



ACROSS MY DESK

By Brian Butko, Editor

When Pittsburgh Loved its Lincoln Essay Contest

With the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth approaching, books, exhibits, and videos are being launched to commemorate the nation's 16th president. The centennial in 1909 likewise sparked interest and may have been the catalyst for an essay contest that ran in *The Pittsburgh Press* for approximately 20 years. Tens of thousands of the region's school children participated, but now, three-quarters of a century later, the story has to be pieced together.



I research the Lincoln Highway, but most of my work concerns the road and places along it. Craig Harmon instead investigates what he sees as the road's most important aspect, the connection to Lincoln the man. He moved to Washington, D.C., a few years ago for better access to original documents; it was browsing newspapers at the Library of Congress that he came upon the birthday essays.

"It's amazing how much space was devoted to it, and how many people participated," he says of the *Press* contest.

Because the LOC only has the *Press* starting in 1926, Harmon is more familiar with the contest towards the end of the run, but he has found a medal as early as 1912. That has him thinking the contest might have been launched in 1909.

The 1912 medal features a profile of Lincoln much like that of the penny. Harmon also has seen a 1918 medal that portrays

Lincoln in profile but full-length sitting. A 1928 medal he found again uses a head profile plus notes Lincoln's birth year and 1928. That medal inspired Harmon to scan the year's news stories, plus he indexed articles for 1926, 1927, and 1930 (see links below). A surprise was that 1927's contest featured not Lincoln but George Washington. It's possible the two were switched regularly or even every other year—more research is needed.

In 1928, an article ran every day for the 36 days of the contest, then following a two-week break for judging, the winner was announced and the paper ran that essay and the runner-up. Of 35,000 entries, 625 awards in 4 categories totaled 2,500 medals.

It was apparently the most celebrated contest yet, but Harmon says 1930 got even bigger: "They had a Lincoln portrayer come in and then went crazy with articles during the last week." The paper ran a photo of two women judges reading the entries along with Lincoln impersonator Judge Charles Edward Bull of Texas, who made appearances the last week that drew more than 50,000 people.

And then it ended.

"I could not find any contest in 1931 or '32," says Harmon with some resignation.

"Why they dropped the contest is a mystery. Maybe it was hard to top 1930 so they let it go."

More likely, the Depression had settled in, funds were tight, and faith in the political system had been shaken.

But not Harmon's faith, especially not in Lincoln. Early in 2008, he launched his own annual "Liberty Enlightening the World: Lincoln & Liberty" Global Essay Contest, with a deadline on Lincoln's birthday and a word



An article from the 1928 contest and a medal from that year. Opposite is a 1912 medal. All images courtesy Craig Harmon.

count matching that of the Gettysburg Address. After receiving entries from around the world, a 17-year-old high school student from Fort Wayne, Indiana, was declared the grand prize winner. Harmon is now inviting world leaders to write what Lincoln means to them, a century after the *Press* contest, and two centuries after the man was born. ☼

For an overview and links to indexed articles from 1926, '27, '28, and '30:

www.lincoln-highway-museum.org/PPEEC/PPEEC-Index.html

For information on Harmon's global Lincoln essay contest:

www.lincoln-highway-museum.org/Essay/Essay-Index.html