John Bodnar

Generational Memory in an American Town The

idea of generational memory is widely invoked by scholars of
modern American history. Drawing on the insights of Mannheim,
who argued that social and political events encountered in early
adulthood can permanently shape outlook, numerous historians
have explained conflict and debate in modern America in terms
of the disparate memories of respective generations. In the most
familiar case, scholars have noted the divergent recollections of
people who lived through the cataclysmic decades of the 1930s
and 1960s, suggesting that the imprint of those times determined
subsequent moral and political viewpoints.[1]

In the scholarly formulation, the "depression generation"
apparently concluded that the central institutions and authorities
that patterned their lives were responsible for pulling them
through hard times and the war experience that followed, and
that they would never need to be changed. Thus, they resolutely
defended the traditional family, communal ties, religion, corporate
capitalism, and the American nation. Terkel's renowned study of
remembering the Great Depression argued that the event left "an
invisible scar" on those who lived it; and his oral history of World
War II revealed how much those who experienced hard times
appreciated the jobs that the war produced. Conflict with insti-

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1 Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London, 1952), 292–299, 301.
Mannheim also argued that older groups tend to cling to the views of their youth and transmit
them to subsequent generations, and that younger groups were, to a greater extent than their
elders, in "fresh contact" with present experience. On the strength and weaknesses of using
the concept of generations, see Alan B. Spitzer, "The Historical Problem of Generations,"
American Historical Review, LXXVIII (1973), 1353–1385; Philip Abrams, *Historical Sociology*
(Ithaca, 1982), 240–241; Michael X. Delli Caprini, "Age and History: Generations and
Sociopolitical Change," in Roberta S. Sigel (ed.), *Political Learning in Adulthood: A Sourcebook
of Theory and Research* (Chicago, 1982), 12–14; David Kertzer, "Generation as a Sociological
Problem," *American Sociological Review*, IX (1983), 125–149.

tutions and authorities existed in the various accounts, but ultimately, people recalled solidarity in families, communities, workplaces, and the nation as a whole. Rieder argued that residents in a section of Brooklyn, New York, in the 1970s resisted racial integration of their neighborhood, modern ideas of sexual liberation, and the critics of their country because, "as children of the Great Depression" and as participants in World War II, they exalted such values as homeownership, traditional families and mores, and patriotism.[2]

The members of the "sixties generation" are generally regarded as mirror images of their parents. They tend to recall traditional authorities as repressive and untrustworthy. A survey of the "baby boomers," born between 1946 and 1964, conducted by *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1988, claimed that they "challenged virtually all the social mores and political values that had come before." The study stressed their commitment to new sexual norms, their flight from marriage, and their experimentation with drugs and new musical forms. "Boomers," themselves, although often idealizing the model of a traditional family, told the magazine's investigators that they placed less emphasis on a "close-knit family" and "respect for authority" than did the generation that preceded them. Indeed, nearly all scholars who have looked at this group have stressed its tendency to rebel against traditional institutions as a hallmark of its collective identity. In one of the most complete investigations of the age group, Roof found that, despite their differences, those in the "sixties generation" were unified by their shared rebellion against traditional institutions,

2 Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York, 1986), 3, 89, 131; *idem, "The Good War:" An Oral History of World War Two* (New York, 1984); Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1985), 17–18. The title of Glenn H. Elder's, *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience* (Chicago, 1974) implies that the Great Depression was more decisive in its impact than the book's actual contents do. Elder's book demonstrates that the 1930s reveal a complex relationship between hard times and personal lives. For instance, he found that the Depression did not alter many traditional conceptions of marriage and family, including the centrality of having children. However, it did influence the "timing" of childbirth. Thus, decisions to delay having children in the 1930s contributed to a "baby boom" after 1945 (282–289). The people studied by Elder were examined at later stages of their lives in John A. Clausen, *American Lives: Looking Back at the Children of the Great Depression* (New York, 1993). Clausen further minimizes the impact of the Depression, finding that viewpoints and characteristics acquired in concrete relationships during formative periods of their lives were more influential. See also Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto, 1987), 17. A 1985 telephone survey by two sociologists asked American citizens what events seemed most

which further explained their involvement in numerous kinds of searches for meaning at midlife; they had already rejected many of the traditional prescriptions for living. A Gallup Poll from 1985 made a similar point: This generation was even less likely to trust social and political institutions and their leaders than people who were born after them.[3]

The manner by which people recall the past and use it to fashion outlooks in the present can be determined from life histories. This study of generational memory is based on a collection of accounts from individuals in Whiting, Indiana, an industrial town near Chicago, in 1991. The limitations are obvious. One town, one class, and one scholar's predispositions do not make for a representative national sample. Whiting is not America. Nonetheless, what was remembered in Whiting was clearly linked to many of the issues that pervaded the nation's political discourse in the past and in the present.

The town manifests a pattern representative of the midwest industrial belt: economic and population expansion early in this century, an interlude of economic contraction in the 1930s, economic stability in the period from the 1940s to the 1960s, and a rapid decline of 30 percent in population from 1970 to 1990 and of 70 percent in employment at the town's major source of jobs—the refinery of Standard Oil of Indiana—from 1960 to 1990. Economic turmoil was accompanied by broad transformations in the politics and culture of postwar America. Traditional religious, corporate, and governmental institutions lost some of their authority and ability to command loyalty, and individual goals came to supersede collective ones. The institutional pillars of Whiting— the Catholic Church, Standard Oil, and the Democratic Party—all

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important to them. Those born before 1930 most frequently cited World War II, but those born between 1941 and 1965 cited the conflict in Vietnam. The authors suggested that social and political events could make a "distinctive imprint" on people at a young age. See Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott, "Generations and Collective Memories," *American Sociological Review,* LIV (1989), 359–381, which tests Mannheim's assertions that generations receive distinguishing characteristics from social and political events during their youth. Mannheim, *Essays,* 276–320, makes the crucial point that generations are much more loosely bonded together than "concrete groups" like tribes or communities; he called them "cliques." Delli Caprini, "Age and History," 21.

3   David Sheff, "Portrait of a Generation," *Rolling Stone,* 524 (1988), 46–57; Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (New York, 1993), 40–41; Paul Light, *Baby Boomers* (New York, 1988), 32, 145–146.

suffered losses during this period. Fathers could no longer assure their sons of jobs at the refinery, as their own fathers had been able to do. Young people were more likely to divorce and avoid church attendance than their parents were. Republicans won the majority of the votes for president in 1972 and 1980 in a town that had otherwise voted Democratic since the 1920s. In American culture as a whole, authority became more decentralized, and the idea of personal fulfillment contested the constraints on individualism that flourished under the regime of church, party, family, and corporation.[4]

Psychologists have demonstrated that narratives, along with abstract propositions, are the two fundamental forms of human cognition. Narratives in the form of life histories render complex experience understandable. Like all narratives they are subjective, despite their objective components, "reconstructing" rather than simply "resurrecting" the past in order to justify life choices. They are not only selective and subjective but also defensive and didactic. Their engagement with both the past and the present mitigates explanations of generational memories grounded solely in history but not those that are based in culture.[5]

The attempts of the people from Whiting to display their personal identities in life histories did not produce great variety. In their construction, these life histories resembled autobiographies, verifying Eakin's contention that self-portrayals usually involve "culturally sanctioned models of identity." Three such "models" were found in Whiting. Individuals of an older genera-

4 Whiting's population of 10,880 in 1930 had dropped to 5,155 by 1990. Nearly all of that decline (80 percent) took place after 1950. The Mexican population rose to 10 percent of the town's total in 1980 and stood at 13 percent a decade later. Although the population of Lake County increased between 1950 and 1970, the western portion of the county that contained Whiting suffered a loss of close to 10 percent. Job losses in refining were also striking in this era—nearly 4,000 in Indiana between 1958 and 1966, and in Lake County, 36 percent between 1960 and 1969. Manufacturing jobs in Lake County, outside Gary and Hammond, also declined by 4.7 percent. See D. Jeanne Patterson, *Indiana Regional Economic Development and Planning* (Bloomington, 1971), II, 27, 81, 93; Indiana Dept. of Commerce, *Indiana: an Economic Perspective* (Indianapolis, 1970), 9; Peter Clecak, *America's Quest for the Ideal Self: Dissent and Fulfillment in the 60's and 70's* (New York, 1983), 1–21; James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York, 1991), 120–126. On the changing nature of authority in modern America, see Morris Janowitz, *The Last Half-Century: Societal Change and Politics in America* (Chicago, 1978), 221–263.
5 Regina Gagnier, *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832–1920* (New York, 1991), 3–10 (thanks to John Eakin for this reference). Patrick H. Hutton, "Collective Memory and Collective Mentalities," *Historical Reflections,* XV (1980), 311–322; Peter Nied-

tion presented themselves as morally upright, selfless, thrifty, hard working, and devoted to the welfare of others in the community and in the nation. They were not imprinted so much by past decades or events as by their long relationship with institutions and ideologies that venerated their preferred ideals: Standard Oil embodied a paternalism that promised jobs for hard toil; the Catholic church guaranteed salvation for sacrifice and adherence to marital roles; and the nation offered fair treatment in return for patriotism.[6]

A second model of identity was exhibited by residents born in the town after 1940. This group evinced a relationship with authorities and ideologies that sanctioned a greater variety of lifestyles. Their narratives celebrated, rather than censured, self-fulfillment and mounted a stronger attack upon the power of parents and, especially, the corporations that influenced their lives. In a remarkable turn of events, the third model emerged from members of the older generation who had left Whiting and retired to Arizona. That these citizens, who had lived through the Great Depression and World War II, told of making lifestyle changes in the southwest desert implied that the imprint of the years prior to 1950 was not beyond reformulation.

SHARING AUTHORITY   Acceptance of life narratives as given is controversial because of the intervention of scholar/interviewers in the process of creating them. At one extreme, critics accuse the oral historians who "control the production and consumption of such texts" with political exploitation. On the other, interviewers tend to present such texts as unimpeachably authentic. Scholars are ultimately responsible for the texts, in that they initiate the

ermuller, "From Stories of Life to Life History: Historic Context, Social Processes, and the Biographical Method," in Tamas Hofer and Niedermuller (eds.), *Life History as Cultural Construction* (Budapest, 1988), 451–452; Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York, 1978), 221. On the public construction of memory see Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memorie," *Representations,* XXVI (1989), 7–24; Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991); Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism* (Princeton, 1992).

6   Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiographies* (Princeton, 1992), 72. On the matter of self-representation in oral histories, see Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory* (Cambridge, 1987), 22–23, 60–61. See the insightful discussion about the subjectivity of oral sources in Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, 1991), ix, 48–53. On the importance of narratives in human cognition and moral thinking, see Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986).

projects that produce them and control the final presentation, but, far from being victims, narrators are able to take advantage of the situation themselves.

In the case of Whiting, any alienation or intimidation that the residents initially may have felt because of the scholarly framework dissipated as soon as they realized, first, that my background was not so different from theirs and, second, that they knew more about themselves than I did. Their attempt to impress me with the strength of their arguments supervened my attempt to impose a chronological structure on the interviews and suggested that their memories were only partly based on encounters with historic events; they were also meant to be heard as contemporary discourses about value and authority.[7]

The results of the collaboration confirmed that life histories are "important sites of political conflict." Local discord in Whiting was affected by larger "culture wars" that were raging in the United States about traditional forms of identity and authority, notions of self-denial, and corporate disavowal of responsibility for the long-term economic security of workers. In this volatile period, traditional ideals and norms were unstable and dubious. Space does not permit a discussion of whether memory and identity would have been more congruent between generations if studied during a period of greater social and economic stability. Pederson found evidence of such harmony in a rural Wisconsin community for the three decades prior to World War II. But, in the Whiting of the early 1990s, the impact of history on memory was shared with the impact of contemporary arguments.[8]

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7 Eakin, *Touching the World,* 88. Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, "Introduction," in *idem* (eds.), *The Myths We Live By* (London, 1990), 61. On the relationship between life history, self-representation, and political authority, see Passerini, *Fascism;* Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York, 1980), 24, 43, is the classic statement of how memory is formed by the present interests and needs of the social group and not simply by the individual. See also Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, 1990). Note the similarities between my experience and Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York, 1978), 14; David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington, 1986), 59; Karen Olsen and Linda Shopes, "Crossing Boundaries, Building Bridges: Doing Oral History among Working-Class Women and Men," in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds.), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York, 1991), 195–197.
8   James Brow, "Notes on Community, Hegemony, and the Uses of the Past," *Anthropological Quarterly,* LXIII (1990), 1–6; Hunter, *Culture Wars,* 67–106; Jane Marie Pederson, *Between*

GENERATIONAL NARRATIVES   The older generation in Whiting, born between 1902 and 1924, revered the ideal of obligation in an era when Americans argued about the pervasiveness of selfishness and the need for cohesion. They recalled lives of mutualism, duty, and care and criticized contemporaries who saw life as a process of self-realization. Their memories valorized their ability to serve their families, their employers, their working-class community, and their nation. Authority was to be accommodated rather than resisted. But their loyalty was not blind. They granted it, as they told it, because they expected and received justice in return. At home, they benefited from familiar support; at church, they participated in a mutual effort at salvation; and at the refinery, they received steady jobs and pensions. Ultimately, their narratives represented a collective belief that they once upheld a common enterprise with other citizens and powerful institutions—the very basis of their loyalty—and that this communal foundation for just treatment was now disintegrating. Their accounts of the past were not only ventures into history and longing, but also demands for the reinstatement of justice in a society dominated by the state, the marketplace, and the media. And yet there was disaffection in their ranks. Although their peers who had retired to Arizona shared many of their memories of a moral community, they had decided in the present to embark upon a more determined quest for personal happiness.

The next generation—born between 1943 and 1962 in this sample, and coming of age after World War II—revealed a different collective memory and identity. This group blended experiences that were unique to the times in which their identities were formed with some of the personal knowledge and values of their elders. They rendered accounts of mutualism in families and neighborhoods, but they affirmed, in much stronger terms, that economic security and occupational stability were best obtained through individual resourcefulness rather than through loyalty to an institution. Their sense of self-reliance was cultivated when relationships with authority throughout American society had become problematic. Conservatives had mounted a widespread attack against individual claims upon the state, and advertisers

against constraints on self-fulfillment. Moreover, cultural critics have suggested that the electronic media—especially television—tended to demystify power, fostering a "decline in prestige" of all who held it.[9]

In Whiting, this deterioration was rooted in the more immediate issue of Standard Oil's reduction in the workforce. Sons and daughters could no longer anticipate the lifetime jobs and benefits that accrued to their parents. Released from their parents' attachment to the refinery, they were free to characterize themselves as more self-sufficient than their elders and overtly question their authority. However, their rebellion contained something of a longing for the advantages of an earlier era that were denied them.

THE OLDER GENERATION   Whiting's older generation were the children of immigrants who came to the town in the first two decades of this century to work at Standard Oil and mills in the area. Their parents were East European Catholics who relied on friends and kin to find them homes and jobs. Their life stories contained extensive accounts of family life that stressed the themes of justice/injustice and concern/indifference. Their narratives resolved these oppositions with the idealization of duty over rebellion and selflessness over egoism. Their values did not emanate simply from events like the Great Depression but from ongoing encounters with familial, religious, corporate, and national authorities whom they considered fair and deserving of allegiance. When they gave loyalty to the community, they gave it to all of the institutions that pervaded that community. However, when they perceived that the institutions that once commanded their allegiance and supported their community were in decline—and no longer able to grant justice and benevolence—they became indignant. The nation no longer appeared to consist of caring and responsible individuals and institutions. Their patriotism had gone unrewarded; their identities were no longer validated.

The life histories of the older generation in Whiting always began with descriptions of their immigrant families. They recalled learning about the need to limit independence and to respect

9 Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York, 1985), 309.

authority, even before the Great Depression. Family members were expected to take care of each other. According to one man born in 1919,

> Every kid had their chores to do. Every fall we'd chop wood and make kindling for storage and pile it in the woodsheds. That was the fall duty. After school, [we] had to bring it on the porch. And we used to help my grandmother out. She lived downstairs. But cleaning the kitchen, doing the dishes, well, that my sister Mary did. Housecleaning was mostly a girl's job. But the guys used to scrub floors. Our home life was like a family deal. Everybody helped each other out. I tried to bring that tradition to my kids. My dad always told us, "you guys stick together, no matter through thick or thin. In the case of an emergency, you guys come out and help." That's how we were brought up.[10]

The remembrances did not imply that reciprocity and adherence to duty was innate. It had to be enforced by authority. Parents preached hard work, family responsibility, honesty, and religious devotion. The attachment of these people to such institutions as the Catholic church and Standard Oil was deep and pervasive, but their loyalty to authority was not just another manifestation of working-class authoritarianism. It was a subtle affirmation of a just society and a moral form of individualism.

Authority could certainly be repressive. As a man born in 1926 explained, "You went to Catholic school and you did your duty. Stealing was sure death. You didn't touch things that didn't belong to you. You [had to] be polite, and never ask for anything. . . . Work hard, save your money, get to church, respect other people. [Parents] were very strict on that."[11]

Yet adherence to duty had its benefits. One woman related that she was able to get a job rolling barrels of axle grease at the refinery at a young age because the priest at a local church falsified

10   Whiting Project Interview (hereinafter WPI), 91-14. The Whiting Oral History Project consisted of 100 interviews conducted between 1990 and 1992. Most interviews were conducted in Whiting, but sessions were also held with former residents who had moved to other Indiana towns and to Arizona. The respondents were selected at random from a list of names generated by contacting such organizations as churches and labor unions, and from suggestions given by interviewees. Interviewers included the author, Chad Berry, David Dabertin, Lisa Orr, and John Wolford. Transcripts of all interviews are on deposit at the Oral History Research Center at Indiana University, Bloomington.

11   WPI, 91-139.

her birth certificate. Several men told how they built their own homes with the help of friends who provided special skills; and midwives were held in high esteem in this generation's collective memory both for their skill in delivering babies and for their helpfulness in cleaning homes while new mothers recuperated.[12]

Consideration and esteem were the rewards for loyalty and submission. The older generation shared the memory of a moral community in which individualism was constrained and re-defined, but not obliterated. Egoism and domination were tem-pered by the ideals of reciprocity and benevolence. The collective memory of this generation expressed what the past was like for them, as well as the timeless value of a moral society in the present. Their story emphasized the continued importance of recognizing individual needs and rewarding people for meeting collective exigencies, and it embodied a call for solidarity—"a realization that each person must take responsibility for the other because as consociates all must have an interest in the other."[13]

Persistent anecdotes about justice and solidarity revealed the older generation's fundamental adherence to authority. Workers at the refinery described men who were so loyal to the company that they would alert a foreman when a light bulb burned out so as not to retard the pace of production. Countless reiterations confirmed how much the local population prized rewards for their devotion, such as the pension system at Standard Oil, in which employees could contribute a portion of their income to a stock

12   *Ibid.,* 91-19; 91-24.
13   Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York, 1983), 31, 64–94. Due to considerations of space, the discussion of moral outlook in this research note does not go beyond the practice of justice, or fairness, and solidarity, or caring. Some scholars might argue that the former is more characteristic of men and the latter of women. Focusing on the issue of generations inevitably submerges the issue of gender differences, but the Whiting data does not strongly affirm the gendered arguments of such scholars as Carol Gilligan that women's identities are more oriented to relationships and less centered on independence than men's are, and, thus, that their stories include a stronger plea for caring than for justice. In Whiting's older generation, both men and women presented themselves as strong individuals who were also bound to the concerns of the working-class community in which their identities and moral outlook was formed. There was a *tendency* for women to talk more about caregiving but no evidence of a significant gender division on this point. See David L. Norton, *Democracy and Moral Development* (Berkeley, 1991), 28; Gilligan, *In a Different Voice; Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, 1982), 73–75; Jürgen Habermas, "Justice and Solidarity: On the Discussion concerning State 6," in Thomas E. Wren (ed.), *The Moral Domain: Essays in the Ongoing Discussion Between Philosophy and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 224–251.

purchase plan that the company would partially match. In the view of some workers, men who earned such benefits had an easier time attracting marriage partners than those who did not.[14]

Standard Oil was appreciated not only for its rewards but also for its acts of outright benevolence. Whiting's older generation did not recall the Great Depression as an era of great economic distress. Some people lost their homes, but Standard Oil found a way to keep most employees on the payroll, at least on a part-time basis. A man born in 1919 affirmed, "People don't forget those things."[15]

Outside the workplace, in spaces visited largely by women, chronicles of justice and solidarity still predominated. In their subjective and selective constructions, this generation of women did not portray themselves as rebellious or particularly self-reliant; but they were not weak or deferential either. Like those of the men, their identities entailed a strong defense of the symbolic community of mutualism and justice. A woman born in 1902 reconstructed a life of caring and devotion to others. Left a widow by the death of her husband from an industrial accident, she scrubbed floors at the Whiting Community Center and took in laundry to raise two children. One of her aunts provided the family with housing, and she returned the favor to the community by going door to door to raise funds for the construction of a new church. During the 1930s, she gave meals to unemployed men who drifted into her yard from the nearby railroad tracks. Another remarkable woman, who graduated first in her class at Whiting High School in 1925, returned to the community after she completed her medical education out of responsibility to both her mother and her hometown.[16]

During World War II, this generation described its participation in the national mobilization as voluntary. The people

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14 WPI, 91-23; 91-24; 91-19.

15 *Ibid.*, 91-24. Scholars who have examined the hostile reaction of the white working class to the changes in moral and political values in the 1960s have stressed the motives of racism, respect for authority, and moral tradition. This study, however, suggests that their explanation misses the importance of justice as an underpinning for the defense of authority and traditional morals. The fundamental belief in fairness may well have served to advance racial understanding, if properly nurtured by political leaders. See Rieder, "The Rise of the 'Silent Majority'," in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (eds.), *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980* (Princeton, 1989), 243–268.

16 WPI, 91-34; 91-22; 91-23; 91-46.

served the nation as they had their families and employers by joining the armed services, donating blood, buying war bonds, and producing gasoline products at the refinery. One man claimed that he decided to enlist as soon as he heard the news about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. A woman born in 1916 who admitted that everyone feared the war also recalled that "people were working so hard buying bonds and everything to help our country." At St. John's Catholic Church in Whiting, a shrine was built to "Our Lady of Victory" in 1942 "for our boys in the service, for victory, and for peace." Prelates at the church maintained that "God and His Blessed Mother" deserved such reverence and that the shrine was the best possible aid that the congregation could render "to our country and our boys in the armed forces." The pursuit of common interests was reinforced at the refinery, where the company newspaper took pride in the workers' production of vital oil supplies, purchase of bonds, and exhibition of the "discipline and teamwork" that would serve many of them well in the military.[17]

This ideal of mutual enterprise was thought to be lost in the present. Whiting's older generation perceived a decline in communal solidarity in both the town and in the nation, an implication that justice was at risk. Older residents began to lament the lifestyle and behavior of their neighbors. A retired refinery worker born in 1914 complained that he did not know his neighbors anymore and accused them of not being "down to earth, good, clean people." Another native observed that Whiting "was not the focus of anyone's life anymore like it used to be in the old days." She described how people failed to entertain or visit one another as they once had.[18]

Central to their critique was an attack upon the rising incidence of divorce. They criticized marital break-up more than any other feature of modern society; they saw it as another example of the decline of authority, solidarity, and service to others. A woman born in 1910 argued that divorce confuses children about who their authority figures are and "where they stand." She complained that materialism had replaced discipline and caring. "Parents buy children toys but do not give them attention." A

17 *Stanolind Record,* 24 May 1943, 1–10; 26 May 1945, 1–4. *St. John's Parish News* (Whiting, Indiana), 16 Aug. 1942; 1 Nov. 1942.
18 WPI, 91-22; 91-144.

fellow resident bitterly attacked the idea that a mother could work outside the house and expect to raise responsible children. Linking local and national loyalties, he predicted dire consequences for the nation: "There is no such thing as having a surrogate mother teach honesty and concepts to children that they will be able to understand and emulate." Another ex–refinery worker felt that "people . . . don't know how to work together. This is the key to marriage, working together."[19]

These detractors of modern society and selfish values were not just enacting a nostalgic defense of their own bygone values. They did not want to preserve the past but alter the present, and they were angry at traditional institutions for breaking the contract of social justice that made them feel like valued individuals. Their story of indignation began with accounts of the most remembered event in Whiting—the great refinery fire of 1955, a sudden explosion followed by an inferno that raged for days—not only because it was so dramatic but also because it led to the first significant layoffs in Whiting since 1920. The fire forced the company to modernize the plant, thereby improving safety and efficiency and reducing the number of employees. The layoffs, which actually began in the 1960s, seemed an abandonment of the ideals of justice and solidarity: "We were disgusted that we had such big layoffs. . . . We were dedicated to our work. We never slouched. We tried to give them more than eight hours and made sure everything was right." The layoffs encouraged the workers to support an outside union—the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union—for the first time. Previously, refinery workers had voted to keep out external labor organizations, such as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), in favor of unions that consisted exclusively of Standard Oil employees.[20]

The company compounded the negative impact of the layoffs by bringing Mexican-American workers into the refinery, creating an association between the arrival of the Mexicans and the onset of moral and communal decline in the minds of the older generation and revealing the limits of mutualism in their East European ethnic background. The Mexicans were unwelcome. One

19   *Ibid.,* 91-5; 91-23; 91-24; 91-143.
20   *Ibid.,* 91-24; 91-143.

older employee said that thefts increased in the plant and that the Mexicans were lazier than his generation of workers. Another, although he did not single out Mexicans, contrasted the loyalty of older workers with those hired in the 1960s: "We . . . would not say anything against Standard Oil, . . . but the younger generation, especially after the Vietnam War . . . didn't have that kind of attitude anymore. . . . They looked only to payday and weekends."[21]

Members of the older generation who were born and raised in Whiting before World War II but moved to Sun City, Arizona, also recalled the moral community of their youth with affection and nostalgia. They, however, felt more liberated than disgruntled. They pointed out that Whiting had been a repressive place as well—not by attacking authority in the past directly but indirectly, by celebrating their new lives in the "Valley of the Sun." They were relieved not to have to fulfill the traditional roles expected of senior citizens in the Indiana town, and exhibited an enhanced concern for their physical well-being—a subject that their peers in Indiana almost never raised. They also elevated the value of leisure time over a defense of the work ethic, and expressed satisfaction that their new neighbors were "professional people" rather than workers.[22]

In general, these Arizona transplants saw their new lives as less restrictive. One woman remarked, "I sit here and look at the sky and thank God I have what I have. . . . [t]he space, the freedom, and the beauty. . . . My parents [in Whiting] never traveled. . . . There's no recreation [in Whiting], other than going to the lake and maybe to a restaurant. Over here you can go anywhere." Another woman elaborated that they did not abandon Whiting so much as the city abandoned them: "Entertainment for our age category wasn't there." Yet another highlighted the "hope and happiness" of Sun City, whereas the attitude in Whiting was that "you sit and wait for the grim reaper."[23]

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21   *Ibid.,* 91-144; 91-143.
22   Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the late Modern Age* (Stanford, 1991), 209–226, discusses the connection between the increased concern for the body and the emergence of lifestyle politics. Interviews were conducted in Sun City because of the numerous references in the Whiting interviews to friends and relatives who had moved to Arizona.
23   WPI, 91-150; 91-153; 91-154.

The Younger Generation   The life histories and identities of Whiting's younger residents also affirmed the value of a tightly knit community and expressed concern about modern disintegration, although the image of communal decline in their narratives was contested by examples of resourceful individuals free from the constraints of traditional authority and hopeful of economic rejuvenation. Pride of individual achievement and hope for progress stood in place of calls for justice and moral outrage. From the perspective of middle age, these people focused more on the prospects of the future rather than a veneration of the past. Their encounter with economic decline gave them no reason to lionize authorities and institutions that held no promise of fairness or benevolence.

This working-class sample was not so likely to attend college or achieve affluence as many of their peers who are normally associated with the sixties generation. Their encounter with the 1960s and 1970s was not liberating but disappointing. Traditional authorities and paths to economic security had little to offer them. Because it was difficult to find permanent jobs at Standard Oil and other plants in the area after 1970, they resigned themselves to making a living through their own ingenuity.

This generation was no stranger to families of modest means and traditional values; family relationships accounted for most of their memories of mutualism. Unlike the older group's experience with authority, theirs seldom involved benevolence or justice, and, as a result, their memory of authority—even that of their parents—was more critical. One woman recalled with disdain how her father had forced her and her sister to return the pants that a neighbor had made for them because he would not let them wear anything but dresses. A man born in 1952 remembered his Southern Baptist upbringing with bitterness: "We went to church three times a week; that was very important. We prayed before every meal. We read the Bible daily. . . . It was either [obey] or be thrown out." Still another confessed that the death of his autocratic father did not have too traumatic effect on him.[24]

The younger generation stressed discontinuity more than continuity. In an era of sharp economic and cultural change, this group described their lives mainly as the result of individual

24   *Ibid.*, 91-29; 91-32; 91-173.

decisions, not as the result of following occupational footsteps of their parents. Their emphasis on self-reliance explicitly contested their parents' commemoration of mutualism and justice. Lasch held that a preoccupation with self-sufficiency can emerge, ironically, from feelings of powerlessness in modern life. The economic decline of Whiting and northwest Indiana after 1945 forced members of the postwar cohort into a more difficult job search than that faced by those who routinely entered the refinery during an earlier era, perhaps explaining why baby boomers produced stronger narratives of personal initiative than the preceding generation.[25]

Consider the career story of an individual born in 1943. After he graduated from high school, he went to an art institute in Chicago to study interior decorating. Then he went to work in a mill, but the union environment proved disagreeable. Next came Calumet College, a stint in the Navy, and a lower management position at *Encyclopedia Britannica*. After an attempt to become an electrician, he worked for a time as a janitor at Consolidated Edison, before ending up as an insurance salesman at Prudential.[26]

A woman who graduated from Whiting High School in 1958 told a similar tale of personal struggle and achievement. In accord with contemporary ideologies of women's liberation, she espoused the ideal of retaining "control of [her] life." Rejecting a career in the military for fear of becoming "a loose woman," she worked as a waitress while taking college courses. Her quest for confidence and control took a positive turn when she accepted a part-time job at the Whiting Public Library, which led her, in turn, to junior college in North Carolina. Lack of funds forced her to return to Whiting, but she eventually earned a bachelor's degree at Indiana University extension and married a man supportive of her efforts. Although she cared for her mother for a time when she was ill, she was still able to maintain her personal life.[27]

Although both generations recalled the recent past as a time of decline—a deterioration in the formative community in their lives—the older generation saw the problem in moral terms. For

25   Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (London, 1980), 84–87; Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Stanford, 1991), 173–175, argued that Lasch tended to deny the potential for individual agency in a modern culture free of traditional authorities.
26   WPI, 91-18.
27   *Ibid.*, 91-11.

those who matured after World War II, however, the demise of Whiting did not end with moral outrage but with a dream of economic revitalization. In the early 1990s, the younger people talk of the return of progress as a way of muting fears of economic decline. They are receptive to messages of individualism and self-fulfillment from contemporary culture, not only because they challenge the moral authoritarianism of their elders, but also because they sense that individualism may be the only viable resource in an economy so much more unpredictable and unjust than the one their parents knew. In their grievance with declining solidarity, they share memories and values with their elders, but in their celebration of individualism, depart from them.

The new consciousness of the younger generation was manifested strikingly in the difference between Whiting's fiftieth anniversary in 1939 and its year-long centennial celebration of 1989. Political culture always influences public commemoration. Whiting's golden anniversary was celebrated with patriotic tales and rags-to-riches stories in the local press, as well as parades of exulted citizens and dutiful workers along the city streets. In the pluralistic culture of late twentieth-century America—which Kammen describes as a culture lacking consensus—commemoration did not equate so readily with the interests of church, state, and corporation. Although the festivities paid tribute to the memories fashioned by the preceding generation—voicing the need for community spirit, family values, and social justice; honoring senior citizens, as well as ethnic and religious heritages; and singing patriotic songs—hope and optimism about the future were more the hallmark of the various events than was the desire to revisit past glories. In the mix of public presentations, the clearly defined narrative of moral outrage, so important to the town's elders, was hard to find.[28]

When one of the centennial's leaders looked back on the celebration later, he was reminded to sound the theme of progress and detachment from the past once again. He called the centennial "the most important thing in his life." He referred to his generation as "new pioneers," praising the current mayor as "forward looking" and decrying the older generation's resistance to change.

28 *Whiting Times*, 30 June 1939, 1, 2; 7 July 1939, 1; Kammen, *Mystic Chords*, 545; *Special Souvenir Edition of 1989 Whiting Centennial Year*. Videotape (Whiting Public Library, 1989); also in author's possession.

"The centennial regenerated the community spirit," he said. "People felt oppressed here. People have to believe that they have a future."[29]

Generational memory is formed in the passage of time, not simply born in pivotal decades and events. Revising the deterministic paradigm of much scholarly thinking, this study—with its subjective, limited perspective openly acknowledged—suggests that generational memory is best understood as the result of long-term encounters with economic forces and powerful authorities. Regardless of the impact of the past, however, generational views are also under constant review and discussion in the present. Whiting's oldest generation revealed, late in life, that their basic narrative was molded from memories of their formative years—the 1920s through the 1950s—and from their reaction to the ideas that emerged later. Undoubtedly, they asserted their critique of social change in American history as elderly people who longed for the past; but they were not just looking backward.

Nor were they were merely creating fictions. However, the tendency to reduce the complexities of life over time to a narrative clearly raises problems of representation. Friedlander has demonstrated that, despite the difficulty of discovering what is true in contemporary, postmodern discourse, with its multiplicity of meanings and interpretations, everything cannot be interpretation or fiction. Truth still exists. Moreover, the cause of historical truth is best served by the preservation and articulation of facts. For Friedlander, the truth of the Holocaust, for example, is preserved in German documents that officially report cases of extermination, regardless of what interpretations may say. For the older generation in Whiting, the reality of a just society is preserved in stories of pension benefits and mutualism. The members of this older group refused to disengage from the present, because to do so would have been to relegate their "truth"—and moral outlook—entirely to the realm of fiction and public commemoration, such as the 1989 centennial celebration that muted their moral outrage. Solidarity in their eyes was threatened not only in the larger society but in their own town. Theirs was not simply a generation

29 WPI, 91-18.

frozen in the memories of the Great Depression. They retrieved facts from the past to comment on the here and now.[30]

Not all of Whiting's present and former residents gave assent to the older generation. Their children, and their peers who left town, did not fully share their views. These people were willing to invest more authority in the individual than in institutions, and they looked forward to the pursuit of new lifestyles and prosperity. They often expressed dissatisfaction with the symbolic community of justice and solidarity that had once existed and were quick to expose its repressive characteristics.

Finally, the concept of generation itself is not without its problems. This study implies not only that the imprint of the past is indeterminate but also that boundaries between generations are imprecise. Generations can agree as well as disagree. For instance, both generations lamented economic decline and tended to be critical of corporate layoffs; and differences in generation did not always eliminate bonds fostered by class, although further investigation is necessary to reveal whether this connection was more pronounced for the working class or the middle class. Moreover, despite the obvious influence of life stage in remembering, both the young and the old in Whiting were concerned about the future. The former were more hopeful and the latter more pessimistic, but their respective memories and attitudes were driven, in part, by speculation about what was to come. Both groups tended to manipulate the past. Assumptions to the effect that generational outlooks are defined by pivotal events like the Great Depression or the "sixties" are wrong. Both young and old in Whiting demonstrated an ongoing connection to the process of creating meaning and exchanging information within their community and the larger society. They affirmed their commitment to participate in the continuous project of restating the reality of the past, present, and future in the contested culture of contemporary America.

30 Saul Friedlander, "Introduction," in *idem* (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 1–21. On the "politics of interpretation," see Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation," in *idem* (ed.), *The Politics of Interpretation* (Chicago, 1983), 139–143.