One of the exciting parts about historical research is that you never know where it’ll take you. Curious about how Minnesota children fared during the Great Depression, I turned to the state archives at the Minnesota History Center. I paged through box after box of records of then-governor Floyd B. Olson. Most of the material was routine—requests for employment, tax reductions, autographs.

Then I happened upon this letter, handwritten by a worried girl who couldn’t get help for a friend, so she turned to the governor. Her name was June Oberg. At age nine, she was still working on her spelling.

Two Harbors, Minn.
March 19, 1931

Dear Mr. Olson,
I am a little girl 9 years old. I like school. I haven’t been [absent] one day. I like my techer very well. I feel pretty great to write to you.

It is [about] a little girl that is in kindergarten she is adopted. If anyone says “Hello” she gets a wipping so some times she’s on consus [unconscious]. I don’t know how to spell these big words just write. If she’s cold she gets a wipping. When she’s sick she has to lay on the cold floor. She hasn’t any overshoes. She lives far from school. people have asked the ones head of the town. They don’t do a thing about it. That is what I want you to know.

Affectionly
June Oberg

P.S. 616 4th Ave Two Harbors Minn
June Oberg

Well! I couldn’t help but wonder if June got the governor’s attention. Olson and his staff responded to many letters from the public, but an answer to June is not on file.

What ever happened to June Oberg and her kindergarten pal? I was telling a friend about the letter when it occurred to me that June might still be living. She probably was born in 1922, making her about 86 years old when I found her letter last year. A girl of her intelligence and compassion likely led an interesting life, I presumed.

Although I had no immediate use for a follow-up, I was determined to find her. (I’m a former newspaper reporter and can’t help myself.) I didn’t know where June lived, or even if she lived. I wasn’t sure even of her name; had she married and left the “Oberg” behind? First I used a telephone directory and computer sources to find phone numbers of Obergs in Two Harbors and along the North Shore. (It’s not an uncommon name.) Nobody knew of her. Oberg Mountain near Tofte, I learned, was not named for her family but probably after a commercial-fishing family living near Lutsen around the turn of the twentieth century.

The census of 1930, the year before she wrote the letter, showed me much about June. Her father, John Alex Oberg, a railroad machinist, was born in Sweden and immigrated in 1909. Her mother, Alfhild, was born in

Peg Meier was a reporter for the Star Tribune for 35 years. She is the author of five books about Minnesotans, past and present. June Oberg will appear in her newest, Wishing for a Snow Day, forthcoming from the Minnesota Historical Society Press in Autumn 2010.
that is what I want you to know.

P.S.
616 4th Ave Two Harbors Minn

June Cheng

Dear Mr. Sloan:

I am a little girl 9 years old. I like school. I haven't been out one day. I like my teacher very well. I feel pretty great to write to you.

This is a little that is in kindergarten. She is adopted. If any one says "hello" she gets a whipping so some times she can't

conclude. I don't know how to spell these big words just write. If she's cold she gets a whipping. When she's sick she

has to lay on the cold floor. She hasn't any overclothes. She lives far from school people have asked the town. They don't do a thing about it.
Norway and arrived in the United States in 1906. June's 16-year-old brother, William, was born in Illinois; June was born in Wisconsin. (One more tidbit in the census report: The Oberg's owned a radio.)

Uh-oh. The family clearly moved around a lot, probably for the father’s work. I didn’t take that as good news. And the next census, 1940, won’t be opened to the public until 2012. Drat.

Of course, I tried county historical societies along the North Shore, first by phone, then in person. A friend and I stopped in at the Lake County Courthouse in Two Harbors. No luck. Nor with a computer listing of marriage licenses, available at the History Center. I unsuccessfully tried to track down June’s contemporaries listed in the program of a 1982 Two Harbors High School all-class reunion.

Then, voila! Somebody suggested I try to place a letter-to-the-editor in local newspapers. Not only did the Duluth News Tribune run my appeal, it was highlighted in a feature column. Within two days, I had answers.

June’s childhood friends Marie Eide and Ruth Jacobson, both of Two Harbors, wrote to say that June had indeed graduated from Two Harbors High School, had married a jeweler, and lived in Emporia, Kansas. Mrs. Jacobson had heard from June the previous Christmas time and knew the name of June’s husband—Bud Stanley. The women sent me photos of a young June.

This was getting easy. Bud Stanley was listed in a telephone directory. I didn’t want to call late that Friday night, when I had opened the mail, so I waited with bated breath until Saturday afternoon. Mr. Stanley answered the phone and inquired why I wished to speak to his wife. I explained. In a gentle voice, he gave me the sad news: She had died six months earlier of cancer.

I was oddly heartbroken about the death of someone I had never known, except through a letter she had written almost 80 years before. Mr. Stanley filled me in on June’s life. He was a buddy of her first husband, Leo Nolz, a navy pilot who died in action in World War II. The Stanleys married in 1947. She already had earned her education degree from the University of Minnesota, had taken graduate work in California, and had taught second grade in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, in the early 1940s. Clearly, the intellect she had exhibited at age nine was put to good use. (And her spelling must have improved.) The Stanleys were in the jewelry business together in Emporia for 60 years and raised two daughters.

None of their family is now in Minnesota. Bud Stanley had never seen, or heard of, June’s childhood letter to the governor, and he had no idea who the abused kindergarten friend had been. His grandsons and great-grandchildren, he speculated, would like the story, though. Yes, he had a photo of her at about age nine. No, she never became a social worker, as I had guessed, but such a fine teacher that former students wrote to her to say she was the best they ever had. And yes, he confirmed, she had been a lovely person. Her obituary suggested that people plant flowers in her memory the next spring. June would be tickled by that, he said, even though she always insisted, “Give me flowers while I am alive.”

Right: June Oberg of Two Harbors, about 1931

*Photo courtesy of Bud Stanley. The letter is in the records of Governor Floyd B. Olson, Minnesota State Archives, MHS.*