

MINNESOTA HISTORY

Dillinger to WWII to Legislature

CURT BROWN



As a 9-year-old during the Great Depression, Bernie Lieder would sometimes spell his father tend-

ing bar at the family's brick saloon. They lived above the Corner Bar, which included a pool table and doors leading to a barber shop and butcher counter where his mother, Rose, once lost a fingertip grinding sausage.

Prohibition-era moonshine flowed from a couple of stills in the woods just outside Hanover — then a farm town of 200 people about 30 miles northwest of Minneapolis.

"Making and selling moonshine was how people made a living back in those days," Lieder, 95, recalled from his home in Crookston. "When my dad was eating his supper, I'd sell you a shot of moonshine and a beer chaser."

A few years later, Lieder "distinctly" remembers strangers from out of town stopping by. One got a shave while another stood by the door.

"The Feds came by a few days later, asking if we'd seen John Dillinger," he said.

The notorious gangster had been holed up in a cabin on Beebe Lake, west of Hanover, a few weeks before police gunned him down outside a Chicago movie theater in 1934.

From the Depression through his combat infantryman's view of World War II and then 25 years as a DFL legislator from Crookston, Lieder has witnessed more history than most Minnesotans. He was the last WWII vet to serve in the Minnesota House.

His memory remains scalpel sharp, his stories as riveting as they are impossible to condense in a newspaper



Minnesota Historical Society

BERNIE LIEDER 1923-PRESENT

Bernie Lieder, shown in 2006, served moonshine in the Depression, served in the Army in WWII and, more recently, served in the Legislature from Crookston.

story. Luckily, there's an online, 79-page transcribed version of an oral history interview Lieder gave in 2006 as part of the Minnesota Historical Society's Greatest Generation project — tinyurl.com/BernieLieder.

Bernard Lieder was born in 1923 at his family's farmhouse on the Hennepin-Wright county line. But he's spent two-thirds of his life in a simple, one-story gray

house he built in Crookston for \$17,000 in 1955.

He moved to Crookston in the early 1950s when he landed a Polk County highway engineer job after dropping out of the University of Minnesota postwar. He married his wife, Shirley, in 1952 and they raised three girls.

An apolitical type, Lieder said local DFLers talked him into running for the Legislature in 1985 instead of

complaining about woeful highway funding. He served in the House until 2010, when he lost by only 131 votes but declined to seek a recount.

"I've stayed away from the Capitol," he said. "It's too partisan right now. It's plain nasty and I'm very disappointed with the caliber of what's going on."

Although Shirley died in 2000 and his hip and back problems have worsened,

WITNESS TO HISTORY BERNIE LIEDER

Born: Feb. 19, 1923, in Greenwood Township on the Hennepin-Wright county line. • **Home:** Living in Crookston.

WWII: As a combat artilleryman, he saw front-line action in Germany.

After the war: Polk County highway engineer.

Legislature: Served in Minnesota House from 1985-2010.

Family: Widow since wife, Shirley, died in 2000; three daughters and 10 grandchildren.

Lieder prefers "legging it" at home in his mid-90s.

He's been to Europe more than a dozen times since World War II, when he helped liberate work camps after the Nazis fell. In 2009, he was honored at Israel's Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, where he laid a wreath and offered a salute.

A grandson of German immigrants, Lieder grew up speaking German in Hanover and later, often helped bridge the language gap between Allied military officials and German prisoners and townspeople.

"It would have been nicer if I had been an official interpreter," he said. "That would have kept me off the front lines."

That front-line vantage point once came from a dike-side house window, from which Lieder's machine gun covered troops building a foot bridge across the Roer River in Germany. Experts later called that the most concentrated artillery fire in the WWII European theater.

As the war wound down, Lieder came across a grisly scene when retreating Germans burned a hay-filled barn where they'd held 1,000 prisoners. Almost none survived the massacre.

But of all the horror, his memory of a squadron buddy named Elliot Kleiner haunts him the most. Before his division shipped out of New

York, Lieder stayed at Kleiner's family home in Brooklyn.

In February 1944, Kleiner was shot in a barn at Lieder's feet. Lieder pulled his lifeless body over to an apple tree, where medics pronounced him dead.

On his way home to Minnesota after the war, Lieder stopped in New York and hired a taxi to drive him to the Kleiner family's Jewish delicatessen. He wanted to assure Kleiner's mother that her son died instantly without suffering.

"His mother looked at my watch and went berserk, accusing me of stealing her son's watch," he said. "She was stark raving mad and I had to leave."

Kleiner's brother walked outside, shrugged and said he knew Lieder hadn't taken the watch. His mother had just been so disturbed since losing her son, he said.

"It was a tough thing to accept," Lieder said. "And it really hurt."

Sometimes painful, often funny, the memories and the stories keep flowing from a 95-year-old Minnesotan who's seen so much.

Curt Brown's tales about Minnesota's history appear each Sunday. Readers can send him ideas and suggestions at mnhistory@startribune.com. His new book looks at 1918 Minnesota, when flu, war and fires converged: <https://tinyurl.com/MN1918>. Podcasts at www.onminnesotahistory.com.