

God Bless America
Grit American Life & Tradition, November 25, 2001
By Bill Kiley

Bill Kiley, a regular contributor to Grit, is a retired NBC-TV executive who wants to share this special memory with Grit readers at this difficult time in our national life.



A CHAT WITH AMERICA'S SONGBIRD

"I read the words first. They made the hair on my neck stand up."

It was back in the 1970's, during a lull in rehearsals for one of her final television appearances, that I had the luck chance to visit Kate Smith's dressing room and ask her a question I had always been curious about.

"When did you first hear *God Bless America*?" I asked the delightful woman who had made the song so famous it has almost replaced our country's national anthem.

"Oh, that's a great story!" smiled the lady known as "America's Songbird" during her half-century musical fame. "I was preparing my radio program for Armistice Day in 1938. We were still in the Great Depression, and there was talk about a coming war in Europe. I thought the country needed a nice, new, patriotic song to cheer it up.

"So I phoned my friend Irving Berlin and asked him if he had nay such song," Kate said.

Belin, who was only 5 years old when his frightened family fled Russia to become Americans, and who grew up to become the nation's most popular song writer with such hits as Easter Parade and White Christmas, thought for a minute or so.

Then he regretfully told Kate he had no songs to fit her radio program.

"About an hour later, Irving called me back," Kate recalled. "He said he had found an old song in a box in his closet. He said he had written it back in 1918, for his Broadway musical Yip, Yip, Yankhank, but didn't fit in the score well, so he pulled it out of the show, and it had never been performed. He said he'd send it over to me."

The messenger soon delivered the sheet music for something called *God Bless America*."

"I read the words first", said Kate. "They made my hair on my neck stand up. Then I played the music, and I knew I had found the song for the show. I called Irving and asked if it was OK if I changed a few words and added a repeat of the closing line. He said, 'Kate, I give that song to you. Do anything you like.'"

Kate changed the lyric that said, "Make her victorious on land and foam," and closed the song with a doubling of the phrase: "God Bless America, my home sweet home."

“I remember that I was smiling all the way through the song when I sang it on that radio program,” Kate said. “We started getting letters within a few days. By the end of the week, we had sacks and sacks of letters wanting to hear ‘that song’ again.

“I sang it again – and the response was amazing. People all across the country were moved and thrilled by it. They wanted it again and again.

“I called Irving to tell him what was happening with his song. I said, ‘This one is going to make you rich.’ That wonderful little man laughed and said, ‘No it’s not. That’s your song. I gave it to you, and it’s your voice that made it a hit.’

“I said, ‘Irving, this song is going to become a part of America’s soul. It will outlive every other song you ever wrote. I can’t accept it as mine.’

“That’s when he said, ‘Why don’t we give it to a charity?’

“Great idea,” Kate said. “Why don’t we give it to the children, so they can grow up singing it!”

Kate was then called back to the television studio’s rehearsal hall, and as we walked to the stage, she said “Now you know when I first heard God Bless America – and why every penny it has ever earned in royalties still goes to the Boy and Girl Scouts of America.

“God Bless America – and that skinny little Jewish immigrant named Irving Berlin.”

Kate Smith was born in 1907 and died in 1986. For more information on her or God Bless America contact the Kate Smith Commemorative Society, P.O. Box 3575, Cranston, RI 02910; or at their website, www.katesmith.org.

KATE SMITH. Just the mention of her name evokes a warm feeling of nostalgia in the hearts of millions who recall her thrilling renditions of popular ballads and her outgoing personality and infectious laughter. An untiring patriot, Kate Smith was honored by every President from Roosevelt, who called her an "American treasure", to Reagan, who gave her the highest civilian award in the nation, the Medal of Freedom. During the Second World War, she was personally credited with selling six hundred million dollars in Defense Bonds. She has been called the First Lady of Song by her peers. Voted one of the three most beloved and important women of her time, Kate Smith was the very embodiment of the American spirit and an inspiration to millions everywhere. Her popularity and her music transcended a half century, all the way from vaudeville to soft rock. She introduced over six hundred popular songs. More than twenty of her records were million sellers.

As a true pioneer in both radio and television, her importance as a public personality is unsurpassed in the annals of broadcasting history. She is undeniably an American original!

Spoken Introduction:
While the storm clouds gather far across the sea,
Let us swear allegiance to a land that's free,
Let us all be grateful for a land so fair,
As we raise our voices in a solemn prayer:

God Bless America.
Land that I love
Stand beside her, and guide her
Thru the night with a light from above.
From the mountains, to the prairies ,
To the oceans, white with foam
God bless America
My home sweet home.

God Bless America,
Land that I love
Stand beside her,
And guide her,
Through the night
With the light from above,
From the mountains,
To the prairies,
To the ocean,
White with foam,
God bless America,
My home sweet home.
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