MATT ANDERSON: Hi, I’m Matt Anderson, a curator at the Minnesota Historical Society, and this is a 1955 Ford Customline Fordinor Sedan. The car has a special history. Three generations of a single family drove the “Bluebird,” as they affectionately called it, and now they’ve donated it to the Society for our Minnesota’s Greatest Generation exhibit.

The Bluebird’s story starts with its original owners, Otto and Cora Bergan. The couple met in St. Paul when Otto was in medical school and Cora was training to be a nurse. They married in 1916 and moved to Clinton, Minnesota, where they quickly became involved in the community. Otto ran his medical practice while Cora worked as a nurse, was involved in her church, and was one of the first women to serve on the school board. Their granddaughter, Mary Carr, remembers visiting Otto and Cora in Clinton.

MARY CARR: Known by everybody in the community in Clinton. They just loved having us come visit and walk down Main Street. At a little country cafe we’d have a lengthy meal there with everybody knowing everybody’s business and seeing Cora and Otto’s grandkids arriving. Just very, very proud. Very, very proud of their sons.

MATT ANDERSON: Otto and Cora had two sons—Bob and Don. Like Otto, Bob attended the University of Minnesota Medical School where he met his future wife, Adelaide. Bob and Adelaide married in 1942 and settled in Duluth. After serving in World War II, Bob opened a pediatric clinic and practiced in the area for 38 years.

Otto and Cora purchased this car, brand new, in June 1955, from Dick Thayer Motors in Ortonville. The Ford became a close member of the family, especially to the Bergan men who bonded over cars.

MARY CARR: Dad and Don and my other uncle, Wynn, they always had their cars parked together and there was a lot of conversation among the guys about the car and what this and that and a lot of the male bonding was done surrounding cars.

MARY CARR: But it was always in the family known to be Cora’s car. Which I think was pretty impressive at that time in history that a woman would have been identified and linked to her own car. I have memories of driving down Clinton in the car. She’s a little bit of a thing.

MATT ANDERSON: After Otto and Cora passed away, their son Bob inherited the Ford. He wanted to keep the car in the family. Bob’s children, including his daughter Mary, drove it often.

MARY CARR: In the ’70’s it would have lived in Duluth, or else with my brothers, and they would sort of take it with my dad’s approval to; if they needed a car while they were down in college and Dad said, “Well, take the Bluebird.” Bluebird was it’s nickname.
MARY CARR: And then I think it was just important for Dad to keep the car in the family. So when nobody was driving it, he stored it at Breezy Point. And he drove it around Breezy a bit, you know, for fun, but he wanted the car. I think it had a real spot in his heart because it was his mom’s car.

MATT ANDERSON: When Bob passed away, Mary and her husband Jim became the third generation of the Bergan family to own the car. By now it was an heirloom, and the Ford spent most of its time in storage.

The Bluebird has another bit Minnesota history to it. The “P” in its serial number reveals where this car was built: Ford’s Twin Cities Assembly Plant in St. Paul. The plant turned out thousands and thousands of vehicles over the years, from Model As in the 1920s to Ranger pick-ups today. The Customline was a popular mid-priced model in the 1950s because of its sleek design and panoramic windshield. Nineteen fifty-five was also the first model year in which Ford offered seat belts and air conditioning as options.

When the Society acquired the car in 2008, we made necessary repairs but preserved the vehicle’s historic character. Rust was eliminated and body panels were repainted, but the original trim and snow tires were retained.

We recently brought the Ford into the History Center where it’s now part of the Minnesota’s Greatest Generation exhibit. The car is a defining symbol of the 1950s boom, and a piece of Minnesota’s auto history. And as we know from the Bergans, the Bluebird is also a family heirloom with its own personal story to tell. I hope it brings back memories for our visitors, just as it does for Mary Bergan Carr.

MARY CARR: But also, the Bluebird engine, and even now, as old as it is, it has a real peaceful hum. The engine sound brings great memories to me. I have lots of memories of the car starting up and just sort of purring along.