

LINCOLN LORE

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THE ANTIETAM SONG-SINGING

Many false and vicious stories circulated for the purpose of turning public sentiment away from Abraham Lincoln were used with telling effect during both of his political campaigns. Although they were created as vehicles of political expediency most of them lived on after the campaigns and many survive unchallenged to this day.

Wherever an incident relating to the President, innocent enough in itself, could be moved out of its setting and given an unfavorable interpretation, it was immediately appropriated, recast, and sent on its way. If the story could serve a two-fold purpose, of humiliating Mr. Lincoln and glorifying his opponent, it became a formidable weapon indeed. This was the chief reason why the story of "The Antietam Song-singing" was given such wide circulation by the friends of McClellan.

The story appeared in a somewhat abbreviated form as early as 1862. It was not until 1864, shortly after Lincoln's nomination as the Union candidate for the presidency on June 8, that it was given much attention. One critic wrote on September 10, 1864, that the story which follows had been "repeated in the New York World almost daily for the last three months."

"One of Mr. Lincoln's Jokes.—While the President was driving over the field (Antietam) in an ambulance, accompanied by Marshal Lamon, General McClellan, and another officer, heavy details of men were engaged in the task of burying the dead. The ambulance had just reached the neighborhood of the old stone bridge, where the dead were piled highest, when Mr. Lincoln, suddenly slapping Marshal Lamon on the knee, exclaimed: 'Come, Lamon, give us that song about Picayune Butler; McClellan has never heard it.' 'Not now, if you please,' said General McClellan, with a shudder; 'I would prefer to hear it some other place and time.'"

The thousands of women made widows by casualties in both armies, with the above picture before them, could visualize the President of the United States asking for a "ribald song" at the very place on the Antietam battle field where "the dead were piled highest," and with the mutilated bodies still before him. On the other hand Lincoln's political opponent, McClellan, is introduced, pronouncing his displeasure with the proceedings.

When some one called to President Lincoln's attention the extent to which the story was being used to discredit him in the campaign and upon being urged to make a statement for publication with reference to it, he said:

"There has already been too much said about this falsehood. Let the thing alone. If I have not established character enough to give the lie to this charge, I can only say that I am mistaken in my own estimate of myself. In politics, every man must skin his own skunk. These fellows are welcome to the hide of this one. Its body has already given forth its unsavory odor."

Ward H. Lamon, who was the individual accused of participating in this unholy scene in the presence of a pile of dead bodies, drew up a denial of the circumstances surrounding the part he played in the affair in answer to a letter directed to him, and submitted it to Mr. Lincoln for his approval. This was Mr. Lincoln's reaction to the letter Lamon had written.

"I would not publish this reply; it is too belligerent in tone for so grave a matter. There is a heap of 'cussedness' mixed up with your usual amiability, and you are at times too fond of a fight. If I were you, I would simply state the facts as they were. I would give the statement as you have here, without the pepper and salt. Let me try my hand at it."

Lincoln then took Lamon's letter and copied that portion of it which he considered would be a truthful statement of just what occurred. It was this incident which had been used as a basis for the story then appearing in such exaggerated and vicious form. A facsimile copy of Lamon's letter in Lincoln's hand is now before the editor of Lincoln Lore.

"The President has known me intimately for nearly twenty years, and has often heard me sing little ditties. The battle of Antietam was fought on the 17th day of September, 1862. On the first day of October, just two weeks after the battle, the President, with some others including myself, started from Washington to visit the army, reaching Harper's Ferry at noon of that day. In a short while General McClellan came from his headquarters near the battle ground, joined the President, and with him reviewed the troops at Bolivar Heights that afternoon, and at night returned to his headquarters, leaving the President at Harper's Ferry. On the morning of the second the President, with General Sumner, reviewed the troops respectively at Loudon Heights and Maryland Heights, and at about noon started to General McClellan's headquarters, reaching there only in time to see very little before night. On the morning of the third all started on a review of the third corps and the cavalry, in the vicinity of the Antietam battle-ground. After getting through with General Burnside's corps, at the suggestion of General McClellan he and the President left their horses to be led, and went into an ambulance or ambulances to go to General Fitz John Porter's corps, which was two or three miles distant. I am not sure whether the President and General McClellan were in the same ambulance, or in different ones; but myself and some others were in the same with the President. On the way, and on no part of the battle-ground, and on what suggestions I do not remember, the President asked me to sing the little sad song that follows, which he had often heard me sing, and had always seemed to like very much. I sang it. After it was over, some one of the party (I do not think it was the President) asked me to sing something else; and I sang two or three little comic things, of which 'Picayune Butler' was one. Porter's corps was reached and reviewed; then, in succession, the cavalry and Franklin's corps were reviewed, and the President and party returned to General McClellan's headquarters at the end of a very hard, hot, and dusty day's work. Next day, the 4th, the President and General McClellan visited such of the wounded as still remained in the vicinity, including the now lamented General Richardson; then proceeded to and examined the South-Mountain battle-ground, at which point they parted, —General McClellan returning to his camp, and the President returning to Washington, seeing, on the way, General Hartsoff, who lay wounded at Frederick Town.

"This is the whole story of the singing and its surroundings. Neither General McClellan nor any one else made any objections to the singing; the place was not on the battlefield; the time was sixteen days after the battle; no dead body was seen during the whole time the President was absent from Washington, nor even a grave that had not been rained on since it was made."

This letter, especially the last paragraph, reveals that the story as it appeared in the New York World was false from beginning to end and built up on one single incident entirely isolated by both time and location from any pile of dead bodies anywhere and from any point on the battle field of Antietam. The noble remonstrance said to have been made by McClellan is no more to be relied upon than the base suggestion credited to Lincoln. The verses sung at Lincoln's request on an occasion which apparently made it proper and appropriate was not a "ribald song" but a solemn and sad ballad very familiar in that day, the last stanza of which is as follows:

"My lids have long been dry, Tom, but tears came to my eyes;
I thought of her I loved so well, those early broken ties;
I visited the old churchyard, and took some flowers to strow
Upon the graves of those we loved, some twenty years ago."