

## **“IN GOD WE TRUST”**

One of the proudest days of my Dad's life was July 11, 1955, when President Eisenhower signed the bill that made "In God We Trust" our nation's official motto. My Dad, Matt H. Rothert, Sr., you see, had a lot to do with it.

A small businessman who lived in a small town in the state of Arkansas, Matt Rothert was an unlikely person to start a crusade for this motto; but circumstances conspired to make him the perfect person to do so. Matt Rothert was a numismatist, a coin collector, interested in money and what it looked like. He was part of the leadership of the American Numismatic Association so he had friends who were also coin collectors all over the country. He also was involved in the National Association of Manufacturers, which gave him contacts in Washington, D.C. and around the United States. As a businessman in Camden, Arkansas, he belonged to the Kiwanis and Rotary and became friends with the members of Congress from that state.

But how was the idea for the motto born? I'd like to tell you the story as he told it to me on many occasions during my childhood. One Sunday in 1953, during the annual Chicago Furniture Market, Dad was in the Second Presbyterian Church in Chicago - the same church in which he and my mother were married -- when he happened to pay close attention to the appearance of the money in the collection plate. He realized at that moment that the coins had the motto "In God We Trust" on them, but the paper money did not. He knew our coins only circulated within the territorial boundaries of the United States, but our paper money was accepted currency all over the world. The idea to also place "In God We Trust" on our paper money came to him, and it seemed God was encouraging him to do something about it.

Being a numismatist, Dad knew the origin of the saying, "In God We Trust," dated back to the Civil War, when a minister, M.R. Watkinson of Ridleyville, Pennsylvania, wrote Ohioan Salmon P. Chase, who was then the Secretary of the Treasury under President Abraham Lincoln. Watkinson wanted the words "God, Liberty, Law" to be placed on the coinage. Moved by the letter, Secretary Chase sent a directive to the U.S. Mint Director James Pollack, which stated: "The trust of our people in God shall be declared on our national coins. You will cause a device to be prepared without unnecessary delay with a motto expressing in the fewest and tersest words possible this national recognition."

The words, "In God We Trust," taken from the fourth stanza of "The Star Spangled Banner" and used as the battle cry of the Fifth Pennsylvania Regiment, first appeared on the 1864 two-cent piece and was generally added to all new designs for coins. Theodore Roosevelt's effort to keep the words off the new design for the \$10 and \$20 gold pieces met with such opposition that designer Augustus Saint-Gaudens put them back. That's how things stood until Dad's visit to Chicago that Sunday in 1953.

Upon returning to Arkansas, Dad wrote the Secretary of the Treasury, another Ohioan, George M. Humphrey, asking that the motto appear on all United States currency, including coins and paper money. The reply came that laws would have to be passed if Dad wanted "In God We Trust" as the official motto on all coins and paper money.

The saying was on coins by tradition and, contrary to popular opinion, Francis Scott Key's reference to it as our "motto" was only a suggestion. So Dad and Mom went to work. Mom typed over 1,000 letters, long before computers and copy machines. Dad sent the letters to everyone in Congress, and to numismatic and manufacturing friends all over the country encouraging others to join the effort. He also spoke to hundreds of groups, including Kiwanis and Rotary service clubs, asking the audiences to send letters too.

Finally, Oklahoma Senator Mike Monroney initiated a bill in the Senate Banking and Currency Committee, chaired by Dad's friend Senator Bill Fullbright from Arkansas. Representatives Charles Bennett of Florida and Oren Harris of Arkansas introduced similar bills in the House. The bills passed, making "In God We Trust" the official motto of the United States. The new law required that "this inscription shall appear on all United States currency and coins." Two years later, the U.S. Mint began printing it on newly designed bills starting with the \$1 silver certificate. This process was speeded up after atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hare convinced the Supreme Court to take prayer out of schools in 1962. The motto withstood a court challenge in 1983, when the Justices declared it had "no specific religious content, promoted no specific religion, and therefore was a neutral statement that had lost much of its meaning through wide exposure." By doing so, they were acknowledging the motto as central to the patriotism of our country.

My Dad was happy, but predicted other challenges would come within 50 years. He wanted everyone to know on which side of the debate he stood and expressed his wishes to have the words "In God We Trust" inscribed on his tombstone when he died in 1989.

When I need inspiration and encouragement to face a challenge, I remember what one man from a small town in a small state was able to accomplish when he put his trust in God. I am reminded that trying again and again - and not giving up - leads to success. I am proud that "In God We Trust" heralds the irrepressible hope, spirit and well-placed trust of the American people. When I see those words, I think of the incredible and wonderful things that are possible in our future.

Hope Taft  
First Lady of Ohio

