

HUCK'S RAFT

A History of American Childhood



Steven Mintz

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Huck's Raft

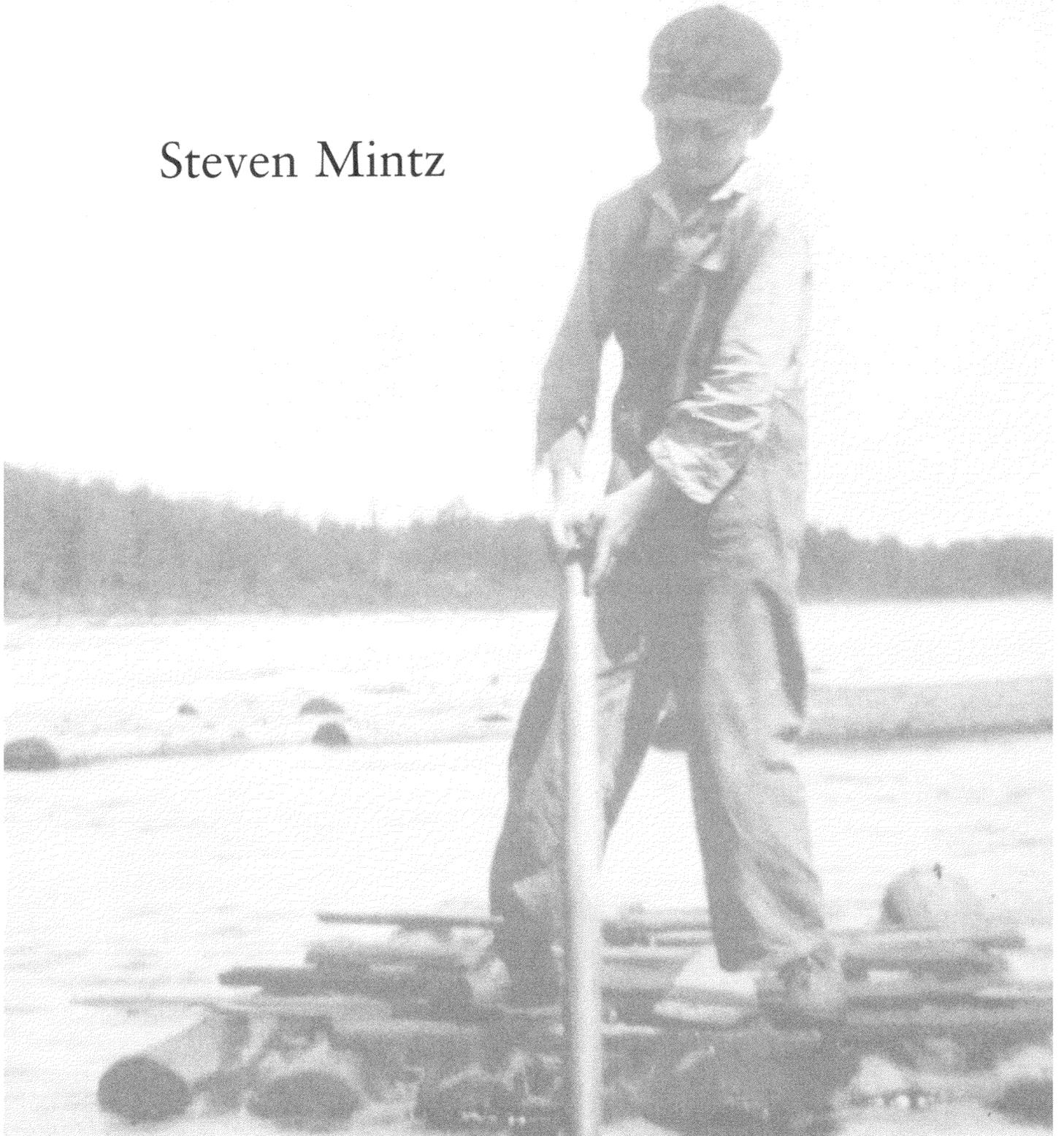
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Title page illustration: Photograph of Charles Lindbergh
at about age ten, rafting on the Mississippi River near
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Preface

FOR MORE THAN three centuries Americans have believed that the younger generation is less respectful and knowledgeable, and more alienated, sexually promiscuous, and violent, than previously. Today adults fear that children are growing up too fast and losing their sense of innocent wonder too early. Prematurely exposed to the pressures, stresses, and responsibilities of adult life, the young mimic adult sophistication, dress inappropriately, and experiment with alcohol, drugs, sex, and tobacco before they are emotionally and psychologically ready.

One of the goals of this book is to strip away the myths, misconceptions, and nostalgia that contribute to this pessimism about the young. There has never been a time when the overwhelming majority of American children were well cared for and their experiences idyllic. Nor has childhood ever been an age of innocence, at least not for most children. Childhood has never been insulated from the pressures and demands of the surrounding society, and each generation of children has had to wrestle with the social, political, and economic constraints of its own historical period. In our own time, the young have had to struggle with high rates of family instability, a deepening disconnection from adults, and the expectation that all children should pursue the same academic path at the same pace, even as the attainment of full adulthood recedes ever further into the future.

The history of children is often treated as a marginal subject, and there is no question that it is especially difficult to write. Children are rarely obvious historical actors. They leave fewer historical sources than adults,

and their powerlessness makes them less visible than other social groups. Nevertheless, the history of childhood is inextricably bound up with the broader political and social events in the life of the nation—including colonization, revolution, slavery, industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and war—and children’s experience embodies many of the key themes in American history, such as the rise of modern bureaucratic institutions, the growth of a consumer economy, and the elaboration of a welfare state.

Certain themes and patterns of American childhood will emerge in this book. The first is that childhood is not an unchanging biological stage of life but is, rather, a social and cultural construct that has changed radically over time. Every aspect of childhood—including children’s household responsibilities, play, schooling, relationships with parents and peers, and paths to adulthood—has been transformed over the past four centuries. Just two hundred years ago there was far less age segregation than there is today and much less concern with organizing experience by chronological age. There was also far less sentimentalizing of children as special beings who were more innocent and vulnerable than adults. This does not mean that adults failed to recognize childhood as a stage of life, with its own special needs and characteristics. Nor does it imply that parents were unconcerned about their children and failed to love them and mourn their deaths. Both the definition and experience of childhood have varied according to changing cultural, demographic, economic, and historical circumstances.

Nor is childhood an uncontested concept. The late twentieth-century culture war—pitting advocates of a “protected” childhood, seeking to shield children from adult realities, against proponents of a “prepared” childhood—is only the most recent in a long series of conflicts over the definition of a proper childhood. These range from a seventeenth-century conflict between Anglican traditionalist, humanistic, and Puritan conceptions of childhood; to heated eighteenth-century debates over infant depravity and patriarchal authority; and turn-of-the-twentieth-century struggles between the notion of a useful childhood, which expected children to act in a way that repaid their parents’ sacrifices, and the ideal of a sheltered childhood, free from labor and devoted to play and education.

Another major theme is the diversity of childhood. Childhood, the period from infancy to eighteen, includes girls and boys at very different stages of development. It encompasses a wide variety of classes, ethnic groups, regions, religions, and time periods. During the early seventeenth century demographic, economic, ideological, and religious factors com-

bined to make geographical subcultures the most significant markers of childhood diversity. By the mid-nineteenth century, shifts in cultural and religious values and a highly uneven process of economic development made social class, gender, and race more salient sources of childhood diversity. In recent years social conservatives have tended to fixate on differences in family structure, while political liberals have tended to focus on ethnic, gender, and racial differences. In fact social class is the most significant determinant of children's well-being. While race, gender, and ethnicity exert a powerful influence on children's lives, socioeconomic status is intimately linked to their health care, schooling, and family stability.

This book also traces the shifting power relationships between parents and children, especially parents' increasing psychological investment in their children. The Puritans believed that parents were responsible for their children's spiritual upbringing; contemporary parents hold themselves responsible not only for children's physical well-being but also for their psychological adjustment, personal happiness, and future success. As birthrates fell and increasing numbers of mothers entered the paid workforce, parental anxiety intensified; fears for children's safety escalated, as did concern that they not suffer from boredom or low self-esteem. Above all, middle-class parents worried that their children would be unable to replicate their status position.

Then there is the pattern of recurrent moral panics over children's well-being. Ever since the Pilgrims departed for Plymouth in 1620, fearful that "their posterity would be in danger to degenerate and be corrupted" in the Old World, Americans have experienced repeated panics over the younger generation.¹ Sometimes these panics were indeed about children, such as the worries over polio in the early 1950s. More often, however, children stand in for some other issue, and the panics are more metaphorical than representational, such as the panic over teenage pregnancy, youth violence, and declining academic achievement in the late 1970s and 1980s, which reflected pervasive fears about family breakdown, crime, drugs, and America's declining competitiveness in the world.

Far from regarding children simply as passive creatures, who are the objects of socialization and schooling, and consumers of entertainment and products produced by grownups, this book views children as active agents in the evolution of their society. The following pages will demonstrate that children have participated actively in the major events in American history, that child-adult relations have involved a process of contestation and negotiation, and that children have been creators as well as consumers of culture. The balance between childhood dependence and in-

dependence has shifted over time and provides a signifier of childhood experience as well as the adult perception of, and relation to, that experience.

In certain respects, today's children are more autonomous than young people have ever been. They have their own institutions and media, most now have their own rooms, and many teens have their own cars. Contemporary children mature faster physiologically than those in the past and are more knowledgeable about sexuality, drugs, and other adult realities. They are also more fully integrated into the realm of consumer culture at an earlier age. Yet from the vantage point of history, contemporary children's lives are more regimented and constrained than ever before. Contemporary society is extreme in the distinction it draws between the worlds of childhood and youth, on the one hand, and of adulthood, on the other. Far more than previous generations, we have prolonged and intensified children's emotional and psychological dependence. Children are far more resilient, adaptable, and capable than our society typically assumes. We have segregated the young in age-graded institutions, and, as a result, children grow up with little contact with adults apart from their parents and other relatives and childcare professionals. Unlike children in the past, young people today have fewer socially valued ways to contribute to their family's well-being or to participate in community life. By looking back over four centuries of American childhood we can perhaps recover old ways and discover new ways to reconnect children to a broader range of adult mentors and to expand their opportunities to participate in activities that they and society find truly meaningful.

THIS BOOK is a work of synthesis and interpretation, and my debts are recorded in every note. Certain individuals, however, deserve special recognition. My colleagues at the Council on Contemporary Families—including Ashton Applewhite, Stephanie Coontz, Carolyn and Phil Cowan, Frank Furstenberg, John Gillis, Ann Hartman, Roger Lake, Joan Laird, Larry McCallum, Barbara Risman, Virginia Rutter, Pepper Schwartz, Arlene Skolnick, and Judith Stacey—taught me that sanctimonious moralizing offers no solution to the problems confronting today's families. The members of the Society for the History of Childhood and Youth, especially LeRoy Ashby, Peter W. Bardaglio, E. Wayne Carp, Howard Chudacoff, Priscilla Ferguson Clement, Miriam Forman-Brunell, Harvey Graff, Philip Greven, Joseph Hawes, Ray Hiner, Joseph Illick, Wilma King, Kriste Lindemeyer, David I. Macleod, James Marten, Susan Porter, Jacqueline S. Reinier, Eric C. Schneider, and Marie Jenkins Schwartz, have demonstrated that the history of childhood provides a re-

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