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Dr. Louis A. Warren - - - Editor

LINCOLN'S POLITICAL REBIRTH

Although Abraham Lincoln was a born politician we have evidence that after his term in congress his interest in politics died out.

The autobiographical sketch which he prepared for Scripps states that his interest in politics was revived by the discussion of the Missouri Compromise and that, "In the canvass of 1856 Mr. Lincoln made over 50 speeches, no one of which, so far as he remembers, was put in print."

Although most of his addresses for this year have been unrecorded, but one of them has been set apart as "The Lost Speech." Too much emphasis cannot be placed upon Lincoln's effort made at Bloomington, Illinois at the Republican State Convention on May 29, 1856 of which the anniversary occurs next week.

Herndon, who attended the convention and heard Lincoln, comments on his speech as follows:

"I have heard or read all of Mr. Lincoln's great speeches, and I give it as my opinion that the Bloomington speech was the grand effort of his life. Heretofore he had simply argued the slavery question on grounds of policy, —the statesman's grounds—never reaching the question of the radical and the eternal right. Now he was newly baptized and freshly born, he had the fervor of a new convert; the smothered flame broke out; enthusiasm unusual to him blazed up; his eyes were aglow with an inspiration; he felt justice; his heart was alive to the right! his sympathies, remarkably deep for him, burst forth, and he stood before the throne of the eternal Right. His speech was full of fire and energy and force; it was logic; it was pathos; it was enthusiasm; it was justice; equity, truth, and right set ablaze by the divine fires of a soul maddened by the wrong; it was hard, heavy, knotty, gnarled, backed with wrath. I attempted for about fifteen minutes as was usual with me to take notes, but at the end of that time I threw pen and paper away and lived only in the inspiration of the hour. If Mr. Lincoln was six feet, four inches high usually, at Bloomington that day he was seven feet, and inspired at that."

Lincoln's political rebirth occurred simultaneously with the birth of the Republican party which Horace Greely claims held its "First National Convention" in 1856 at Pittsburg but

nominated no delegates. Five months later the Republicans convened at Philadelphia.

Less than three weeks after the Bloomington convention the Philadelphia assembly met. Lincoln had been chosen one of the three delegates to this national convention but did not attend. The spell of "The Lost Speech" was still over the Illinois delegates who did go, and it was their enthusiasm for Abraham Lincoln which, unknown to him, placed his name before the convention as a candidate for vice-president.

With no organization behind him and no preliminary campaigning he polled 110 votes on the first ballot, but the successful candidate, Dayton, had received 259. This recognition might be called the public announcement of Abraham Lincoln's political rebirth.

The Bloomington Anti-Nebraska convention, as it was called, was attended by the following delegates from Sangamon:

A. Lincoln, Wm. H. Herndon, J. C. Conklin, J. B. Webber, Preston Breckinridge, William Jayne, R. H. Ballinger, Pascal P. Enos, William H. Bailhache, E. L. Baker, and Peter Ernest.

The usual procedure of a convention was carried out and after several speeches had been made, especially after the crowd had been incensed by a speech delivered by James S. Emory, a Kansas agitator, the excited group called for Lincoln to come to the platform. Lincoln was not prepared with a written speech but the last few days before the convention he had formulated a talk that he intended to deliver on some future occasion.

Lincoln knew if this momentous meeting was to establish any results he must in this speech bind the discordant group into a harmonious unit with a common purpose so the delegates would leave Bloomington with minds convinced that this new movement was very necessary for the good of the union. He exerted his best effort before the 2,000 people who were so eager to hear him.

From the "Democratic Press" May 31, 1856, the following editorial comment is observed:

"Abraham Lincoln, of Springfield, was next called out, and made the speech of the occasion. Never has it been our fortune to listen to a more eloquent and masterly presentation of a subject. I shall not mar any of its fine proportions or brilliant passages by attempting even a synopsis of it. Mr. Lincoln must write it out and let it go before all the people. For an hour and a half he held the assemblage spell bound by the power of his argument, the intense irony of his invective, and the deep earnestness and fervid brilliancy of his eloquence. When he concluded, the audience sprang to their feet and cheer after cheer told how deeply their hearts had been touched, and their souls warmed up to a generous enthusiasm."

John L. Scripps has given his reaction to this most remarkable speech in the following enthusiastic description.

"Never was an audience more completely electrified by human eloquence. Again and again, during its delivery, they sprang to their feet and upon the benches, and testified long continued shouts and the waving of hats, how deeply the speaker had wrought upon their minds and hearts. It fused the mass of hitherto incongruous elements into perfect homogeneity; and from that day to the present they have worked together in harmonious and fraternal union."

Another writer reviewing the reminiscences of those who attended the convention remarks:

"Men who heard the great American on this occasion unhesitatingly ranked his effort with the perfect address he delivered at Gettysburg a few years afterward. He so flung himself into the appeal for justice to white and black alike that the professional reporters forgot their pencils and their paper. The audience was hypnotized by the magic of the speaker's logic, and the speech was 'Lost.'"

It is admitted generally that the reporters became so intensely interested in the speech that they forgot to take notes. Henry C. Whitney, a young lawyer wrote down a few of the most striking utterances and some years ago prepared his interpretation of the speech for publication. David Davis, it is said, was very indignant when he read the Whitney version because "It fell so short of Mr. Lincoln's great effort."

The following three testimonials by well known Lincoln authors may illustrate the different points of view which are held regarding the authenticity of Whitney's attempt to restore "The Lost Speech."

"Just what Lincoln said in that speech no one knows. He had not written it out but he had thought much about it. Henry C. Whitney, an attorney, who had been at Danville where Lincoln had been attending court for about three weeks, wrote out many years afterward what he believed to be the substance of this speech. Medill, who heard the speech itself, thought that Whitney had fairly reproduced the thought, and in some instances the very phraseology, of the address."—Barton.

"Whitney's report of Lincoln's Bloomington speech is as good, if not better than, that of most speeches made long afterward from longhand notes and from memory."—Beveridge.

"It is difficult to draw any other conclusion than that the Whitney version of Lincoln's 'Lost Speech' is so largely a product of the imagination that it is entirely unreliable, in substance as well as phraseology."—Angel.