



National Anthem Celebrates 78 Years, Thanks to VFW

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The VFW vigorously took on the fight to make The Star-Spangled Banner this country's national anthem. In 1928, the U.S. was the only modern nation in the world without a sanctioned national ballad—a flagrant lapse VFW was determined to set right. It was Walter I. “Daddy” Joyce, director of the National Americanization Committee, who led the crusade.

The Star-Spangled Banner had been played and sung with varying degrees of success for some 100 years. The uplifting words came from Francis Scott Key, a 35-year-old lawyer who had watched from Chesapeake Bay, Md., the night the British bombarded Ft. McHenry in 1814.

The next morning, the sight of the tattered flag still flying over the shelled fort inspired Key to put his feelings to words. They were published as a poem in the Sept. 20, 1814, issue of the Baltimore Patriot.

Set to the music of an old English drinking song, “To Anacreon in Heaven,” it became an instant favorite. President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed it the national anthem in 1916, but Congress had yet to legislate it as the nation's patriotic musical signature.

Joyce, with the endorsement of then-VFW Commander-in-Chief Frank T. Strayer, energetically pursued his goal of securing an overwhelming number of petition signatures with which to bombard Congress.

Posts and Auxiliaries pitched in against opposition by pacifist groups that objected to the song's alleged “militaristic” tone. But at VFW's 1929 national encampment in St. Paul, Minn., Joyce reported 4 million signatures in hand. A Gold Star mother collected 12,000 signatures; a New Jersey VFW member, 9,000; and another in Troy, N.Y., 5,000.

Musical purists said, with justification, the music was in too high a register to be sung by all except operatic sopranos. The score was rewritten in the key of A flat to bring it within reach of more American vocal cords.

Joyce persuaded New York Rep. Hamilton Fish to introduce a bill before Congress, but it

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never got out of committee. Nor did it during the next session. Then, on Jan. 30, 1930, representatives from more than 60 patriotic organizations gathered in Washington, D.C., to press for another version of the bill introduced by Maryland Rep. Charles Linthicum. It went before the Judiciary Committee the next day, where Joyce presented 5 million signatures and endorsements from other organizations representing another 15 million citizens. Among the signatures were those of 26 governors. Foreign Service, VFW's magazine during that period, proudly proclaimed it "a feat without parallel in the history of any veterans organization."

The climax came when VFW Auxiliary member Elsie Jorss Reilly stood and sang Key's words to the accompaniment of the Navy Band. The bill came out of committee by a vote of 16 to 2, but stalled on the House floor because of the objection from a Mississippi representative.

It finally passed on April 21, 1930, and was sent to the Senate Library Committee, where it again lay fallow until March 3, 1931. On that date, it passed unanimously, a day before the 71st Congress adjourned. President Herbert Hoover signed the bill the following morning. The Star-Spangled Banner was now the nation's national anthem by law, as well as in fact, thanks to the little-known campaign waged by VFW.

In recent years, it has been under assault. A campaign to replace it with something other than a "war song" was waged. Public opinion, however, appears to be on the side of tradition.

Herbert M. Mason is author of VFW: Our First Century, 1899-1999, published in honor of VFW's 100th anniversary.