A Note on Steel Shavings:
Family Histories of the Calumet Region

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The fifth annual issue of Steel Shavings magazine, published in July, 1979, and subtitled "Families of the Calumet Region During the World War II Years, 1941-1945," contains thirty-two historical sketches as well as pictorial essays and excerpts from such local newspapers as the Gary Post-Tribune, the Hammond Times, and the Chesterton Tribune. The war years were a critical period for the people of the Calumet Region, not only because of the tumultuous international events but also because of the effect that the conflict had on their own lives. The articles in volume five of Steel Shavings examine the Calumet home front with particular emphasis on the social habits and changing lifestyles of its citizenry. They deal with such topics as civil defense "brownouts," rationing procedures, "Gold Star" mothers, Junior Commandos, scrap-iron drives, black market profiteering, Eisenhower jackets, leg make-up, zoot suiters, jitterbuggers, and singing patriotic songs in movie theaters or sitting around the radio in the parlor.

Residents of the Calumet Region underwent experiences which in some ways were unique and in other instances typified America during World War II. For some families the war boom meant greater economic security than during the 1930s; but it was also a time of shock. Michael Boskovich's father Frank stated that those years constituted "a time to forget"; yet most people interviewed vividly remembered their reactions to Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's death, Hiroshima, and V-J Day. For example, James P. Navarro wrote: "Mother had just finished washing her hair on August 14, 1945, when she heard the shouts of joy in her house. [Broadway] was literally jammed with people... There

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(Photo by Gary S. Wilk).
were tears of joy and tears of sadness, realizing that many loved ones killed in action would never come home. Airplanes were flying overhead, and firecrackers were bursting in the air. People danced in the streets and kissed one another. It truly was a memorable day” (p. 39).

*Steel Shavings* was founded at Indiana University Northwest in Gary in 1975 in order to publish worthy family histories written by university students concerning the history of Lake and Porter counties. These portraits of common people's social, economic, educational, ethnic, and political experiences comprise a series of intimate community studies. Because the Calumet Region includes industrial cities, small towns, and even rural areas, the sketches cover a wide range of cultures. Assigning a family history project is a practical method in teaching not only local history but other courses as well. The example of *Steel Shavings* has inspired a number of similar family-awareness projects in area high schools. English and social studies teachers have reported that even students with below-average writing skills have excelled at this type of assignment.

The initial volume of *Steel Shavings* dealt with a single city, Gary, and included articles on such urban institutions as the police and fire departments, the public schools, nationality clubs, and churches. Volume two featured ten articles on ethnic families who had uprooted themselves from such places as Yugoslavia, Greece, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Poland, and the American South. The process of adjustment was difficult and painful for all, although some managed it more successfully than others.

The 1977 issue, subtitled “Families of the Calumet Region During the Depression of the 1930s,” focused on efforts to combat the economic hardships which threatened jobs, homes, aspirations, and the very survival of certain families. The Depression was so severe and long-lasting that it fundamentally affected people's thoughts and habits and left a variety of invisible scars on those who lived through it. As contributor Sandy Blomeyer wrote: “These were times when a young child took a wagon to a “Relief Depot,” and a teenager read and heard of distant lands but was unable to obtain sufficient gasoline to drive to Crown Point. These were also times for learning. The insecurity of life taught my father the necessity of independence and self-reliance” (p. 5). Debbie Terpstra's article concentrated on a child's joyless Christmas: "Ann tore off the wrappings of her lone present and pulled out a plain brown jumper
SUNDAY AFTERNOON, U. S. STEEL, GARY WORKS, 1940

Courtesy of author
with puffed sleeves. She was shocked, not only because it was not the coveted pink dress but because it was so ugly. It came to her than that things were much worse than she had realized” (p. 6). In the same issue E. Craig Turpin related efforts of his Uncle Zeb to obtain coal and food: “There was no such thing as stale bread in those days [Zeb recalled]. We even picked the mold off and ate it. We would go behind the butcher shop and pick orange peels out of the garbage and eat them. We were so hungry one time that when my father brought home a bag of flour, we ripped the bag open and ate it just like that” (p. 40).

In contrast to this solemn motif, volume four of Steel Shavings, subtitled “Cruisin’ the Region in the Fifties,” had a somewhat nostalgic tone. Student articles and photo essays provide glimpses into the Gary Golden Anniversary Jubilee, the Hammond Centennial, and various high school reminiscences. More somber topics included hardships imposed by the 1959 steel strike, the Whiting explosion at Standard Oil, the local dimensions of the Red Scare, and the enduring realities of racism.

Future volumes of Steel Shavings will deal with work experiences in the Region, with race-relations during the 1960s, with the era of the “Golden 20s,” and with pioneer portraits of town builders. By the mid-1980s it might be possible to prepare an issue entitled “Family Biographies of the 1970s.”

Publication costs for Steel Shavings have been met in several ways. The goal of self-sufficiency has been obtained without becoming dependent on a single source of funding. Several Indiana University Northwest administrative units have provided funds in return for copies which they distributed to interested people. Area businesses and service clubs have donated money and in turn have received multiple copies of issues. And the magazine is on sale for two dollars per issue (half price for students) at the university bookstore or through the history department. Broadening the base of patrons has enabled circulation to rise to 1,100 copies, which has reduced the unit cost to approximately $1.50 per issue. The size of each issue has steadily grown, and community interest has increased to the extent that the supply of the first two Steel Shavings issues is almost gone.

As Steel Shavings editors Ronald D. Cohen and James B. Lane wrote, students until recently learned remarkably little about the history of their own communities. Too often local
history had been the private preserve of antiquarians sometimes largely concerned with glorifying their ancestors. *Steel Shavings* is dedicated to redressing part of that imbalance by taking seriously the lives that common people have led, long ago and within recent memory.