M 1645

Glimpses of Abraham Lincoln

By

ALONZO ABERNETHY

Delivered before the Mitchell County Farmers' Institute, February 12, 1909. Reprint from the Osage News, February 18, 1909.

Mr. Daniel Fish

With Compliments of

Alonzo Abernethy

1445. 4th St. Des Moines Ia.

Dec. 2. 1909.

GLIMPSES OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The American people have been celebrating, for nearly a century, the birthday of one distinguished citizen, as the Father of His Country.

Today begins the centennial celebration of another illustrious patriot, as the Saviour of His Country.

When Abraham Lincoln was born one hundred years ago today in a far western wilderness, five hundred miles east of where we now live, the nation had a population of seven million. Today it has more than eighty million.

When Lincoln was born, the first steamboat ever built, was not yet two years old. When at the age of nineteen, he went down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in a flat boat, built by his own hands, there was not a railroad engine in the world. He had lived nearly half his life, when on the 24th of May, 1844, Morse sent his first thrilling telegraph message; "What hath God wrought?" from Washington to Baltimore, and return. President Lincoln had been in his grave many years before either electric light, heat, or power, or a telephone was invented. The last invention of the century and most wonderful of all was wireless telegraphy.

Iowa has already made this man's birthday a legal and perpetual holiday. The smallest hermit nation, fifty years ago, is now among the greatest world powers. With such a pace does the world move in one century.

What little I can say in the few minutes allotted me today, regarding Mr. Lincoln, I prefer to state, so far as I may, in his own words, letting these depict his life and labors, his character and purposes, his aspirations and longings: the burdens, defeats, and triumphs he experienced: and all the intense and sorrowful life, of this earnest, honest, inspired leader of a nation.

He lived and wrought during the most turbulent and embittered period in the nation's life, if not in human history. But his life, and work, and final assassination, was crowned at last, under divine Providence, and under his guiding hand and brain, with the greatest moral and civil achievements of modern times.

Great as was the work wrought by Abraham Lincoln, the chief lesson of his life, as I look at it, is the marvelous value, in human life, of honesty, truthfulness, devotion to right, and lofty patriotism.

Early Life.

His early life was the humblest possible. His several early homes were the rudest of log huts, built on the extreme frontier of civilization in the wilderness, in Hardin, now Larue County, Kentucky, near the present town of Hodgenville. Here he spent the first seven years of his life.

His father Thomas Lincoln, grew up, also on the frontier; was without education, and could neither read nor write. He attributed much of his hard life to his lack of education, but was an honest, good man, and an affectionate father. History records that, his mother was a woman out of place among those primitive surroundings. She was a slender, pale sad and sensitive woman, with much in her nature that was truly heroic, and much that shrank from the rude life around her. A great man never drew his infant life from a purer or more womanly bosom, and Mr. Lincoln always looked back to her with unspeakable affection. Long after her sensitive heart and weary hands had crumbled to dust, he said to a friend with tears in his eyes: "" All that I am or hope to be. I owe to my angel mother, blessings on her memory." Here was the home and here were the occupants, all humble and poor, yet it was a home of love and virtue. Both father and mother were religious persons, and sought at the earliest moment, to impress the minds of their children with religious truth.

For many years Abraham Lincoln never saw a church, but up to his seventh year when they removed to Indiana he had occasionally heard Parson Elkin, a Baptist minister, preach.

Death of His Mother.

At the age of nine his mother died, and was buried under the trees near the home. Neither the husband nor son could endure the thought of letting the sorrowful event go by without the loving tribute of a funeral, and wanted to send back to Kentucky a hundred miles, for good Parson Elkin to perform this duty. Apparently no one in the neighborhood, but little Abraham, could write a letter. He therefore, with his father's help, framed the letter, begging the minister to come over for this service. He accepted the duty, came, and performed the loving tribute in the presence of all the people for many miles around.

What better heritage can any man have, than a loving, honest, Christian father and mother?

Books He Read.

The books which Lincoln had the privilege of reading in boyhood, were the Bible, much of which he could repeat; AEsop's Fables, all of which he could repeat, Pilgrim's Progress, Weem's Life of Washington, and a life of Henry Clay.

The latter, undoubtedly, had a marked effect upon his later life, and he became a great partisan of the "Sage of Ashland," and in 1844, canvassed the state of Illinois for him, for President.

Weem's Life of Washington was one of the earliest books he read, and yet when he visited Trenton, N. J., many years afterwards, on his way to Washington, alluding to this little book he said: "I remember all the fields and struggles for the liberties of the country; and none fixed themselves upon my imagination so deeply as the struggle here at Trenton. **I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common**, that these men struggled for."

In 1830, Lincoln's father moved to Illinois, settling on the Sangamon river, near Decatur. I remember hearing, many years ago, one of his stories connected with this river. He was describing a man who did a great deal of talking and very little thinking. He said the man reminded him of the first Sangamon river steamboat he ever saw. It's boiler was so little and its whistle so big that whenever they blew the whistle, the paddles had to stop, there not being enough steam to run the paddles and the whistle at the same time.

Mr. Lincoln split rails enough to fence his father's first ten acre clearing, and did other farm work; and later became clerk in a store. It was there that he was given the name of "Honest Abe." Every one trusted him and liked him.

In 1832, he enlisted to fight Black Hawk and his Indian allies along the Rock River. He was elected captain but did no fighting, and saw no Indians.

Later he was appointed post master at New Salem, which had few duties, but enabled him to read all the newspapers that came to the office.

He also learned surveying and by this means supported himself while studying law, having previously bought, at auction, a copy of Blackstone.

One man who knew him at that time said; "Lincoln had nothing only plenty of friends."

In 1834, he was elected representative from Sangamon county, and was re-elected in '36, '38 and '40, serving eight years, going and returning, the first two sessions on foot, about a hundred miles. The first session he said little but learned much. In 1834, he became acquainted with Stephen A. Douglas, and later served with him in the legislature and in congress. It was with Douglas that he had nearly all his great political battles, before his election to the presidency.

The Lawyer.

Soon after entering the legislature he decided to study law and was admitted to the bar in 1836. He was a keen student and hard worker, and studied every case that came to him with great care, trying to get thoroughly at the strong points of both sides. If he made up his mind that his client was wrong he would not take the case.

On one occasion when it developed that his client had indulged in fraudulent practices, he walked out of the court-room, and refused to continue the case. The judge sent a messenger directing him to return. He said: "Tell the judge that my hands are dirty, and I've gone to wash them."

During the years of Lincoln's law practice he became one of the ablest attorneys in Illinois. He had none of the graces of an orator, nor was he a specially profound lawyer; but his mind was so vigorous, his conceptions so clear and exact, and his probity of character known to all men, that he soon rose to prominence. He had an intuitive insight into human nature, a wonderful clearness of statement, and an amazing facility of illustration. His illustrations were always of t' plain homely kind, easily understood by the common people. He always tried a case fairly, honestly.

Stephen A. Douglas in one of his political contests with Lincoln led off with so captivating a speech, that his admirers believed the battle was already won. But Lincoln got up, as soon as the cheers died away, and taking off his long linen duster, he dropped it on the arm of a young bystander, remarking in his far pervading voice, "Hold my coat while I stone Stephen." This witticism turned the laugh on Douglas, and the whole audience were soon eagerly watching to see how he was going to "stone Stephen."

Personal Traits.

Mr. Lincoln was considered in his early life rather uncouth in appearance, and awkward in manner. He was six feet four inches in height with a powerful frame, but rather slender, with a thin angular face.

He shunned society, but finally became much interested in a young lady of accomplished manners and refined social tastes, named Mary Todd, daughter of Hon. Robert S.

Todd of Lexington, Kentucky.

One evening Lincoln approached Miss Todd, and said, in his peculiar idiom: "Miss Todd, I should like to dance with you the worst way."

The young lady accepted the inevitable, and hobbled about the room with him. When she returned to her seat, one of her companions asked, mischievously:

"Well, Mary, did he 'dance with you the worst way?' "

"Yes," replied Miss Todd, "The very worst!"

Lincoln's Duel.

Lincoln, Douglas, and Shields were rival candidates for the hand of Miss Todd. After the campaign had been carried on for several months, it was announced that Abe Lincoln was the accepted suitor. But Shields, an Irishman, at that time a school master in Springfield, but later a United States Senator in three different states, persisted in paying attention to the young lady, much to her annoyance, as well as to Lincoln's. Finally an unsigned paragraph appeared in the Springfield Journal, written by Miss Todd, purporting to be an old lady's advice to a granddaughter, warning her, among other things, against allowing her hand to be held unduly long by Irish school masters. The allusion was instantly recognized in the little community of 1,500, and Shields threatened to chastise the editor unless he revealed the writer's name. The editor said he would not divulge it without the author's consent. "If you will return in fifteen minutes, I will give you an answer." Shields departed, and the editor ran around to Lincoln's office and stated what had occurred, saying, 'Abe, what shall I do?" "Tell Shields I wrote it," Lincoln replied. Promptly came a challenge which was promptly accepted. Lincoln chose cavalry swords for weapons and the Bloody Island in the Mississippi was selected as the scene of the duel. The day was clear and cold, and while the seconds were arranging the preliminaries, Lincoln to warm himself, began mowing the grass. When Shields saw the giant figure swinging a long sword like a scythe, he leaned against a huge elm, and fainted from fright. And so ended the bloodless duel.

Lincoln afterward married Miss Todd. They had four boys, Robert, Edward, William and Thomas. Edward died in infancy at Springfield, and William at the White House.

The Calamity of Slavery.

It was generally supposed that Lincoln's father left Kentucky because he was opposed to slavery. Certainly the son, early in life, became strongly opposed to this institution.

During his first session in the legislature, at Vandalia in southern Illinois, surrounded by much pro-slavery sentiment, he united with one other member, in placing on the records their protest against some resolutions adopted of a pro-slavery nature.

Henry Clay had early become Lincoln's political idol. He knew well of Mr. Clay's personal dislike of slavery. He knew how Clay had been compelled to yield his own convictions regarding this national wrong, to the demands of southern sentiment, growing everywhere below Mason and Dixon's line.

When he entered congress in 1847, he at once took sides with the antislavery section, but he remained in congress a single term only, returning to his Springfield practice.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act.

He watched with alarm, the extension of slavery westward, beyond the Mississippi, and northward, by means of the Compromise of 1850, and later complete abrogation of the Compromise of 1820, which had shut out slavery from all territory west and north of Missouri, by Mr. Douglas' popular Sovereignty Bill, in the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854.

Mr. Lincoln's first great political speech was made at Peoria, Illinois, October 16, 1854, replying to Judge Douglas who had spoken for three hours. The subject was this abrogation of the Missouri Compromise of 1850, by the Kansas-Nebraska Act. To indicate Mr. Lincoln's position let me quote two sentences:

"I wish to **make** and to **keep** the distinction between the **existing** institution, and the **extension** of it, so broad and so clear, that no honest man can misunderstand me, and no dishonest one successfully misrepresent me."

"Mr. Jefferson—the author of the Declaration of Independence, then a delegate in Congress: afterwards, twice president: a Virginian by birth and residence, and withal a slaveholder—conceived the idea of taking that occasion to prevent slavery ever going into the Northwestern Territory. He prevailed on the Virginia Legislature to adopt his views, and to cede the Territory, making the prohibition of slavery therein a condition of the deed. Congress accepted the cession with the condition, and in the first Ordinance for the government of the Territory, provided that slavery should never be permitted therein. This was the famed Ordinance of 1787."

The Dred Scott Decision.

In March, 1857, four days after President Buchanan was inaugurated, came the famous Dred Scott Decision, read by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, of the Supreme Court of the United States, declaring that when the constitution was adopted, "Negroes had no rights which the white man was bound to respect," that the slave holder had the right to take his slaves—his property—into any territory in the land.

On the following June, at Springfield, Mr. Lincoln made another elaborate and powerful speech, the closing sentence being as follows:

"The plainest print cannot be read through a gold eagle, and it will ever be hard to find many men, who will send a slave to Liberia, and pay his passage, while he can send him to a new country—Kansas for instance—and sell him for fifteen hundred dollars, and the rise."

Lincoln-Douglas Debates.

In 1858, the second term of Mr. Douglas in the U. S. Senate, being about to expire, the republicans of Illinois, met in Springfield, June 16 and nominated Mr. Lincoln as their candidate for the office. Here he made his celebrated "House Divided Against Itself" speech. Like nearly all his speeches, a historical paper with his usual logical conclusions, and unanswerable. I quote one sentence only:

"A house divided against itself cannot stand." I believe this,Government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved: I do not expect the house to fall: but I **do** expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction, or its advocates will push it forward, until it shall become alike, lawful in all the states, old as well as new, North as well as South."

This speech made trouble in the Democratic ranks in the state, and something must be done. Three weeks later, on the evening of July 9th , Mr. Douglas answered the speech at great length, Mr Lincoln being present.

Mr. Lincoln in turn, on the following evening, made a reply to Douglas of nearly equal length. I will quote a sentence near the close.

"'So I say in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can. If we cannot give freedom to every creature. Let us do nothing that will impose slavery upon any other creature. Let us then turn this government back into the channels in which the framers of the Constitution originally placed it."

At Springfield, July 17, afternoon, Mr. Douglas spoke again devoting a large part of his speech to attacking Lincoln's published speeches, quoting freely from them. Mr. Lincoln, though not present at Douglas' speech, replied to it the same evening. Two sentences will illustrate one element of his popularity with the common people. He said near the beginning:

"Senator Douglas is of world wide renown. All the anxious politicians of his party, or who have been of his party, for years past, have been looking upon him as certainly, at no distant day, to be President of the United States. They have seen in his round, jolly, fruitful face, post offices, land offices, marshalships, and cabinet appointments, chargeships and foreign missions, sprouting and bursting out in wonderful exhuberance; ready to be laid hold of by their greedy hands. On the contrary, no body has ever expected me to be president. In my poor lean, lank face, nobody has ever seen that any cabbages were sprouting out."

Then follows the celebrated seven joint debates between Douglas and Lincoln, which were published and republished, by the republicans as republican campaign literature until his election.

Heard Mr. Lincoln in 1858.

It was during these debates, that I had the unspeakable privilege of seeing and hearing Mr. Lincoln. I was attending school at the time in Burlington. The republicans of that city became greatly interested in the debates; also in Mr. Lincoln's success: and invited him to come over to Burlington, and let his friends in that section have a chance to see and hear him. His fifth debate with Douglas was at Galesburg, forty miles east of Burlington, on October 7th. He sent word that he would speak in Burlington on the evening of October 9th.

Grimes hall was packed with anxious hearers, when Mr. Lincoln came in. He was then as always, tall and angular, and to me, he appeared, a fine looking man, with intellectual face and pleasant voice. I watched his every move. He brought with him a large bundle of papers, which he unrolled and spread out on the table, including many letters and clippings. He arranged these, picking out here and there one, and laying it aside as if to use it; though as, I remember, he consulted none of them during the speech. This done, he was introduced and began. I was in plain sight and hearing, and I think I heard every word he uttered;

entirely captivated by the most marvelously interesting man, I had ever seen or heard, or have ever seen or heard since. I cannot recall any part of his speech. Fifty-one years is a long time. I do not think there was any attempt at oratory, or any part of the speech delivered with special emphasis, but the whole of it with earnestness and force. I know that the speech was intensely satisfactory to me, and I had hurrahed for Henry Clay for president in 1844, fourteen years earlier, and had read Greeley's New York Tribune almost from boyhood. I remember also that I said in my enthusiasm, as I left the hall, and to fellow students next day, that the speech was wholly unlike anything I had ever heard, not political, but a statesman's speech.

Lincoln in the East.

Mr. Lincoln's life had been spent almost wholly in the West. The East knew little of him. In 1859, he made two great speeches in Ohio, one in Columbus, the other in Cincinati, which greatly stirred the people of that section, but his greatest address was made February 27, 1860, at the Cooper Institute meeting, New York City, which surprised New York and New England and undoubtedly aided materially in his nomination for the presidency the following June.

Saw Mr. Lincoln Nominated.

I was at school in Chicago, in 1860, when Mr. Lincoln was nominated, and attended all the sessions in that great Wigwam, where the nomination was made, as an intensely interested spectator. It was to me the most thrilling scene of my life, in its exhibition of intense human excitement and passion.

Mr. Lincoln spent the first eight months between the nomination and his first inaugural, at his home in Springfield, in deep study and intense anxiety, as to what he could possibly do to avert the long threatened effort of the South to secede. He chose his cabinet with his unerring foresight, calling around him seven of the ablest men in the nation, led by Senator Seward, himself, his chief rival for the nomination the year before, and thereby again greatly strengthened his hold on the people.

His First Inaugural.

When his inaugural was read seven states had already withdrawn from the Union, and as many more were preparing to do so. Nevertheless, the whole purport of his message was a plea for the maintenance of the Union. The last clause was as follows:

"We are not enemies but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic cords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriotic grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet be the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

In spite of such pleadings, in spite of everything, slavery's preparations for war went relentlessly on, but when Beauregard fired on Ft. Sumpter, Mr. Lincoln was prepared for this crisis also, and instantly issued his call for seventy-five thousand volunteers, and in four days had regiments marching to protect the Capital.

Douglas Won Over.

Then followed another one of his singular personal triumphs. He and Mr. Douglas had really led the rival parties in the West for twenty-years, and finally throughout the North, and they were the rival candidates for president the year before. But when Mr. Douglas saw that war was inevitable, when he saw that this first overt act of war had been committed he went at once with a friend to the White House on Sunday evening, the day following the fall of Ft. Sumpter to assure Mr. Lincoln of his own earnest support in the contest which was now inevitable. The President received him most cordially, and read him the call, which he had prepared to issue the next morning. Mr. Douglas said at once to him: "Mr. President, I cordially concur in every word of that document, except that instead of the call for seventy-five thousand men, I would make it two hundred thousand. You do not know the dishonest purposes of those men as well as I do." For once the lifelong antagonists were united in heart and purpose. The next morning Mr. Douglas prepared an earnest appeal and sent it to the country, along with the president's call. In this act he proved himself a true patriot, and a leader that helped to unite the whole North in support of the war.

The Emancipation Proclamation.

Mr. Lincoln, apparently from the first, had a vision that slavery would, at some time and in some way, come to an end, but bided his time. When the war had mowed its terrible swath for one long and sorrowful year, his great heart said that the time had come. He would issue the proclamation of emancipation, but was advised by his cabinet to defer action until it could follow the announcement of a victory for the Union arms. At last came the victory of Antietam. He hurridly called his cabinet, and said to them: "I made a solemn vow to my God, that if General Lee should be driven back, from Pennsylvania, I would crown the result by a declaration of freedom of the slaves." On the 22d of September, 1862, the Emancipation Proclamation was issued. Later he said: "As affairs have turned out, it is the central act of my administration, and the great event of the nineteenth century."

Getteysburg Address and Last Inaugural.

Let me close these hastily prepared glimpses of America's matchless Commoner with one sentence each, from his Gettysburg speech, and his last inaugural; two sentences which will enshrine his memory in the love and veneration of his countrymen for all time:

"It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and orphans—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."