

Fred Shaw (Feng Hsiao)

Like many members of Minnesota's "greatest generation," Fred Shaw (born 1919) learned about hard work growing up in the 1920s and 1930s with a big family on a farm—but in his case, the farm was 15,000 miles away in Shi-han Province, China. Then known as Feng Hsiao, he excelled in school, went to college in China, and passed a special examination that allowed him to continue his engineering studies in America. He went first to MIT and then, in 1947, to the University of Minnesota to study at its renowned hydraulic engineering laboratory at St. Anthony Falls.

In addition to his studies, Feng became the head of the Chinese Student Association at the university and also worked as an assistant researcher so, as he said in July 2008, "I was able to afford to have a car. At that time not many people had a car, so . . . I became a popular guy."

Feng next went to work for Orville Madsen's construction company. The Madsen family took the young bachelor under their wings, and throughout the 1950s encouraged him to settle down, marry, and start a family. In about 1955 Feng and Jennie Ho, who lived in Taiwan and had some connections with him through family and friends, began a long-distance correspondence, and in 1958 Jennie came to Minnesota—not as "mail-order bride," but with some clear instructions from her parents "to be nice to him, and not try to look for other people," as she said. She moved in with the Madsens in April, and in a matter of weeks the two were married.

Fred and Jennie, like thousands of other postwar Minnesota newlyweds, moved to Richfield, where Fred bought a brand-new, two-bedroom, 900-square-foot house. "To me," Jennie said, "it was a nice house and to him also, because he had been living all this time in a rooming house by the university. . . . The house is still there."

Fast-forward to 2008: Fred Hsiao, as he signs papers today, still goes to work every day at the construction firm he cofounded in 1976, Shaw-Lundquist, the largest minority-owned business in Minnesota. Fred and Jennie celebrated their fiftieth anniversary. And, after 50 years, three grown sons, and several moves around the Twin Cities, Fred and Jennie are back in Richfield. —Brian Horrigan

Photos courtesy Fred and Jennie Hsiao

Brian Horrigan is an exhibit developer at the Minnesota Historical Society. He and Sherri Gebert Fuller, corporate/foundation gifts officer at the Society, interviewed the Hsiao in July 2008.



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.

Minneapolis Western (later Northern Pacific) Railroad Bridge



MINNEAPOLIS was a city in a hurry in the 1880s, growing up so fast that it needed more of everything, including bridges across the Mississippi River. In this view, taken from the east side of the river on the University of Minnesota campus, a new bridge for the Minneapolis Western Railroad is under construction just downstream from St. Anthony Falls. Later used by the Northern Pacific Railroad, the bridge was said to be one of the first steel (as opposed to iron) structures in the Twin Cities. Sources disagree as to when the work was completed. It was no later than 1891 and possibly as early as 1886.

The man in charge of the bridge was Frederick W. Cappelen, a Norwegian-born engineer destined to leave a distinctive mark on Minneapolis. Best known for his graceful concrete-arch spans (including the Franklin and Third Avenue bridges), Cappelen produced a rather standard truss design for the railroad bridge, which was his first big project in Minneapolis.

This sweeping photograph offers an especially good view of the bridge's uncompleted western approach—a rather delicate-looking trestle curving high above the small wooden houses of Bohemian Flats, the riverfront home to many early immigrants. The Minneapolis Gas Light Company and other industrial users occupied the bluffs above the flats. Prominent in this scene are the stone buildings of the Norenberg and Heinrich breweries, at that time two of the largest in Minneapolis. They combined in 1891 to form the Minneapolis (Grain Belt) Brewing Company and promptly built a new brewery complex in northeast Minneapolis that still stands.

Today, the gas works, the old brewery buildings, the houses on the flats, and the bridge itself are all long gone. Parks, parkways, and the university's West Bank campus now dominate the neighborhood. The bridge was demolished in the early 1920s when the Northern Pacific built a new, more massive structure upstream as part of an ambitious project to relocate its tracks away from the center of the university's East Bank campus. This bridge was taken out of service in 1981 but received new life in 2000 when it reopened as a pedestrian and bicycle crossing.

—LARRY MILLETT

Larry Millett is the retired architecture critic for the St. Paul Pioneer Press and author of the illustrated AIA Guide to the Twin Cities (2007). His newest book is Murder Has a Public Face: Crime and Punishment in the Speed Graphic Era.

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