

# THE U.S. CAPITOL HISTORICAL SOCIETY REACHES FIFTY

## PART I

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### FRED SCHWENGEL AND THE FOUNDING OF THE UNITED STATES CAPITOL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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*By Jeffrey Hearn*

**B**Y THE TIME FRED SCHWENGEL arrived on Capitol Hill in 1955 as a freshman member of the U. S. House of Representatives from Iowa, he had already worn a great many hats in the course of a life filled with interesting experiences and interesting people. He was a joiner, a ready volunteer, and a tireless booster. He was an entrepreneur and a promoter. He loved his country and he loved its history, his passion for each inseparable from the other. And all this helped prepare him for the role he would eventually play as the driving force behind the founding of the United States Capitol Historical Society in 1962.

#### **HORATIO ALGER ON THE MIDDLE BORDER**

THE SON OF IMMIGRANT PARENTS, Schwengel was born in 1906 and raised in a German Baptist farming community in north central Iowa, near Sheffield, in Franklin County, surrounded by a large extended

family and neighbors who had come to America from a farming community in northwest Germany not many years before. With only German spoken at home, and church services delivered in German as well, he rarely heard the English language spoken as a young child, and did not learn to speak English himself until he began to attend school at the nearby one-room schoolhouse.

Many of the most important lessons he learned were taught at home, however, at the kitchen table, by his father. "Often," Schwengel would recall, "he would talk to the family about how fortunate he was that he came to America so we could be born in this great country. He talked about being involved." His father applied for citizenship immediately after he arrived in the United States, and passed the exam as soon as he could take it. "He was as proud as he could be to be a citizen. He told us about that very often."

Staying in school long enough to get a high school education was not always easy

when a big, strong son could be of great assistance at home on a small family farm, but Schwengel continued to pursue his education, often at great sacrifice, and graduated from high school in 1926. He had proven to be a talented athlete by this time; his exploits as a literal one-man track team earned him multiple college scholarship offers. At Northeast Missouri State Teachers College he excelled at both football and track and field, and, in addition to his classes and the jobs he worked to help pay his way through school, he helped found a college fraternity, joined the dramatic society and the history club, and dabbled in campus politics.

Graduating from college in 1930 with the storm clouds of the Great Depression looming on the horizon, he landed a job as a high school teacher and athletic coach in tiny Shelbina, Missouri. While there he discovered a talented schoolgirl athlete in a nearby town and developed her into a world record-setting discus thrower who delivered a silver medal-winning perform-