

# Lee Foster's Minnesota Boy Memoir Excerpt on The Ancestors



I am posting some excerpts from my memoir about growing up in Minnesota, titled *Minnesota Boy: Growing Up in Mid-America, Mid-20th Century*. This post is about the toughness of my ancestors, who settled Minnesota. Their example continues to energize me, including their ability to survive, their hard work ethic to succeed, and their optimism about a brighter future.



My grandfather Eddie, father Russ (left), and his brother Wink

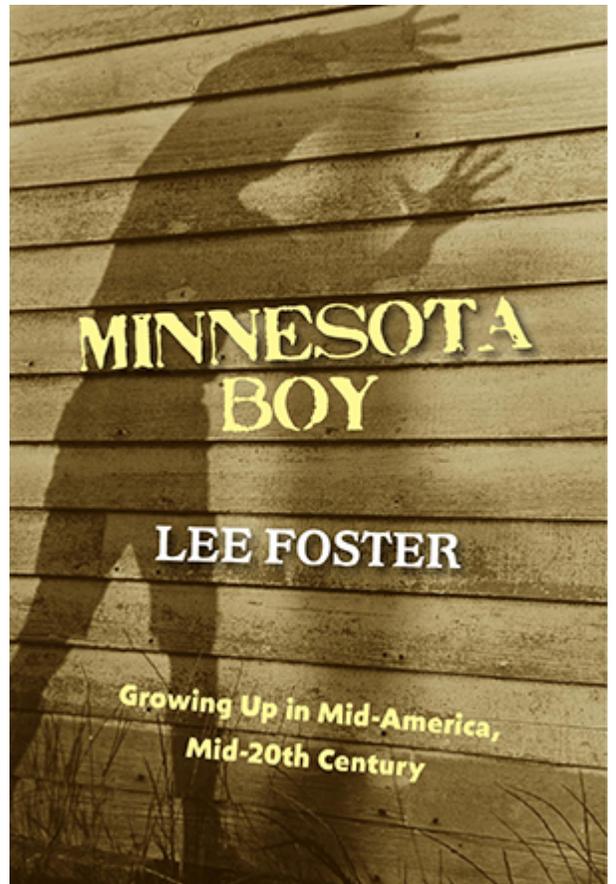
See below an announcement about the book and then three of the 82 sections (45,

19, and 20) appropriate for this theme.

The Announcement:

Lee Foster Literary Book *Minnesota Boy: Growing Up in Mid-America, Mid-20th Century* Published

Lee Foster's literary memoir about growing up in Minnesota has been re-published and released as *Minnesota Boy: Growing Up in Mid-America, Mid-20th Century*.



The book was originally published in 1970 with the title *Just 25 Cents and Three Wheaties Boxtops*. Foster wrote the volume in the late 1960s when he was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow at Stanford, studying writing and American Literature under Wallace Stegner, eventually receiving an MA Degree and completing ABD (All But Dissertation) on his PhD. Stegner liked the book and assisted Foster to get it agented and published. Stegner went on to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1972.

Minnesota Boy conveys the experience of growing up in a Minnesota mid-America that produced the sensibilities of people like Hubert Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy,

Walter Mondale, Garrison Keillor, and Bob Dylan.

The book is not a standard chapter-by-chapter memoir. Rather, it is a collection of imagined conversations and recollections of what life was like in that Eisenhower Era 1950s, just as the times morphed into the Vietnam War and Protest 1960s. The book has 82 literary selections and 67 photos.

Minnesota Boy addresses a perennial and enduring question: What is it like growing up in America? The answer depends partly on the time and place.

The book informs about the strong hunting and fishing outdoor culture, Catholic religion sinner-can-be-saved ethic, egalitarian and inclusive all-children-are-equal spirit, progress-through-education-and-hard-work ideal, and optimism-about-a-better-future mindset that pervaded life in Mankato, Minnesota, in the 1950s. There was always, however, a nervous background worry about Nuclear Annihilation.

Black-and-white photos created by Foster in the 1960s, as he was beginning his writing/photography career, catalogue visually the now-vanished world of the child and family in that era in a Minnesota America. Visual details in the photos now have substantial archival value, with captions such as "My father's fishing tackle box," "Artifacts from a boy's life in Minnesota," "The garage at my family's house," and "A confessional at Saints Peter & Paul Church."

The printed book (\$14.95) and the ebook (\$3.99) are available wherever books/ebooks are sold. ISBN for the print book is 978-0976084327 and for the ebook 978-0976084334.

The Amazon link is at

[http://www.amazon.com/Minnesota-Boy-Growing-Mid-America-Mid-20th/dp/0976084325/ref=asap\\_bc?ie=UTF8](http://www.amazon.com/Minnesota-Boy-Growing-Mid-America-Mid-20th/dp/0976084325/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8)

and on Lee Foster's Amazon Author Page among his 19 books at

[http://www.amazon.com/Lee-Foster/e/B001HNI5S8/?\\_encoding=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&linkCode=ur2&qid=1353686444&sr=1-2-ent&tag=fostertravelp-20](http://www.amazon.com/Lee-Foster/e/B001HNI5S8/?_encoding=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&linkCode=ur2&qid=1353686444&sr=1-2-ent&tag=fostertravelp-20)

Bookstores and libraries can order the printed book through Ingram and the ebook through Smashwords.

This popular memoir book received a positive response from consumers on the day it was launched. The book ranked in sales as #65,318 of all the millions of books on Amazon, and #80 among books in a category Biographies/Memoirs.

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## **Three Excerpts about The Ancestors:**

### **Section 45**

Grandpa Foster, who died October 26, 1968, at the age of 98, was a man who had all the qualities of a pioneer at a time when few other qualities could be called virtues. Independent and self-reliant, he ran calculated risks and lived by an ethic of hard work. He often said, “Lee, find something you’d love to do day, night, and Sunday.”

“Material” was his favorite adjective. He used it, not in the modern and slightly derogatory sense that suggests a deficiency of the imagination in a time of opulence, but with a pioneer’s appreciation for a few basic tactile necessities. He set up a business and pulled it and his family through the Depression, watching with pride as his three children took university degrees.

Grandpa Foster knew adventure at a time when the sheer geography of the country

was something to wonder over. Drawing on these fond days, his mind often repeated like a stuck record, because those were the heroic days of his early travels to places with sonorous names that rose in his speech to a heady incantation: mining in Rock Springs, Wyoming; serving as mess boy in the High Sierra; walking San Francisco in its roaring days; working cattle and fruit ranches of the San Joaquin.



My grandfather Eddie, father Russ (left), and his brother Wink

He provided for himself from that day in his 10th year when his parents put him on a train going west from Iowa with 50 dollars in his pocket. The origin of his people was never certain. They likely came from England. But maybe they just sprung spontaneously from an Iowa river bottom on one of those hot July nights when, he claimed, you could hear the corn grow.

His wandering must have had a carefree robustness, because he lived in an earlier America when a man was a pair of strong arms and each man was as good as the next man if he could do a day's manual labor. Especially in California during the 1880s and 1890s, he must have felt a certain lyrical and idyllic security in the way a man knew he was a man, could estimate his worth exactly, sure he was capable of making a dollar a day, certain he could get ahead if he had drive.

He was one of the few people who did not assume that the world ceased to change when he became fixed. He tried to keep up, always reading his newspapers or paging through U.S. News in the glaring light of his room, peering through wire-rim glasses, wearing his green printer's visor, holding his rolled-up shirtsleeves with a leather armband.

“What do you think of Russian foreign policy?” the boy asked, with vast presumption.

Grandpa folded his hands, settled in his chair, perhaps spit his chew quickly if grandmother wasn't looking, arched his head back thoughtfully, and then gave the query far more and graver thought than it deserved. His answers were always filled with such respectful sobriety that the boy soon became convinced his questions were important.

In the evening the boy often went with his father on a daily visit. After some talk concerning a new order at the factory and maybe a comment on what the Free Press had said about General Eisenhower, he asked what the boy had done today, and the boy insisted that his BB gun was far more accurate than the target would ever corroborate. But he never questioned the boy's aim.

There followed a silence in the harsh unshaded light of the room at night, the silence of the two men and the boy, who liked to be together, the silence of two who had grown accustomed to marking out the days with this unobtrusive habit of meeting, the silence of his father resting in a chair after a hard day, and grandfather reading, and the boy absorbed in mute wonder in their presences, this silence finally more eloquent than all words.

Occasionally, grandpa gave advice. For years he wanted the boy to see a phrenologist, maybe one in Chicago. A phrenologist could decipher bumps on your head and tell you exactly what you ought to be in life. Grandpa was ready to pay the \$10 fee. Grandpa, as a boy in Iowa, had been told by a phrenologist that he ought to be an architect, something he wanted to hear. He always regretted that he could never have afforded the training. The rich town-architect's son, trained in Europe, when told by the grandpa-boy about this dream, just laughed at his ambition.

Grandpa cautioned the boy against what he called “self-abuse,” always speaking in a manner sufficiently cryptic that it was uncertain whether he meant smoking, masturbation, liquor, loose women, late hours, associating with Democrats, or what. He showed the boy his right hand with the missing finger, adding this final piece of advice, “Don't wear rings near printing machines.”

For 10 years of almost unbroken Sunday family dinners and picnics, the boy watched

grandpa come and go, dressed in a gray suit that never grew old, black hook-eye shoes that never scuffed, wide ties, and the great gray vest that gave him a dressed-up dignity and distance. The boy remembered him with his hat on, edging along on his strong steel crutches down the wooden steps, wearing a coat because he feared catching cold. Father drove him out into the countryside to enjoy the hills and see the crops.

“I’ve never seen the corn so high this early,” he commented, with every new July.

If the day was hot, he might sit outdoors, his shirt collar open and his breast bared on the sun, the only medicine he ever believed in. Indoors he always made an effort to sing around the piano, however badly he was out of tune. While rocking grandchildren on his knees he sighed, “Wheeeeeeee.” Each Sunday he asked for two small glasses, one of water and one of bourbon, which he sipped quickly after the invariable toast, “Here’s to the breeze that blows through the trees.” The next lines of his toast were naughty, so he always muffled them while downing his bourbon if grandma was in the room.

On Sunday afternoons, after grandma Foster died, whenever grandpa left to be driven home in the station wagon, he protested that he had been so much bother, that he ought not to come next Sunday. He looked at mother after one of her countless impeccable feasts and uttered a message that could already be read in the soft wetness of his gray eyes in the dusk, “Thank you, Nellie, thank you. Thank you. Thank you.” The boy’s family would collectively protest back, and mean it, that they really felt good to be so happily bothered by him. The next Sunday he was waiting when the boy and his father arrived.

At their house on Byron Street, the boy watched grandpa’s gruff manliness meet the soft refinement of grandmother. Their house was a boy’s joy, because it had a pleasing, cluttered completeness that made the boy always feel comfortable and made him want to explore what might be on the shelves in the icebox room, with its little door to the outside, or in the corners of the coal bin room deep in the basement, where he had to wear a sweater, even in summer. In the parlor was an immense old oak chair, which the boy took to be an excellent seat for any visiting giants. He went up the complaining hallway steps with a flashlight, beyond the

trapdoor and into the attic, where he found, hanging in the stale air from a long nail, an old brown moth-eaten leather diving helmet that stared back with immense glass eyeholes covered by a protective grid of wire.

At grandpa's house the boy could do things he could never do at home, like adding 50 spices to a Coca-Cola to make a sickening brew that was an alchemist's delight. And he could run across the street and down the Brandrupt's hill in the new cut hay, where, if he were lucky, he might find a garter snake. He could press his nose against the window of the garage to look at grandpa's ancient Ford.

Some family tensions surfaced mainly on Election Day. On one November 5, while motoring home from the polling place, grandfather observed, "I presume that you voted for the right party."

Grandmother stared at him and offered her tart reply, "You can be assured I did not."

Whereupon grandfather stopped the car, walked around to his wife's side, opened the door, and requested that she walk home.

In the spring the boy and grandpa planted the wooden flowerboxes in front of the house with geraniums. Grandpa, brandishing a hand hoe, nodded with all the gray hair on the sides of his balding head and gestured with his bushy eyebrows when the boy had added just the right amount of Vigoro to nourish the seedlings' young green lives.

Grandpa's religion, unwilling to have any truck with the divine, was a set of good habits that might have been handed down from Ben Franklin. His speculations, confined to this life and this planet, consisted of a hard optimism and a wide-eyed wonder, convinced of steady progress to a golden day, always amazed at the rapid rate of change. He professed one unshakable mythic belief, "The future will be a great time."

Born in the decade after the Civil War, his life spanned most of the phenomena that one thinks of as modern. It could be said of his death, as was often said at the passing of old Confederate soldiers, that finally he was defeated, but never

conquered.

## Section 19

His Grandmother Foster's people, the Andersons, came to America from Sweden. Their life was a catalogue of the harshest immigrant tragedies. Told by J. E. Anderson (1846-1921) in Forest City, Iowa, in June 1914:

My father, Emanuel Anderson, born October 22, 1808, twelve Swedish miles from Gothenburg, Sweden, was a farmer, blacksmith, and all around man. He even made musical instruments. He could do cabinet work and build houses. Though Methodist in tendency, he belonged to the Lutheran Church as a matter of form. Black hair, black whiskers—he wore a long beard. He was nearly as tall as I am (5' 11"). He used to thrash the others because they were older, but he did not thrash me—my mother did that.



Grave of Swedish babies who died

With the seven of us children and my mother he boarded the ship AA PIRSGROS in the fall of 1852 bound for New York. One child had died in Sweden. That was Anna Maria. Anna Luisa, Andrew, Johann, Edward, August, Johannes, Emanuel, Petrus, and Olavus lived. The last three died in the North Sea from seasickness. We were shipwrecked three times. It took six weeks to come over. We drifted back and forth

on the ocean in a small ship. We drifted as far up as the Newfoundland Banks. At one point the Captain told all the passengers that we would be in hell in a few minutes. Mother said as for her she was not going to that place.

Edward, 11, died in New York.

On the Great Lakes we suffered shipwreck again and had 25 cents when we landed. We lost all our property in the shipwreck. In Sweden we had been fairly well to do. Father could not collect insurance for all the children he lost, either.

Frank Oscar was born in Whiteside County, Illinois, in 1857. He weighed fifteen pounds when born and could walk in seven months.

In 1857 we moved to Iowa. My father became a farmer in Iowa, also. We moved to Lake Mills in the 1860s. Many Scandinavians were coming into the district at that time, but we mingled with the Americans. We drove to Lake Mills from Lyons, Iowa, in an oxen-drawn wagon. We lived in a log house, of course. We had a nice log house with several rooms, up and down. The house was well built and stronger than the frame houses they build now. It was built of oak. Poplar and oak were used for these log houses.

Father always had good health. Pneumonia from the fall in a lake was the cause of his death. He was buried in Bristol, North County, Iowa. He had a doctor just once—the day he died.

## **Section 20**

The maternal side of the boy's family arrived from Ireland. In an America of the 1870's they retained their Old World preferences for farming, good whiskey, and Catholicism.

Patrick Mullin, the boy's great great grandfather, set up a hotel in Madison Lake for the loggers.



My Irish ancestors

James Mape, who married one of Mullin's daughters, came from Ireland at 17, saved money he earned as a farm laborer, and then set up the first saloon in Madison Lake. "The Shamrock" prospered without competition for 29 years. It was a favorite meeting place for people like the two men who posed in James Mape's buckboard—John Neary, the slim, fierce-looking town marshal, and hefty Dan Brown, "a man everyone knew." James Mape later opened a resort and cottages on Duck Lake, where tourists came to fish for pike and take the air. James had eight children. The oldest girl, Virginia, rocked in the only cradle the family could afford—a hollow log. She grew up to become the family beauty.

Virginia married Billy Lyons when she was 18. He was a farmer who later became a cattle speculator in Saint Paul. In his speculations, sometime he won and sometimes he lost. His namesake, Will Jr., died of diphtheria at age 13. The history of the seven children who survived was a migration pattern common to many Midwestern families. One by one, five of the seven slipped off to California.