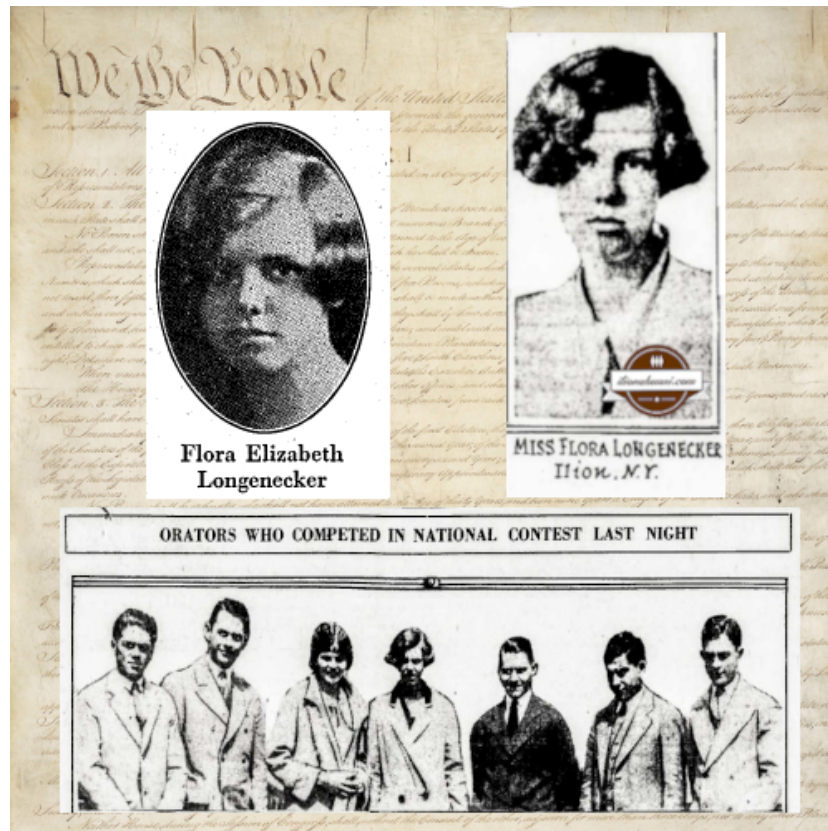


## IHS 1925 Flora Longenecker National Oratorical Contest Winner

April 2023

By Aileen Carney Sweeney

Share 0



### The 1925 National Oratorical Contest

Ninety-eight years ago, a young Ilion girl, 16 year old Flora Longenecker, earned acclaim by winning fourth place in the National Oratorical Contest, held in Washington, DC. An article in the "Memoirs of the Union School" began with the following:

"To have been acclaimed unanimously the first young lady to attain highest feminine 1925 honors as a public speaker of high in America, to have been praised by President of the United States, Calvin G. Coolidge, and public men of national fame for her part in a national oratorical contest following preparation briefer than two months' duration, and to have received general national recognition as a result, distinguishes Flora Elizabeth Longenecker, 16, Class of 1925."

Considering the horrible events that happened to our country, on January 6, 2020, Flora Longenecker's near final oration words, from 1925, were eerily prescient.

**"But what of the future? Our Constitution has been attacked in the past, and it is inevitable that it will be attacked in the future. Our danger in this respect lies not so much from without as from within --- our peril will arise from the **ignorance and indifference of our own citizens**. This being true then it naturally follows that our safety lies in education."**

## Flora Elizabeth Longenecker

### Ilion High School 1925

Flora was born in Dayton, Ohio, on August 13, 1908. She was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Edward E. Longenecker. She first attended Toledo, Ohio, schools in 1914-15. Later, in 1916, she attended grade school in Windsor, Ontario, Canada. She graduated from there and entered the Windsor Collegiate Institute in 1921. In June, 1924, the family moved to Ilion. Flora entered Ilion High School, in September, 1924, as a senior in the Class of 1925. The family resided at 51 John Street, Ilion, NY, which later was the home of Superintendent, Earl P. Watkin.



Flora Longenecker

## The National Oratorical Contest



### 1924 Winners

The first year the contest was held nationally was in 1924. It was inspired by the vision of Mr. Harry Chandler of the *Los Angeles Times*. Randolph Leigh, who was an editorial writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, was the founder of the contest. Mr. Leigh spent seven months prior to the announcement of the contest in interesting newspapers about the project and in securing the co-operation of school authorities. Thirty-seven metropolitan newspapers financed and conducted the contest.

"The eliminations proceeded by classes, schools, groups of schools, etc. until the winner in each major newspaper territory was selected. Since it was impossible to have the thirty-seven champions speak in the final meeting in Washington, the country was divided into six major zones, in each of which six champions would compete for a place on the final national program. The District of Columbia, as the scene of the final meeting, was arbitrarily made a zone in itself, which amounted to giving its representative a 'bye' to the finals. ... In twelve-minute addresses the high school boys and girls, winners in their respective zones, will speak in honor of the Constitution." The national finals were held in the Memorial Continental Hall, on June 6, 1924, with President Coolidge presiding. The event was broadcast by station WCAP, Washington, D.C., WEA, New York City, and WJAR, Providence, R.I.

## Flora Longenecker - Ilion's Star Orator

### Memoirs of the Ilion Union School - The Mark of "1925"

On March 12, 1925, Flora Longenecker was captain of the Ilion High School debating team, against Norwich High School. It was her first experience in public speaking. She was chosen by Professor A. L. Sisson, supervisor of public speaking in Ilion schools, to be the local representative in the 1925 national oratorical contest. The next competition covered three counties and was held on April 3, 1925, at Oneida, NY. Flora was selected for first place

## Flora Longenecker's Path to Washington DC

Soon after, on May 1, 1925, Flora gained recognition by taking first honors in the northeastern states zone contest, which included speakers from New England and New York State. The event was held in Brooklyn, N.Y. Finally, on Friday, May 8, 1925, in Washington, D. C., the national finals were held. The event was held in an auditorium holding approximately 7,000 people.



## The Contestants - May 8, 1925





Photo caption - Upper: First meeting here of the seven contestants.

Left to right: Eugene F. McElmeel, Philip Glatfelter, Miss Asenath Graves, Miss Flora Longenecker, George Stansell, Max N. Kroloff and Robert Sessions.

Lower, left to right: Eugene F. McElmeel of Los Angeles, Calif., second prize; Robert Sessions of Birmingham, Ala., first prize; Max N. Kroloff of Sioux City, Iowa, third prize.

## Supreme Court Judges - May 8, 1925



Photo caption - 1925 Justices are: McReynolds, Sanford, Holmes, Sutherland, William Howard Taft, Butler, Willis Van Devanter, Stone, Brandeis.


These were the judges in the contest - Supreme Court Chief Justice Taft, Justice Van Devanter, Justice Butler, and Justice Sanford.

By reviewing who was on stage that evening, one gets a sense of the pressure Flora, and the other contestants, might have been feeling. The finals event was presided over by John Hays Hammond, American Mining Engineer, Diplomat, and Philanthropist. The President of the United States, Calvin Coolidge, delivered a speech on the meaning of the contest. President Coolidge noted that 1,400,000 students entered the contest, representing 16,216 schools, public and private.

The judges of the contest were composed of former President and Supreme Court Chief Justice, William Howard Taft, Justice Willis Van Devanter, Justice Pierce Butler, Justice Edward Terry Sanford and Attorney General, John G. Sargent. Among those on the stage, in addition to the President and Mrs. Coolidge and Chairman Hammond, were Commerce Secretary and future President, Herbert Hoover, Treasury Secretary, Andrew Mellon, Secretary of the Navy, Curtis D. Wilbur, Federal Commissioner of Education, Dr. John J. Tigert, Superintendent of Schools of Philadelphia, Dr. Edwin C. Broome, Washington D.C. Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Frank W. Ballou, President of *The Evening Star Co.*, Frank B. Noyes, Publisher of the *Birmingham Age-Herald*, F. I. Thompson, Chairman of the Americanization Committee of the American Bar Association, Josiah Marvel, and Randolph Leigh, national director of the contest. In addition, the event was broadcast over radio stations.

Below is the official program. Flora Longenecker was the second contestant to speak. Fifteen-year-old Robert Sessions was the third of the orators to appear on the stage of the auditorium.

**ORATORICAL PROGRAM.**

Introductory,  
John Hays Hammond  
Address.....President Coolidge  
Musical selection.  
Miss Asenath Graves,  
Washington, D. C.  
"The Constitution."  
Miss Flora Longenecker,  
Ilion, N. Y.  
"The Constitution."  
Robert Sessions,  
Birmingham, Ala.  
"The Constitution."  
Musical selection.  
Eugene F. McElmeel,  
Los Angeles, Calif.  
"Marshall and the Constitution."  
George Stansell, Chicago, Ill.  
"The Constitution."  
Philip Glatfelter, Columbia, Pa.  
"Lincoln and the Constitution."  
Max N. Kroloff,  
Sioux City, Iowa  
"The Constitution."  
Musical selection   
Awards.  
The program starts promptly  
at 8 p.m.

## Robert Sessions - The First Place Winner





Robert Sessions, of Birmingham, Ala., fifteen years of age, youngest of the competitors, carried off first prize by a very narrow margin, Mr. McElmeel winning second place and a cash award of \$1,000. Young Sessions stated, "We should educate the masses in the duties of good citizenship, in a better understanding and appreciation of the spirit of the American Government, in the broader meanings of patriotism and a stronger devotion to the flag and the glorious things for which it stands." His winning speech is available on [google books](#), in a book authored by the contest founder, Randolph Leigh, - *Oratory: A Handbook for Participants in the National Oratorical Contest, Containing the Winning Orations of Each Year*. All winning 1925 speeches begin on page 99. Flora's speech is on page 106.

#### Order of Winners

First, \$2,000 - Robert Sessions of Birmingham, Ala; aged 15.  
 Second, \$1,000 - Eugene F. McElmeel of Los Angeles; 16.  
 Third, \$500 - Max H. Kroloff of Sioux City, Iowa; 17.  
 Fourth, \$450 - Miss Flora Longenecker of Ilion, N.Y.; 16.  
 Fifth, \$400 - Miss Asenath Graves of Washington, D.C.; 16.  
 Sixth, \$350 - George Stansell of Chicago; 17.  
 Seventh, \$300 - Philip Glatfelter of York, Pa.; 17.

## Flora Longenecker Wins Fourth Place





Flora Longenecker was judged the leading feminine speaker of high school age in the United States. Her award, for fourth place in the National Oratorical Contest, was \$450. The *Seneca County News* reported "Further gratification is given in the award of the fourth prize of \$450 to a New York state girl, Miss Flora Longenecker, of Ilion, whom many in the audience thought should have figured among the first three prize winners, but judges of the contest took a different view."

### *The Washington Evening Star - Touring Washington, DC*



Final contestants in the national oratorical contest photographed at Arlington National Cemetery last Sunday. Left to right: Max Kroloff of Sioux City, Iowa, winner of third prize; Eugene McElmeel of Los Angeles, second prize; George Stransell of Chicago, winner of sixth prize; Flora Longenecker of New York, fourth prize; Asenath Graves of Washington, winner of fifth prize; Robert Sessions of Birmingham, Ala., winner of first prize, and Phillip Glatfelter of Pennsylvania, winner of seventh prize.

Washington Star Photo

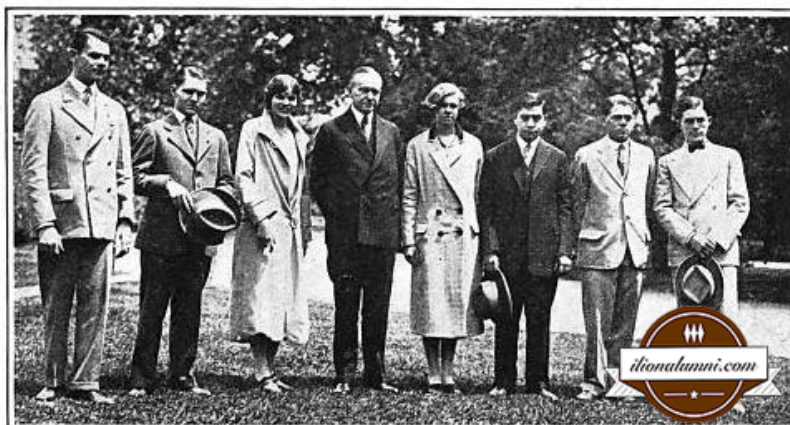
Photo caption - Final contestants in the national oratorical contest photographed at Arlington National Cemetery last Sunday. Left to right: Max Kroloff of Sioux City, Iowa, winner of third prize; Eugene McElmeel of Los Angeles, second prize; George Stransell of Chicago, winner of sixth prize; Flora Longenecker of New York, fourth prize; Asenath Graves of Washington winner of fifth prize; Robert Sessions of Birmingham, Ala., winner of first prize, and Phillip Glatfelter.

## WITH NATIONAL ORATORS ON JAUNT ABOUT CAPITAL



With the President at the White House, left to right: Philip Glatfelter, George Stansell, Miss Asenath Graves, President Coolidge, Miss Flora Longenecker, Max Kroloff, Eugene P. McElmeel and Robert Sessions.

Photo caption - With the President at the White House, left to right: Philip Glatfelter, George Stansell, Miss Asenath Graves, President Coolidge, Miss Flora Longenecker, Max Kroloff, Eugene P. McElmeel and Robert Sessions.



©Henry Miller  
PRESIDENT COOLIDGE WELCOMES WINNERS OF THE ORATORICAL HIGH SCHOOL CONTEST,  
AND HAS NOT FOUND WASHINGTON LONESOME, THOUGH CONGRESS IS NOT IN SESSION

(At the extreme right is Robert Sessions, fifteen, of Birmingham, Ala., who was adjudged the champion student orator of the United States and awarded the first prize of \$2,000. The others in the group from left to right are: Philip Glatfelter, seventeen, of Columbia, Pa., Eastern champion, winner of seventh award; George Stansell, seventeen, of Chicago, Ill., Central States champion, winner of sixth award; Miss Asenath Graves, sixteen, champion of the District of Columbia, winner of fifth award; President Calvin Coolidge; Miss Flora Longenecker, sixteen, of Ilion, N. Y., Northeastern champion, winner of fourth award; Max N. Kroloff, seventeen, of Sioux City, Iowa, Midwestern champion, winner of third award; Eugene F. McElmeel, of Los Angeles, sixteen, Pacific champion, winner of second award)

Photo caption - President Coolidge Welcomes Winners of the Oratorical High School Contest  
And Has Not Found Washington Lonesome, Though Congress Is Not In Session (Flora is right of President Coolidge)

One of the preliminary features was their reception at the White House by President and Mrs. Coolidge, following a morning of sightseeing as guests of *The Evening Star*. The national finalists, in the order in which they spoke, were: Miss Asenath Graves, 16, Washington, champion of the District of Columbia. Miss Flora Longenecker, 16, Ilion, N.Y., Northeastern champion. Robert Sessions, 15, Birmingham, Ala., Southern champion. Eugene F. McElmeel, 16, Los



Angeles, Calif, Pacific champion. George Stansell, 17, Chicago, Central States champion. Philip Glatfelter, 17, Columbia, Eastern champion. Max N. Kroloff, 17, Sioux City, Iowa, Midwestern champion.



Photo caption - Resting in the monastery grounds. May 10, 1925

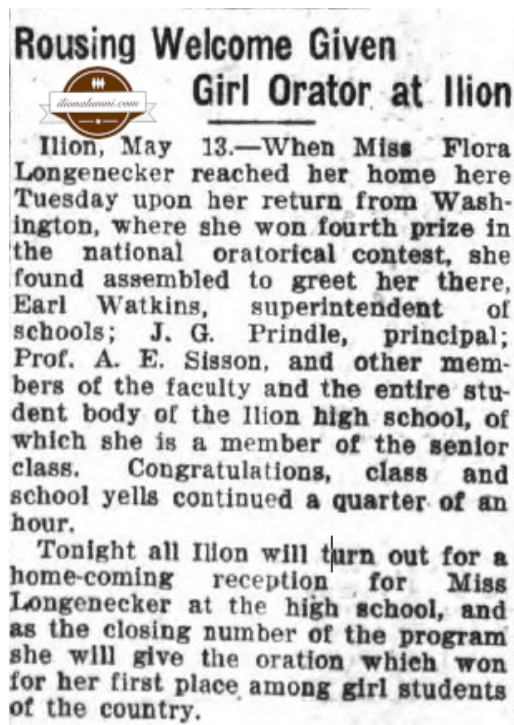
Two beautiful girls and five stalwart boys will compete in the Washington Auditorium Friday evening for the oratorical championship of the United States and \$5,000 in prizes.

The *Washington DC Evening Star* described Flora with the following text. "Miss Flora Longenecker, 16, of Ilion. N.Y., is a slender, sparkling-eyed girl with golden locks and a golden voice. She was adjudged the best speaker in the Northeastern zone and was the only girl in that zone to win the championship of a newspaper territory. Miss Longenecker is a senior in Ilion High School, is president of the high school debating society and is a member of the school dramatic club. She has lived in Ilion but a year, after having passed eight years in Canadian schools while her parents lived at Windsor, Canada."

The same newspaper, on May 7, 1925, reported the following: "With the arrival of Miss Longenecker today, it became certain that bobbed hair versus long locks would again present an interesting study in the psychology of coiffures. Miss Longenecker's tresses are shown, while Miss Graves, the Washington finalist, takes pride in the long locks with which Nature originally endowed her. They are the only girl orators in the contest."



Miss Longenecker was chaperoned by her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Edward E. Longenecker, and Allen L. Sisson, who was her instructor in public speaking at Ilion High School.



"Rousing Welcome Given Girl Orator at Ilion" per the *Rome Daily Sentinel*, May 13, 1925

As a mark of appreciation of her efforts, the entire student body of the Ilion High School, accompanied by the faculty, greeted Miss Longenecker upon her return home to 51 John Street, on May 12, 1925. A demonstrative reception awaited her when her trip ended. Several public gatherings took place in her honor in the weeks following her return home.

Ilion, May 13. - When Miss Flora Longenecker reached her home here Tuesday upon her return from Washington, where she won fourth prize in the national oratorical contest, she found assembled to greet her there, Earl Watkins, superintendent of schools; J. G. Prindle, principal; Prof. A. E. Sisson, and other members of the faculty and the entire student body of the Ilion high school, of which she is a member of the senior class. Congratulations, class and school yells continued a quarter of an hour.

Tonight all Ilion will turn out for a home-coming reception for Miss Longenecker at the high school, and as the closing number of the program she will give the oration which won for her first place among girl students of the country.

Later, The Ilion High Dramatics Club would be known as "Flora Longenecker Dramatic Club" in her honor.

### The Contestants in College

After the contest, the oratory winners formed their own society. The club, which was informally known as the Pleiades Club, or "The Seven Stars of the Constitution," was formed in May 1925 by the finalists. The purpose of the club was to perpetuate the friendships and contacts formed in connection with the contest. The January 26, 1926 *Washington Evening Star* reported on the progress of the 1925 winners.

The finalists and their colleges follow:

1925

Robert Sessions, Southern champion (still in high school).  
Eugene F. McElmeel, Pacific champion, St. Thomas College. St. Paul, Minn.  
Max N. Kroloff, Midwestern champion, Morningside College, Sioux City, Iowa.  
Flora Longenecker, Northeastern champion, Vassar College.  
Asenath Graves, Southeastern champion, Mount Holyoke College.  
George Stansell, Central champion, University of Illinois.  
Philip Glatfelter, Eastern champion, Princeton University.

## Flora Longenecker's Winning Oration

Below is the entire text of Flora Longenecker's 1925 winning speech. It is available on [google books](#), in a book authored by the contest founder, Randolph Leigh, - *"Oratory: A Handbook for Participants in the National Oratorical Contest, Containing the Winning Orations of Each Year."* All winning 1925 speeches begin on page 99.

### The Constitution

By Flora Longenecker

Ilion High School Ilion New York

WE who were born in a free land, who have never felt the galling yoke of serfdom and despotism, of restriction and suppression, are too prone to accept freedom and liberty as a mere matter of course, just as we accept the sunshine of the present day, without regard to its blessings. Perhaps it is difficult to appreciate fully those things which we have never been denied, yet it seems almost a tragedy that the true and beautiful significance of our Constitution and all it stands for is not indelibly written in the hearts of every man, woman and child in our nation. Shall we look upon our Constitution merely as a working plan for the conduct of the affairs of our government, or shall we not look beyond the printed words of its seven articles and see in them the crystallization of centuries of dreams - dreams of liberty and justice and freedom for which countless thousands laid down their lives in order that millions who were to follow might enjoy the blessings of self expression and self determination? As the Bible is to the Christian world, so should our Constitution be to Americans. No other document occupies so important a place in our national life. The Declaration of Independence was a formal notice of our intent to become free. When freedom was finally gained, its purpose was served. On the Constitution depended the success or failure of the freedom which had been so valiantly won.

Although the thirteen States had joined in the common cause for liberty, they were not truly united. The common peril ended, state pride and jealousy broke out afresh. Each state had thought of itself as a complete and isolated political body in a way which it is difficult for us, after more than a century of national unity, to conceive. There was serious danger of each state going its own way. The Articles of Confederation under which they were bound were wholly inadequate, although they served the admirable purpose of having committed the several states to a policy of united action. It linked them together into a league of friendship for common defense and welfare, but failed to weld them into a united nation. The Revolutionary Congress was more of an emergency committee than it was a real government. It had no authority save in tacit general consent. The principal faults of the Confederation were that Congress was powerless to enforce its will, could

not collect a revenue, and could not regulate commerce. The affairs of the country were in a state of chaos. We were heavily in debt because of the war, and without means to assure ourselves of funds to carry on the government. Other nations did not care to enter into treaties or arrangements with a country that could not give reasonable assurance of its ability to carry out its agreements. Unless some definite basis of government was adopted soon, we would stand discredited in the eyes of the world and the freedom we had won would go for naught. This was the situation which confronted the delegates who met in Philadelphia in the spring of 1787 in an effort to bring order out of all this confusion. To the authors of our Constitution we owe a debt of everlasting gratitude. Theirs was a stupendous task --- almost a hopeless one --- for at times it appeared impossible to arrive at a satisfactory solution. They had to provide for the interdependence of the states without wholly depriving them their independence; they had to overcome the prejudices and self-interest of the various states in which no real national spirit had been developed --- nor had they any precedents to guide them. In the face of discouragements and disappointments this group of men persistently held to their task for three months, at the of which time they gave us a Constitution which was destined serve as a model to the world, for no important advance has since been made by any civilized government which has not, in greater or less degree, been modeled after ours.

Embodied in our Constitution was the best of what was then known of other governments; it was adapted to our peculiar needs based on the experience of 150 years of colonial existence, and woven into it were the highest ideals of liberty, equality and justice. It took into consideration the fact that a nation is but a multiplication of individuals and that national progress and permanence could be assured only by insuring the rights and opportunities of its component citizens. Our Constitution is unique in that it does not vest absolute power in any one person or department. There are three counterbalancing divisions --- the legislative, the executive and the judicial --- but the control remains in the hands of the citizens at large. This wise distribution of power definitely precluded the danger of any person or group of persons establishing themselves in an autocratic position to the detriment of the masses. Our Constitution has more safeguards to person and property than any other political document in history; it has a longer list of personal rights, it limits the powers of government and at the same time limits the power of the people so that mob rule may never prevail. It is sufficiently restrictive to prevent impulsive action yet sufficiently elastic to meet the demands of progress. How wisely the authors of the Constitution anticipated the requirements of the nation is best attested by the fact that in spite of our unprecedented progress and the rapidly changing conditions under which we have lived, only nineteen amendments have been found necessary. Ten of these, which further extended and guaranteed the rights of the individual, were adopted within the first four years, leaving only nine additional amendments over a period of 134 years. Further proof, if any be needed, lies in our national development, for in less than 140 years under our Constitution we have grown from a weakling among nations to the greatest and most influential world power. In every way our Constitution has stood the acid test of time. Domestic and foreign wars have left it unshaken --- it has withstood all attacks from within and without.

But what of the future? Our Constitution has been attacked in the past, and it is inevitable that it will be attacked in the future. Our danger in this respect lies not so much from without as from within --- our peril will arise from the ignorance and indifference of our own citizens. This being true then it naturally follows that our safety lies in education. Our government is safe in the hands of the people only so long as public opinion is intelligent and sane. If every citizen knew our history, our traditions and what our Constitution really is, could he not be more definitely relied upon to vote intelligently for the best interests of the nation? When citizenship is granted to an alien, he must swear to support and defend the Constitution of the United States. If this is good for the alien, would it not also be good for the youth of America? When we enter into the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship, should we not, like the young men of Athens, pledge ourselves that we will not leave our country weaker than we found it, but stronger and better?

The freedom for which our fathers died is in our hands as a sacred trust. It is the rightful heritage of posterity, and we are but its guardians. Let us, then, be true to our trust and place in their waiting hands the undimmed torch of liberty.

## The American Legion High School Oratorical Constitutional Contest



Photograph courtesy of The American Legion

The American Legion recently honored Central Valley Academy Principal Richard Keeler in Ilion for his support and his high school's hosting of the Zone 4 Oratorical Competition. Presenting the award of appreciation are Philip Seybert (left), Zone 4 oratorical chairman, and Eugene Falshaw, Herkimer County chaplain. Seybert also thanked Herkimer County Legion for its support.

Sometime before 1938, the national newspapers stopped sponsoring the contest and it appears to now be managed by The America Legion.

"Since 1938, the program has presented participants with an academic speaking challenge that teaches important leadership qualities, the history of our nation's laws, the ability to think and speak clearly, and an understanding of the duties, responsibilities, rights and privileges of American citizenship. The program has featured numerous politicians and prominent contestants over the years, including former presidential candidate Alan Keyes, national television commentator and talk radio host Lou Dobbs, and former U.S. Vice President Mike Pence."

"The purpose of The American Legion High School Oratorical Scholarship Program - 'A Constitutional Speech Contest' is to develop knowledge and appreciation of the Constitution of the United States on the part of High School students. Other objectives of the contest include the development of leadership, the ability to think and speak clearly and intelligently, the preparation for acceptance of the duties and responsibilities, the rights and privileges of American citizenship."

See the following for more information about this wonderful contest - [American Legion - About the Oratorical Contest](#).

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Friday

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