

LINCOLN LORE

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HONESTY—LINCOLN'S MOST STRIKING CHARACTERISTIC

No descriptive name has been applied to Abraham Lincoln more often than "Honest Abe." The old-fashioned virtue, honesty, as rugged as the man himself, seems to have been personified by this son of the western prairies.

The profession which Lincoln followed has not always been synonymous with this outstanding characteristic which he exemplified. On one occasion he advised an apprentice, "Resolve to be honest at all events, and if in your own judgment you cannot be an honest lawyer resolve to be honest without being a lawyer."

His interest in politics also allowed him to make some observations about certain politicians "who have interests aside from the interests of the people, and who to say the most of them are, taken as a mass, at least one long step removed from honest men."

Although practicing law for twenty-three years and taking an active interest in politics all of his mature life, he came forth to honor both of these professions. While most of our presidents have been known as honest men, among them all, Lincoln alone has had the prefix "Honest" associated with his name.

Lincoln's early training must have had much to do with the establishment and cultivation of this virtue. His parents lived under the strict discipline of the church where "falsifying the truth" and telling "falsities" were punished by excommunication, and lessons on integrity were taught from the Scriptures.

Aside from the Bible, most of the books Lincoln read as a youth emphasized, through precept and fable, that honesty was the most honorable of the virtues to be embraced. Lincoln read in Weems' Washington how George had been trained to tell the truth so that when confronted by his father after mutilating a young tree he did not flinch but so conducted himself that the cherry tree story has become one of the classics of our folklore.

Among the fables of Aesop, Lincoln read the story of "Mercury and the Woodman," which not only taught that "Honesty is the best policy" but also concluded "that the honest man, provided his other talents are not deficient, always carries the preference in our own esteem before any other in whatever business he thinks fit to employ himself." In the fable of "The Young Man and the Cook" Lincoln learned that "An honest man's word is as good as his oath." In "Murray's English Reader" he observed that "Sincerity and truth form the basis of every virtue." Most of the early school books were as much concerned in teaching good morals as they were in teaching good English.

In Lincoln's own country in Indiana where he grew up, Judge De Bruler said in a political speech in 1860, "I shall cordially support 'Honest Abe' for the presidency. I believe that Mr. Lincoln is honest and incorruptible." A newspaper correspondent indorsed the remarks of Judge De Bruler by writing, "Here around the scenes of his (Lincoln's) youth and early manhood where his character was formed his reputation for trustworthiness and honesty is second to no man's in the land."

Beveridge claims that as early as 1832 Lincoln was known as "Honest Abe" and further states that "Lincoln was scrupulously truthful and honest to well-nigh painful exactitude. What he said could be depended upon absolutely; and Lincoln's name became a synonym for fair dealing. Indeed precise truthfulness and meticulous honesty were his most striking characteristics."

His reputation for honesty as a youth also followed

him through all those early years in Illinois when he was struggling with poverty. As a storekeeper, on one occasion he had taken six and a quarter cents too much from one of his customers, and, after the store was closed that evening, he walked several miles to repay the one he had short changed. On another occasion he weighed some goods in the evening, and in the morning discovered he had placed the wrong weight on the scales. This time he shut up shop and went immediately to deliver the rest of the goods due the customer.

Possibly the best-known story of his honesty is associated with his settlement with the Government as postmaster of New Salem some time after the office had been closed. A Government authority came around to make collections and called on Lincoln. As tradition has it, "Lincoln responded by rising from his chair, crossing his office to an old trunk in the corner and taking from it a cotton rag tied with a string. Untying it he produced the exact amount of money demanded by the post office agent, indicating that he had held the sum intact and untouched ever since his retirement as postmaster. 'I never use any man's money but my own,' he ejaculated calmly."

On February 8, 1842, Lincoln was asked to deliver a eulogy on the death of Benjamin Ferguson of Springfield. During his remarks he had occasion to mention Ferguson's integrity and said, "In very truth he was the noblest work of God—an honest man."

On February 22, 1842, Lincoln made a Washington's Birthday address, and after returning home wrote a letter to a youth who was planning to enter West Point. The story of Washington's honesty must have been fresh in his mind when he wrote, "I never encourage deceit, and falsehood, especially if you have a bad memory, is the worst enemy a fellow can have. The fact is truth is your truest friend, no matter what the circumstances are."

Joshua Giddings wrote to Lincoln after his nomination for the presidency and said, "When men came to me asking my opinion of you, I only told them 'Lincoln is an honest man.' All I ask of you in return for my services is to make my statement good throughout your administration."

The fame of Lincoln's honesty spread to Europe, and an English biographer, writing in 1861, congratulated America on having as its ruler "an honest man" and concluded his tribute with this statement:

"Honesty is, it is true, old-fashioned; but fashions, as with hoops so with virtues, occasionally repeat themselves, and are the more honoured for their long absence."

Lincoln not only practiced honesty, but he admired it in others. On one occasion a young lady gained an interview with him to request a pass which would allow her to hunt for her brother, a Confederate soldier, who was in a Union hospital. Lincoln said to her, "You are loyal, of course." She replied, "Yes, loyal to the heart's core—to Virginia." The President looked at her a moment and then turning to his desk wrote the following note:

"To Commanders of Forts containing rebel prisoners:
Permit the bearer, Miss Neilson, to pass in and make inquiries about her brother; she is an honest girl and can be trusted.

(Signed) A. Lincoln."

In 1865, an engraving by H. B. Hall was given circulation, showing Diogenes, with his lantern, resting beside a portrait of Lincoln, with the following verse inscribed:

"Diogenes his lantern needs no more
An honest man is found: the search is o'er."