

# A Medal for an Immigrant Boy

This best-selling author has written many famous essays—but none as important as one long ago that told him he “belonged”



By HARRY GOLDEN

Author of “Only in America,”  
“For 2¢ Plain,” and “Enjoy, Enjoy!”



“Miss Tibbitts presented the medal in American History to me before the school assembly. It was one of my proudest moments.”

I WAS 12 YEARS OLD and in the sixth grade when a New York newspaper announced a city-wide contest for the best essay on “Why I Love America.” Hundreds of school children participated.

George Washington, I wrote, was the reason I loved America, because he could have been an aristocratic English gentleman but chose instead to lead poor farmers through the terrible winter of Valley Forge.

When the newspaper announced the results, I saw my name at the head of the “Honorable Mention” column. A day later, before the school assembly, my teacher Miss Tibbitts presented a prize medal to me.

That silver coin-shaped medal sums me up. It was a promise, a promise redeemed many times the worth and honor of the medal. It did not represent the only promise, it simply represented the best promise. It was a promise made by America.

Not until recently did I learn that Miss Tibbitts is Miss Marjorie Tibbitts. In those days we did not believe that teachers had anything so mundane as a first name. No, they were towers of dignity and devotion to truth, not at all ordinary people like the rest of us. They were special people, and the years have not dimmed that viewpoint. These wonderful men and women who were our teachers succeeded in making immigrants into citizens within a single generation—a feat unequalled in world history.

Imagine, then, what a medal from Miss Tibbitts meant to an immigrant boy. Imagine what it meant to be awarded a medal in American history when your father and mother could not speak a word of English.

Even at that early age, this America was a

bewondering place. The award, however, told me something about America; as a matter of fact, it still tells me a story about this country. I suspect I pick this as my most inspiring moment because it was tied up with the entire era in which I lived as a boy.

It was an era best symbolized by the free public schools and the neighborhood settlement house, both establishments founded and supported by native Americans for the instruction and benefit of the newer Americans. If the neighborhood settlement house was a place where we youngsters subjected ourselves to a free eye examination and a place where our parents enjoyed the free public baths, it was also a place where old men played chess and young boys played basketball—and above all, a place filled with books. It was in the settlement house that I read the books which helped me compose that essay. Like the schools, the settlement house in those years was staffed mostly by native American social workers.

IN THE BEGINNING, the Jewish immigrants felt uncomfortable about this. Our parents, who came from the small villages of Eastern Europe, had reservations about gentile leadership. It came as a great surprise and a greater comfort to them when, for the first time, they met these gentiles who did not speak to them in anger and who were not interested in converting them but rather would climb five flights of tenement stairs to convince a boy he should go to the synagogue and study his Hebrew lessons.

This was a brand-new idea in communal living, and it gave immigrants a sense of belonging. This attitude was not lost on our parents, even though

they could not speak a word of English.

My mother looked at this silver medal Miss Tibbitts had given me, and across the face of it was written the words “American History” and my name and the date. I translated this for her, and on one occasion she shyly asked me whether she could wear it.

SHE WAS GOING on a visit to Providence, R.I., to see relatives who had just arrived from Europe, and as far as I can remember this was the only trip she ever took, the only holiday she ever had. I still remember how she hemmed and hawed about whether she could pin that medal on her blouse and tell the newer immigrants about it.

The medal became the coin of admission to the open, free society. It promised me and every immigrant child in the class that what we had to say about George Washington was important and would be listened to. It promised us that we, too, could be proud of George Washington, the Constitution, Abraham Lincoln, and the winning of the West. The medal promised that this history belonged to us, too; that we could be Americans.

Did anyone anywhere ever promise more?

Not long ago I was able to tell Miss Tibbitts about my mother wearing this medal pinned to her blouse. The Lower East Side folks had a reunion at one of the fancy hotels, and there was my schoolteacher, Miss Marjorie Tibbitts. I told her about that medal and that I still have it.

There have been all these years with many joys and many sorrows, and yet this little silver medal must remain as the first great signal that I could do something and, more important, people would help me do it.

## COVER:

Ozzie Sweet captures the rugged, 6-foot, 2-inch frame of Paul Hornung, star halfback of the Green Bay Packers. Read about his hard climb from rookie to pro on page 4.

## Family Weekly

September 24, 1961

LEONARD S. DAVIDOW President and Publisher  
WALTER C. DREYFUS Vice President  
PATRICK E. O'ROURKE Advertising Director  
MORTON FRANK Director of Publisher Relations

Send all advertising communications to Family Weekly,  
153 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.

Address all communications about editorial features to  
Family Weekly, 60 E. 56th St., New York 22, N. Y.

### Board of Editors

ERNEST V. HEYN Editor-in-Chief  
BEN KARTMAN Executive Editor  
ROBERT FITZGIBBON Managing Editor  
MARGARET BELL Feature Editor  
PHILLIP DYKSTRA Art Director  
MELANIE DE PROFT Food Editor

Rosalyn Abrevaya, John Hochmann, Jerry Klein, Hal London,  
Murray Miller, Jack Ryan, Peer J. Oppenheimer, Hollywood.

© 1961, FAMILY WEEKLY MAGAZINE, INC., 153 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Ill. All rights reserved.