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ALASKA'S FLAG TELLS ITS STORY

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In March 1927, a middle school student at the Jessie Lee Mission Home in Seward received a telegram that left him pale and speechless: he was the winner of a territory-wide contest to design a flag for Alaska. Benny Benson's simple design, featuring the Big Dipper constellation against a dark blue background, would soon be flying on poles from Ketchikan to Barrow.

The inspiring story of Benson and his flag is told in *Eight Stars of Gold: The Story of Alaska's Flag*, an exhibition that opens at < YOUR MUSEUM NAME HERE > on < DAY AND DATE HERE >. The exhibition, commemorating the 75th anniversary of Alaska's flag, was organized by the Alaska State Museum in Juneau and is currently traveling around the state.

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Guest curator India Spartz, currently Senior Archivist at the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, wrote a catalog that accompanies the flag exhibition, also titled *Eight Stars of Gold: The Story of Alaska's Flag*. The catalog is available at the museum store.

The exhibition and catalog delves into the story behind the flag contest. In 1926 Territorial Governor George A. Parks visited the U.S. Postal Service building in Washington, D.C. Flags from other states and territories waved in the breeze, but Alaska was not represented because the territory had no official flag. This inspired Parks to arrange a flag design contest sponsored by the Alaska branch of the American Legion for all Alaska schoolchildren in grades 7-12. Students submitted a total of 142 entries.

Although there were many creative concepts, Benson's simple, elegant layout was unanimously declared the winner. Benny wrote: "The blue field is for the Alaska sky and the forget-me-not, an Alaskan flower. The North Star is for the future state of Alaska, the most northerly in the union.

The Dipper is for the Great Bear, symbolizing strength (sic)." Benson later worried about the spelling error, but the judges apparently overlooked it.

Benson's flag helped rally the territory for the long and difficult campaign for statehood. It also inspired Marie Drake, secretary to the Commissioner of Education, to write a poem that later became the lyrics for the song *Alaska's Flag*, which is still performed at many official state functions. Elinor Dusenberry wrote music to accompany Drake's lyrics.

The exhibition includes reproductions of Benson's winning design as well as 26 other designs submitted by Alaska students and information text panels.

Online educational materials that complement the traveling exhibition are available through the State Museum's Web site at www.museums.state.ak.us.

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