
- ◆ To what extent do visitors reflect on their own generational identity (e.g., do they realize that they, too, are part of a generation)?

METHODOLOGY

RK&A trained MHS staff and volunteers to conduct in-depth interviews during a workshop on March 26. Trained staff and volunteers interviewed 50 visitors after visiting *MGG*. Trained staff and volunteers intercepted visitors exiting the exhibition using a continuous random sampling method. In keeping with this method, staff and volunteers intercepted adult visitors (18 years or older) upon exiting the exhibition and asked them to participate in the interview. If the visitor declined, the data collector logged the visitor's gender, estimated age, description of the visit group, and reason for refusal. If the visitor agreed, the interview was conducted using a standardized interview guide (see Appendix A). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to facilitate analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING METHOD

All data were analyzed qualitatively. That is, the evaluator studied the data for meaningful patterns and, as patterns and trends emerged, grouped similar responses.

Findings are organized according to the interview guide. Within each section, trends and themes in the interview data are presented from most- to least-frequently occurring. Exemplary quotations are presented to elucidate the trends. Additionally, for one question, RK&A used a word cloud to present trends.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW S

INTRODUCTION

RK&A conducted 50 interviews with visitors to the *Minnesota's Greatest Generation* exhibition at the Minnesota History Center. More than one-half of interviewees are female, and the median age is 58. Most interviewees are Minnesota residents, and one-half had visited the Minnesota History Center previously (a few were members). About one-third of interviewees were visiting the History Center with children. The participation rate was 68 percent.

VISIT REASON

When asked about their reasons for visiting the History Center that day, almost one-half of interviewees cited general reasons for visiting the Museum, including that it was spring break, they had the day off, and they wanted to spend time with family and friends. These visitors did not cite specific exhibitions or interests.

We're on spring break, and I thought it would be something educational to bring my daughter to. [female, 39, visiting with children]

About one-quarter of interviewees said they were visiting the History Center to see the *Minnesota's Greatest Generation* exhibition. A few of these visitors had seen the exhibition already and were returning with family and friends (see the first and second quotations below). A few others said the exhibition was recommended by a friend (see the third quotation). Still a few others were visiting the exhibition as part of a group trip, including those organized by a Senior College, historical society, or church.

(Why did you decide to come to the exhibition today?) Because my husband has already been here twice, and I didn't come along those times so he thought I should come—he thought I would like to see it. [female, 79, not visiting with children]

I had been here [to the exhibition] once briefly, and I brought my dad who was born in 1943 and was in town visiting from Michigan. [female, 34, not visiting with children]

Actually, a coworker had come [to the exhibition] with her kids on Thursday and told me a lot about what she saw in here; in particular, she saw something similar to something that I have in my house from my grandmother, so she said 'You have to go see; you have to go see!' She told me about the soda fountain shop for the kids to play in and the World War II stuff—my son wanted to come so bad when he heard about that, and he's only 11. [female, 42, visiting with children]

About one-fifth of interviewees came to the History Center to see the *Benjamin Franklin: In Search of a Better World* exhibition. All other responses were miscellaneous and included admission incentives, such as a coupon, free pass, or library pass, and specific interests, such as the history of St. Paul in the early 20th-century.

GENERAL EXHIBITION EXPERIENCES

This section describes visitors' top-of-mind responses to the exhibition; data are the result of preliminary, open-ended questions about visitors' experiences in the exhibition.

SURPRISING ASPECTS

When asked what if anything they found surprising about the exhibition, more than one-half of interviewees cited at least one thing. About one-fifth talked about the objects in the exhibition, and a few talked about specific objects that they remembered from their childhood/life or that they currently possess, such as plates or toys like the erector set (see the first quotation below). Additionally, a few commented on the amount of objects in the exhibition. Still, a couple each said they were surprised by the authenticity of the objects and the fact that people saved these things (see the second quotation).

(What, if anything, was surprising about the exhibition?) The first thing I saw was the first erector set because my son has, of course, today's version, but the original [is here]. So, I ran and I got him to show him that it was made in the 1920s. Something unexpected. [female, 42, visiting with children]

(What, if anything, was surprising about the exhibition?) That it [some of the objects were] made so long ago and that people actually hung on to these things . . . because we look at our kids' toys now and they're so expendable. We donate them, and some of them get thrown away because they're broken. . . . These toys [in the exhibition] are real . . . and somebody had enough forethought to save them. We don't save anything; it all goes somewhere else. And I'm glad that people are saving these things. [female, 42, visiting with children]

Fewer than one-half could not think of anything surprising about the exhibition. A few said the exhibition was what they had expected and a few others said it was not surprising because they were familiar with the generation either because they lived through some of the events described (e.g., the War), heard stories from their relatives about the generation, or had read Tom Brokaw's book *The Greatest Generation* (see the quotations below).

(What, if anything, was surprising about the exhibition?) Not a lot because I lived through a lot of it. I was born in 1939, and I remember gathering the milkweed pods for the war effort and remember the rationing of tires, gasoline, and sugar—we used saccharine at home because of that. I was a little kid, so it was just interesting to remember all of that. I was a little too young to get into the War but relatives were in the War. I had fun telling him [my grandson] about how much of it I knew because I was there. [male, 70, visiting with children]

I don't know if anything surprised me. I'd read the book by Tom Brokaw—*The Greatest Generation*. Seeing as how this is Minnesota's Greatest Generation, so I don't know . . . I've always been impressed by just people accomplishing what they did and what we have as a result. [male, 63, not visiting with children]

STAND-OUT ASPECTS

When asked what stories, objects, or parts of the exhibition stood out to them, most interviewees named specific exhibits. Interviewees most frequently talked about the War World II exhibits, including the multimedia show in the airplane (which nearly one-half of interviewees mentioned), artillery shell assembly line, war souvenirs, and the tank (see the first three quotations below). Boom (post-War) exhibits were the next most frequently mentioned; these interviewees talked about the kitchen, televisions, car, nursery, and cabins (see the second three quotations). Depression (pre-War) exhibits

were mentioned least frequently; exhibits mentioned include the soda fountain, movie theater, and scout uniforms (see the seventh quotation). A few interviewees did not mention specific exhibits, but enjoyed the stories or content in general (i.e., not exhibit specific).

(Of all the objects, stories and parts of the exhibition, which ones stood out to you most?) Definitely the—was it the C-47 airplane that you could sit inside? Definitely that one. (And what was it about the C-47 that interested you?) Not being really a history buff myself or knowing much about World War II, just sitting in there and the reality of what was actually happening for those men was huge. [female, 42, visiting with children]

Definitely being on the airplane. In fact, we just brought this gentleman [fellow member of a senior group] back up there because he didn't get on it before. I said, 'Well, you can't leave without doing that.' [female, 69, not visiting with children]

I thought that that ammunition loader was interesting—and to think of them trying to spin that thing all day long and making those shells as fast as they could. [male, 38, not visiting with children]

I liked all the old cars and television sets. I was born in the late 1950s so some of that stuff was around when I was just a kid. [male, 51, visiting with children]

I enjoyed the kitchen area. We had a refrigerator just like they had there. [female, 88, visiting with children]

I saw my set of bowls sitting on the kitchen counter back there! I actually have a set like that at home, so that definitely stuck out to me. [female, 69, not visiting with children]

I've always been interested in art and the movies, so I enjoyed going into that little theater and seeing Tom Mix, Roy Rogers, and Gene Autry. [female, 71, not visiting with children]

Most interviewees explained that they enjoyed these exhibits because they showed or reminded them about what life was like back then (see the first quotation below). Many of these interviewees talked about the differences between life then and now and described personal connections to certain objects, stories, or time periods (see the second and third quotations). Additionally, in talking about the parts of the exhibition that they enjoyed most, a few also expressed their appreciation for the generation and the life they led (see the fourth quotation).

Again, I think the stories about the War and what happened with the War stood out a lot, and then for me, a little closer [personally] was some of the old TVs, *Gunsmoke*, the appliances, and some of that older stuff that just put me back in that time. [male, 47, visiting with children]

There were so many things that resonated because [the exhibition shows] my parents' generation. You know the nursery and how people didn't come in—men weren't in the delivery rooms. They stood and saw their babies through the glass wall of the nursery . . . It was a generational thing that we just can't comprehend; it's just not the same. [female, 46, visiting with children]

(Of all the objects, stories and parts of the exhibition, which ones stood out to you most?) I thought there was a lot here that stands out just because . . . my grandfather was in the first world war and my father was in the second world war and he got a Bronze Star—he was injured

in the service but came home—so there's a lot. . . . Seeing all this stuff brings back memories. [female, 67, not visiting with children]

(Of all the objects, stories and parts of the exhibition, which ones stood out to you most?) Probably [the multimedia show on] the airplane. (Okay. What about that interested you?) It just kind of reminded me of how fortunate we are and how lucky our family is that my husband didn't have to go through anything like that; [we] had it kind of easy. [female, 35, visiting with children]

EXHIBIT EXPERIENCES

This section describes specific exhibit experiences that the History Center was interested in understanding, including whether visitors went to the soda fountain and the multimedia show on the airplane, what they did there, as well as what they took away from those experiences. Additionally, this section describes whether visitors talked while in the exhibition, what they may have talked about, and whether and what they read in the exhibition.

SODA FOUNTAIN EXHIBIT

Many interviewees visited the soda fountain exhibit. About one-half said they played or watched kids play in the exhibit; these interviewees often said that the kids pretended to be soda jerks and made sundaes and sometimes recalled other playful experiences including the jukebox, pinball machine, and the rotary phone (see the first quotation below). About one-quarter of interviewees looked at the menus and read the stories within them, while a few each said they looked at the signs and prices and generally looked around at the objects and décor (see the second quotation).

I think the first thing I did was watch my kids play with the stuff, making sure that they could play with everything. My kids had never used a dial phone before, and so I let them experience how long it takes to make a phone call with a dial phone. And then I went behind the bar and served ice cream, and I had my daughter do it and use the register. We just kind of role played back there. [female, 42, visiting with children]

Pricing. I thought it was very unique, and they started looking at [the costs] like 20 cents and 15 cents, and a lot of the Coke things that were there and the jukebox with the coins. [male, 77, visiting with children]

Since the History Center was particularly interested in whether visitors experienced the Pearl Harbor multimedia behind the soda counter, interviewers probed specifically about this component. Almost one-third of all interviewees (which is less than one-half of soda fountain visitors) experienced the Pearl Harbor media. The majority said that the multimedia depicted the bombing of Pearl Harbor, although it did not seem to play a large role in their experiences at the soda fountain. However, a few interviewees thought that it was significant that the multimedia played in the soda fountain since it mimics how and where the news of Pearl Harbor broke—suddenly, and in a soda fountain (see the quotation below).

When the radio comes on and says 'Pearl Harbor's been bombed,' you kind of go, 'Oh yeah; that really happened to people, and they were sitting in soda counters just like this.' [male, 41, visiting with children]

When asked what they took away was from their experiences at the soda fountain, about one-third did not respond to the question. Another one-third said their experiences in the soda fountain made them

think about what it would have been like to live in that era or made them reminisce about it (see the first quotation below). A few interviewees said their soda fountain experiences showed them that it was simpler time back then, and one interviewee lamented that these times had passed by (see the second and third quotation).

What I took away was memories of how it used to be and how people came together. . . . It was more community[-oriented]. [female, 39, visiting with children]

Just that things used to be much—I hate to say—simpler. Much easier and a different pace of life and it just looks really cool. [female, 37, visiting with children]

(Either this time or last time you were here, did you take away anything from the soda fountain area?) Oh, yeah. Definitely. I mean, just the simplicity of some things. It feels like we've lost that in a way. It's sort of lovely and sad at the same time. [female, 34, not visiting with kids]

Of the few visitors who did not stop at the soda fountain exhibit, the majority said the exhibit was too crowded and chaotic or that there were too many children at the exhibit (see the quotation below).

It was pretty chaotic at the time; there were lots of kids there and they were serving each other and so we kind of moved beyond that. [female, 47, visiting with children]

MULTIMEDIA EXHIBIT IN THE AIRPLANE

About two-thirds of the interviewees went to the multimedia exhibit in the airplane. The majority of these interviewees said they enjoyed the realism of the experiences, saying that they felt like they too were paratroopers entering the war. These visitors liked the noise, video, and narration of the exhibit (see the first quotation below). Additionally, the majority of the interviewees said that the multimedia experience helped them appreciate the feelings paratroopers must have experienced, such as “horror,” “fear,” “fright,” and “terror,” which some said helped them appreciate those men (see the second quotation). Some interviewees also commented generally on the war situation, calling it “tragic times” and describing how troops were up against “overwhelming odds.” A couple interviewees had concerns about the noise level and that the exhibit may be scary for children.

Like I had mentioned, it was kind of the reality of what those men actually went through. Being in there it was very visual and you could hear and feel—you could get wrapped up in the emotion of actually being there. I actually did leave though, when it got sad. I didn't want to hear about that part. [female, 42, visiting with children]

It makes you appreciate what these people went through—the real people. I mean this is—you know you're safe and you're fine in there, but if you put your imagination to use and you think about what these people would've been feeling at the time, it makes you appreciate all the more what they did. [female, 48, not visiting with children]

About one-third of interviewees did not experience the multimedia show in the airplane. When asked why they didn't visit the airplane, interviewees' responses varied. A few interviewees said they didn't have time or were trying to move through the exhibition quickly. A few other interviewees didn't realize that they could go into the plane or didn't notice an entrance to the plane. A few others said they were visiting the exhibition with children and sensed that the multimedia was not age-appropriate for their children. Still a few others described accessibility issues, saying that they didn't walk well enough to enter the airplane (e.g, walk with a cane, trouble with stairs and ramps) (see the quotation below). There were still a few others who did not provide a reason for skipping the multimedia exhibit.

(Did you see the multimedia show in the airplane?) You know, I can't remember. (It was the big airplane over at the end over there. You walk up the ramp and go inside.) Oh, no. We didn't go in that. (Was there any particular reason you skipped that one as well?) Because my cane; I have a little navigation problem. [female, 73, not visiting with children]

EXHIBITION TEXT

Almost all interviewees said they read some of the text in the exhibition. More than one-third of interviewees talked about the stories and firsthand accounts—often those from the World War II exhibits—and how these accounts presented unique and real perspectives (see the first two quotations); similarly, a few interviewees liked the connection between objects and real people (see the third quotation). About one-third talked about specific content areas of interest, such as the Baby Boom or the starvation research study at University of Minnesota (see the fourth quotation). About one-fifth said they read the text in the exhibition although they couldn't name one specific thing that piqued their interest. There were a few miscellaneous responses.

(Can you tell me about something that interested you?) At the end, I was reading about the people and how they grew up and then the part where the men were getting inducted in the army at Ft. Snelling. So, I was reading how that operation happened and the various experiences of the men and women who went through that and then the women working various industries during the war. (What about that interested you?) Just people's lives. [I am] interested in history and not just how one was taught in school. From war to war, it's interesting to hear the people's stories and what people were actually doing back home—not just fighting wars. [female, 55, not visiting with children]

The World War II stories and the souvenir exhibition—just the pitiable state of picking up things and the Bataan march. Things just horrify me about that . . . like the constant war and that somebody had to do that. [male, 53, not visiting with children]

These last ones [exhibits] over here, there was just like an object from a particular person and then there was a little blurb about that person and their life. I thought that was really neat to have some sort of artifact from that person and then have their story on the wall. [female, 31, not visiting with children]

I was really interested in how the University of Minnesota had that semi-starvation diet that they put the men on so that they could see what the postwar effects would be if there were struggles for food. [female, 34, not visiting with children]

When prompted to talk specifically about their thoughts about presenting history through stories and memories in the exhibition, most interviewees said they enjoyed it because it made history more interesting. Several liked that it provided a real and emotional perspective, which some said helped them connect personally with history (see the first quotation below). Note that some interviewees talked about the stories together with accompanying pictures or objects (see the second quotation).

(The exhibition presents history through stories and memories. What are your thoughts about presenting history this way?) I like it. I find the personal aspect of it to be more vivid—real. I think the insights from individuals who actually did it—what they remember and what they see—is better than a third party repeating it, whether it be through a book or a movie. You know, taking a picture versus hearing somebody's experiences and what they were thinking is pretty close to touching it. [male, 52, visiting with children]

There was one thing—the lady with the red hair whose workman’s uniform was out here. She was the air force lady. When you went around a little later, she was a teacher, and then at the end, we saw her picture with Tom Brokaw and with her Air Force uniform. It’s like, ‘Wow! You can go back and read that she did this at this time, and she was a teacher in middle life. The things she did and how she changed.’ [female, 37, visiting with children]

There were also a few miscellaneous responses, and one interviewee said he preferred a “historic,” fact-based presentation.

CONVERSATION

When asked whether they had talked with other visitors or staff in the exhibition, many interviewees said they had. Most interviewees talked with other visitors (normally in their visit group), while a few talked with staff, mostly about rationing (see the quotation below). A few interviewees said they did not talk with anyone while in the exhibition, and the majority of these interviewees were alone.

We talked to the guy around the table with the rations about the victory gardens, nylons, and stuff. [female, 34, not visiting with children]

The subject of conversation varied greatly, although it seemed to be prompted most often by objects. Objects—particularly those in the Boom (post-War) section followed by the Depression (pre-War) section—encouraged many interviewees to share stories and memories with friends and relatives (see the first two quotations). Content spurred a few conversations, but they were often exclamations, such as, “I didn’t know that!” (see the fourth quotation.)

I didn’t talk with any staff in particular, but of course, I talked to my kids about certain things that I saw that maybe my grandparents used to have in their home or the way of life that my grandparents would talk about. I would say, ‘See? This is what your great-grandma and grandpa used to have to do to get this done,’ ‘These were the plates they used to use,’ or ‘I remember this used to be in their cabin.’ Those types of things. [female, 42, visiting with children]

I talked with my mom right over at ‘The Generation is Born’ [section]. She was saying ‘Oh, we had one of those bassinets for my baby sister, and this is what we did with it.’ We were [also] talking about the hospital bill because her father had saved her hospital bill so we were comparing them. We were talking about the kitchen, and she said there were no dishwashers, so we were just talking about the everyday stuff that we saw. [female, 28, not visiting with children]

It was pretty cool to see that the one tank was made here in Minnesota, and then, another volunteer lady that works here showed us that they actually did the shipbuilding in Savage. It was like, ‘Really? No way!’ We didn’t know that. [female, 37, visiting with children]

OUTCOME OF EXHIBITION EXPERIENCES

This section describes the outcome of visitors’ exhibition experiences, including what messages they took away from the exhibition, including their ideas about the Greatest Generation and thoughts about their generational identity.

EXHIBITION MESSAGES

When asked what they thought the exhibition was trying to show or tell visitors, almost two-thirds said it was about the lives of people who experienced the Depression and/or World War II; the degree of

specificity varied although they all focused on people's lives. About one-third of interviewees clearly stated that the exhibition described the life of one generation (see the first and second quotations below). The other one-third talked generally about people's lives—with some indicating or implying the Depression or World War II—but without using the word generation (see the third and fourth quotations). Also note that several described the people featured in the exhibition as “ordinary” people who faced extraordinary challenges (see the fifth quotation).

I would say it's trying to show about a generation—specifically how that generation lived in Minnesota versus what people might've read in the national media about the Greatest Generation from Tom Brokaw. [female, 28, not visiting with children]

Well I think it's just to educate and give the next two or three generations perspective on what it was like back then and what that generation went through. [male, 47, visiting with children]

(After all that you saw and read, what would you say the exhibition is trying to tell visitors?) [It tells visitors about] the hard life that people went through back in the Depression era. They got themselves out of the Depression because of the hard work and the togetherness that everybody felt because they had the same, common enemy in World War II. [male, 58, not visiting with children]

I think that a big part of it is trying to really illustrate that everybody that was involved here went through times, that technically for a lot of people, can be difficult for any individual. . . . To me, I think it really illustrates that these people aren't people with supernatural powers; they have concerns and problems just like we do. [male, 63, not visiting with children]

Just to tell stories of everyday people and how their lives were like. . . . At the end, they were talking about why that generation is called the Greatest Generation., and I like the example of the guy who said, 'History was what was great, and we just happened to have lived through it.' [female, 31, visiting with children]

More than one-third said the exhibition was about history in general, meaning that they did not talk about the people explicitly but the events in general (see the first quotation below). Some of these interviewees said it was about the history of Minnesota, a few said it was about the War, and one said it was about the Depression (see the second and third quotations).

I think it's just trying to tell people of the history of what had happened. I think history is important to know so we don't repeat the same mistakes of the past and we can learn from history probably better than anything else. [male, 38, not visiting with children]

(After all that you saw and read, what would you say the exhibition is trying to tell visitors?) How much Minnesota contributed to the world. [female, 58, visiting with children]

I think they were just trying to show visitors the shocking reality of World War II. It wasn't just the war you play in *Call of Duty: World at War*. That's how some people look at it. [male, 41, visiting with children]

THE GREATEST GENERATION

When asked how they would describe the Greatest Generation, all interviewees talked positively and sometimes reverently about the generation. Many talked about the events that the Greatest Generation experienced, specifically the War and the Depression; these interviewees went on to describe the

generation as “tough,” “hard-working,” and “brave” people (see the first two quotations). A few also mentioned the fact that these were real, everyday people who endured so much (see the third quotation). Additionally, a few recalled people who they knew from that generation, such as parents and grandparents (see the fourth quotation).

Just a peculiar time coming out of the Depression—the toughness that developed in people and the ingenuity that helped them survive that time and set them up to have victory in a war. [male, 41, visiting with children]

They were just a generation that was really defined so much by the things that happened in the world in their time, particularly the war, certainly the Depression and like I said then the baby boom. They lived through all these terrible things, and yet, they totally held on to looking to the future with faith and excitement. . . . They built the world back up after [the War]. I mean, they didn’t come back and just put their heads in the sand. [female, 46, visiting with children]

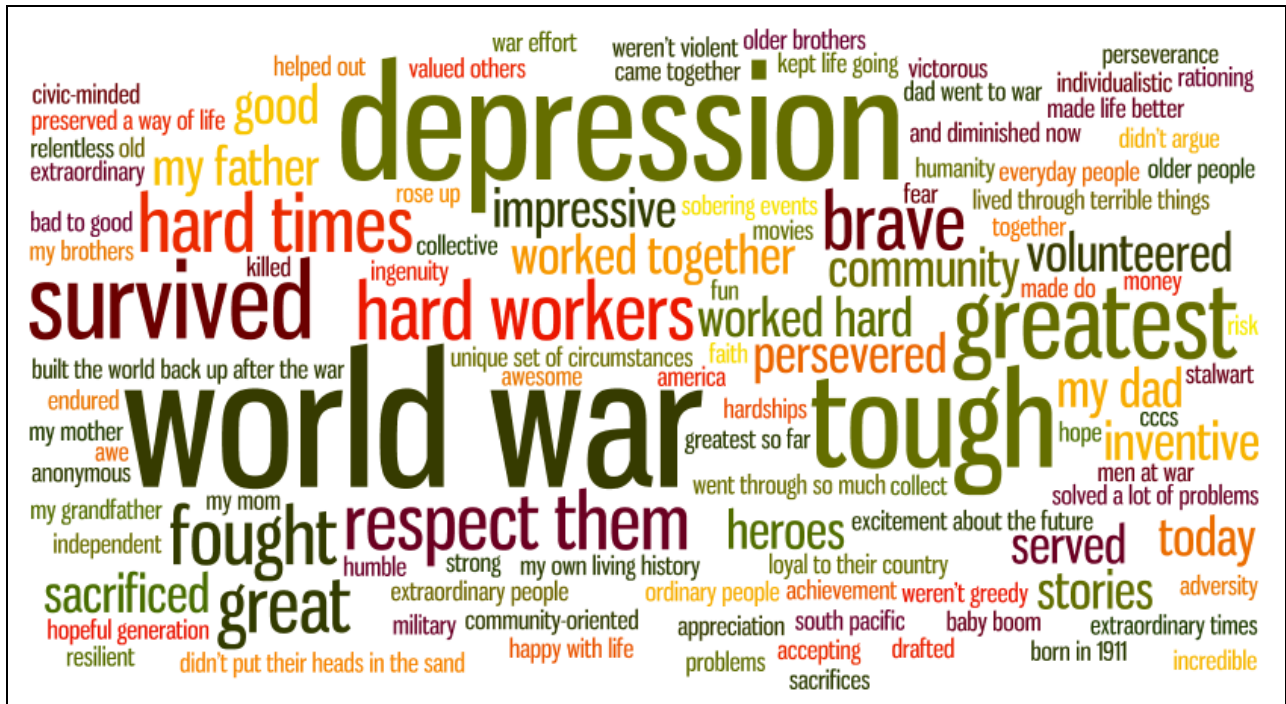
The Greatest Generation—I would describe—they went through an extraordinary thing, but they were still very ordinary in a lot of ways. The [exhibition] talked a lot about them being very civic-minded and very collective, and I think that’s very different from now. So, I would say they’re different from today because they had that experience where they came together so they have a collective mentality that’s different. [female, 28, visiting with children]

To me, I guess it’s—when I think about my father as kind of being part of that because he was born in 1911. . . . He had some very good stories about the Depression; he was in the CCC’s, and when it came time for the war, he was a little bit older and he did get drafted but he never served because he had a pierced eardrum, and they wouldn’t take him as a result of that. To me, I think it connects more with my own living history. [male, 63, not visiting with children]

Using interviewees’ descriptions of the Greatest Generation, we created a word cloud to demonstrate the large trends. Words and phrases that came up more frequently in responses, such as “world war,” “depression,” “tough,” “greatest,” and “survived,” appear larger than words and phrases used infrequently, such as “civic-minded” and “resilient.”

FIGURE 1

WORD CLOUD DEPICTING VISITORS' DESCRIPTIONS OF THE GREATEST GENERATION



¹The word cloud was created using Wordle™.

When asked whether interviewees' ideas about the Greatest Generation had changed, most said that they had not. However, all of these interviewees said that it broadened or deepened their understanding of and appreciation for the Greatest Generation.

GENERATIONAL IDENTITY

When asked whether the exhibition made them consider how they are part of a generation, more than one-half of interviewees said it did, although responses varied greatly. While several did not explain how they thought about their generation, several others thought about the events that define their generation. For instance, a few interviewees from the Silent Generation said they reminisced about the events in the exhibition that also impacted their generation, such as the War and Boom sections, and a few interviewees from various generations thought about what events would define their lives, including whether they have happened already (see the first quotation below). Additionally, a few others posed the question, "What is a generation?" and a couple said they did not feel like they had a generational identity (see the second quotation).

(Did the exhibition make you think about how you are part of a generation?) I think it's more that question, 'What will be the hallmarks of my generation?' One-hundred years from now, or 50 years from now, what will they say was special about our generation? Because I think it's hard to see it—maybe not while you're in the middle of a war—but it can be hard to see it otherwise when you're in the middle of it. [female, 46, not visiting with children]

I liked it because as I was walking through I was thinking like what events would be shown when my generation would be in a historical society. I'm sure that people that were part of this generation could come through and recognize certain things. I think it's eye-opening for me to

try to realize like what would be like my generational strong points of history. Yeah, I liked it.
[female, 38, visiting with children]

Yeah. My generation doesn't really seem like a generation, I guess. [male, 30, not visiting with children]

Several interviewees said the exhibition did not cause them consider their generational identity; a few each were part of the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, and Generation X. A few said that they didn't yet reflect on their generational identity, or that it would be more top-of-mind when they were older (see the quotation below). Several other responses were miscellaneous and did not address the question asked.

(Did the exhibition make you think about how you are part of a generation?) Oh, a generation. Not yet, but maybe when I get a little older. [male, 40, not visiting with children]

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

REMOVED FOR PROPRIETARY PURPOSES