

Frank Soboleski, 1945

Frank Soboleski, born in 1925, grew up on the family farm outside of International Falls. He spent plenty of time out of doors as a young person, and is sure that, as a soldier, this experience served him well. An Army paratrooper during 1944–45, he saw heavy combat in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany.

“I felt my life as a hunter and a trapper had a lot to do with my survival. Because you’d be walking in the woods with a rifle, and an animal’s smart; they’re on their home ground. Just like the Germans—they were there before we were. They were well settled, dug in, waiting for us to come. It’s the same thing, you just hear a flicker of something, you just freeze and get down and go around and find them. All that came to my mind when I was over there. That flashed back from when I was a kid, hunting rabbits and then deer. You’ve got to think like they do, in their world. . . . Most of that comes from when you’re a kid, and you’re chasing wild game. If they can see you out in the open, they’re not going to be there when you get where they were. That’ll be it—that’s where they were. But you can go behind these bushes, get upwind from them. That’s the way it was over there.”

Thomas Saylor



Frank Soboleski, 101st Airborne, at home in International Falls, 1943

Thomas Saylor, associate professor of history at Concordia University, St. Paul, interviewed Frank Soboleski for Remembering the Good War: Minnesota's Greatest Generation. His newest book is Long Hard Road: American POWs During World War II (2007).



Minnesota's
Greatest
Generation

The Minnesota Historical Society is in the midst of a long-term project to preserve and present the history of “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation,” the men and women who grew up during the Great Depression and came of age during World War II. This essay is part of a series that spotlights the experiences of generation members from all walks of life. For more on the MHS project, visit www.mngreatestgeneration.org.

St. Austin Roman Catholic Church, Minneapolis



CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

in Minnesota tends to be conservative, but now and then somebody steps outside the brick box for a walk on the wild side. So it was with Father James Troy, first pastor of St. Austin parish, formed in the 1930s. After traveling in Europe, the priest came back to Minneapolis with the idea for this wonderfully strange little church, supposedly based on an exposition building he'd seen in Czechoslovakia. Whatever its inspiration, the church must have seemed to parishioners like a visitor from another architectural planet when it opened in 1939.

Designed by Joseph Vanderbilt of the Minneapolis firm of Bard & Vanderbilt, the stuccoed church was built around 40-foot-high laminated timber trusses shaped into parabolic arches. Ornamental panels and an incised cross rose above the triple-arched front entrance. Side windows in the form of curving lancets and a dainty tower perched atop the roof added to the church's aura of exoticism and mystery. Inside, steeply curving white walls were set off by dark horizontal bands. A crossbeam over the altar supported yet another curiosity—two sculpted seraphim holding a clock set at three, the time of Christ's death.

Although Vanderbilt designed more than 30 other churches during his long career (he died in 1966), he never attempted anything remotely

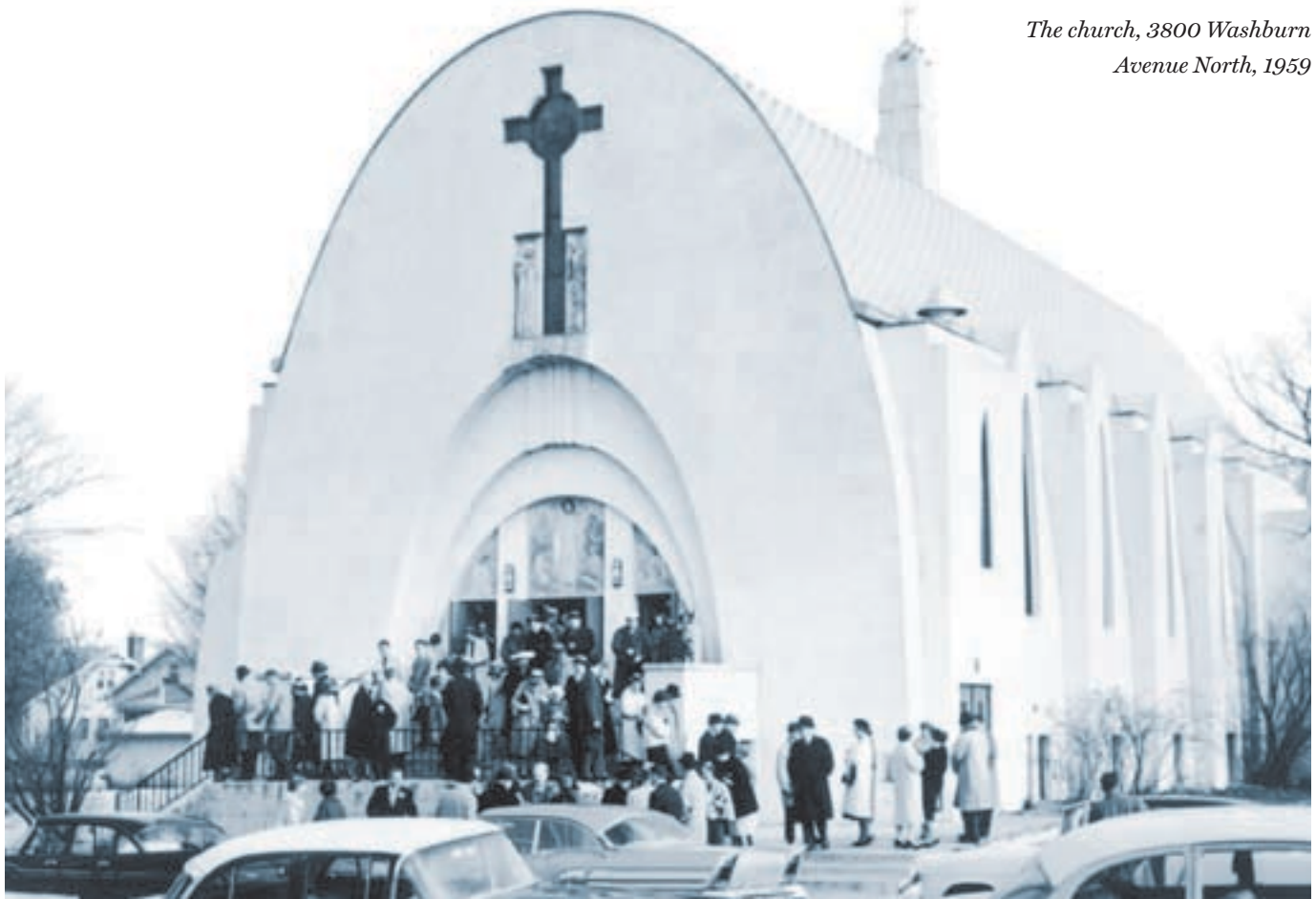
like St. Austin's again. Mixing the Streamlined Moderne look of the 1930s with hints of the droopy neo-Gothicism of the great Catalan architect, Antoni Gaudi, St. Austin's was one of a kind.

Not surprisingly, the church created quite a stir and even received a mention in *Time* magazine. But its small size and lightweight construction (stucco was substituted for concrete to save money) worked against it in the long run. The parish built a new, far more traditional church nearby in 1963, after which Father Troy's unique dream was demolished.

—LARRY MILLETT

Larry Millett, retired architecture critic for the St. Paul Pioneer Press, is the author of the illustrated handbook, AIA Guide to the Twin Cities.

The church, 3800 Washburn Avenue North, 1959





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