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STUMPING HIS NATIVE STATE

Abraham Lincoln made but one stump speech in his native state and the atmosphere created on the eve of the presidential election seems to offer the proper incentive for telling the story.

One day in 1927 I visited the store of James Taylor in Morganfield, Kentucky, and observed upon the floor the butt end of an old broken cannon, which was used to hold a door back against the wall.

"That is a piece of a cannon that was fired at a Lincoln speechmaking here in 1840," the proprietor said. I was startled as much at his pronouncement as must have been the early audience that witnessed the event eighty-five years before. It is not known generally that Lincoln made a political address in his native state.

What Mr. Taylor told came down to him from his father, Samuel Taylor, who was present at the celebration which occurred not far from where the piece of cannon was serving as a door stop.

It is a well-known fact that Lincoln campaigned in 1840 for "Harrison and Tinnecanoe," the Illinois convention had named him as one of the electors. He visited the extreme southern portion of the state on one of his itineraries and finally reached Shawneetown, at one time capitol of the state. Here at the point where the Wabash River flows into the Ohio he was given a rousing welcome.

Across the Ohio River in Kentucky there lived an enthusiastic Whig leader by the name of George W. Riddell. Through his influence Lincoln was induced to cross the Ohio and make his first and only political speech in the state of his birth.

Morganfield, the county seat of Union County and the scene of this political rally, is about 15 miles from Shawneetown. The campaign of 1840 with its keg and cabin emblems and its queer slogans was the most picturesque of all the early presidential contests, and the Morganfield celebration was in harmony with the program usually followed.

A parade started at Shawneetown

which ferried the river and started for Morganfield. The feature of the long line of march was a float drawn by white horses and occupied by a large group of beautiful young ladies representing the states in the Union. The procession came to a halt in the Court House square at Morganfield, where a great crowd of Kentuckians was waiting to receive it.

Besides the beautiful young ladies that the Shawneetown Whigs had brought along they had transported an ugly old cannon with which to fire a salute. Into this setting must also be brought the tall young orator from Illinois, then only thirty-nine years of age, but even at that time one of the leaders of the Whig party.

What Abraham Lincoln said on this occasion is not known but it is likely that he used the same type of flowery oratory which he used at other places during the campaign. A few excerpts from the speeches made during this campaign are presented:

"Here, without contemplating consequences, before Heaven, and in the face of the world, I swear eternal fidelity to the just cause, as I deem it, of the land, of my life, my liberty, my love; and who that thinks with me will not fearlessly adopt the oath that I take.

"Many free countries have lost their liberty, and ours may lose hers; but if she shall, be it my proudest plume, not that I was last to desert, but that I never deserted her.

"But if, after all, we should fail, be it so; we still have the proud consolation of saying to our consciences and to the departing shade of our country's freedom, that the cause approved by our judgment, and adorned by our hearts, in disaster, in chains, in death, we never faltered in defending."

The people of Morganfield soon forgot the beautiful young ladies and also the tall young orator, but they did not forget the cannon brought from Shawneetown, and the part it played in the celebration.

When the festivities were about to begin the cannon was set against a tree with no provision made for the rebound and with a terrific roar it literally blew itself to pieces; the butt end of this cannon was the piece observed by me in the store of James Taylor. The relic is now preserved in the museum of the Kentucky State Historical Society.

While making some inquiries as to other pieces of the old cannon which might have been preserved along with traditions associated with the event, I learned that for many years a piece of an old cannon served as a corner post to a farm bordering on the road that led from Morganfield to Shawneetown.

Upon visiting the site where the old cannon once stood and having interviewed the owner of the farm and some of his neighbors, I found that the barrel of the cannon which marked the corner had been removed many years before. The description of the relic, however, as remembered by those who had observed it, made me feel confident that it was a companion piece to the butt end of the cannon at Morganfield.

Desiring to have some document that might give authenticity to the cannon story and also some support to the entire tradition, I searched the public records for some reference to this unique marker. A deed filed in the Union County court house giving the boundaries of the farm where the old cannon once served as a corner contained the following reference: "A tract of parcel of land being in Union County, Kentucky, and bounded as follows: Beginning at a broken cannon in the road..." This deed was dated March 28, 1893, which would imply that at that time the cannon still served as a corner.

Further investigations allowed me to trace the final destination of the barrel of the cannon which had been removed from its former resting place of more than half a century, probably because of its historical significance.

There is a sequel to this story which must have brought home to Abraham Lincoln in a very vivid way his memorable visit to his native state in 1840.

When the war came in 1860 Mr. Riddell, who had been marshall of the day in 1840, chose to cast his lot with the forces of the south. He was just as ardent a Confederate as he had been a Whig in the old days. Because of his uncontrolled enthusiasm for the southern cause, he was soon arrested and sent to Johnston's Island where he was held a prisoner.

Remembering this early contact with Abraham Lincoln he took occasion to write the former orator of 1840, now the president of the Union. The descendants of Mr. Riddell still remembered the contents of this letter, which follows:

"After my compliments I would say that in 1840 I had you in tow at Morganfield, Kentucky. I put you and your friends up at the best hotel in town, and it cost me about thirty dollars. Now you have me in tow, and you are not treating me as well as I treated you. If you cannot do any better send me home to my wife."

Mr. Riddell was soon released and he never tired in after years of telling of his association with the young Whig orator who later became President. The old hotel in Morganfield where Riddell entertained Lincoln and the Shawneetown Whigs still stands as a monument to Lincoln's only political speech in his native state.