

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor.
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, of Fort Wayne, Indiana.

No. 270

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

June 11, 1934

A PERSONAL DESCRIPTION OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

It is doubtful if any public man changed more in appearance during a period of five years than Abraham Lincoln did during his administration as President. There was also a great change in his physique after he ceased to be a woodsman and became a lawyer. Even during the short time between his election and his inauguration the growing of a beard made a marked difference in his appearance.

When Abraham Lincoln prepared an autobiographical sketch for Fell at fifty years of age, he concluded his brief statement with this paragraph:

"If any personal description of me is thought desirable, it may be said, I am, in height, six feet, four inches, nearly; lean in flesh, weighing on an average, one hundred and eighty pounds; dark complexion, with coarse black hair, and grey eyes—no other marks or brands recollected."

With his own personal description as a nucleus we are now able to supplement this sketch with a much more detailed study of how he looked.

Height

No other single physical characteristic set Lincoln apart from other men with such contrast as his extraordinary height. He said he was "six feet four inches, nearly." One observer remarked that "His great height was conspicuous even in a crowd of goodly men and lifted him fully in view as he walked."

It is difficult to exaggerate Lincoln's tallness which made him loom above other men. One description of him emphasizes the fact that he was six feet four inches in his stockings. Several contemporaries are in agreement that when enumerating a great thought he had the ability of stretching up to a height beyond his usual structure; vertical elasticity it is called. Lincoln was the tallest of our presidents.

Frame

We would expect one so tall to be long of limb. Both his legs and arms were abnormally long and in undue proportion to his body. When seated in a chair he did not appear to be much taller than other men. His hands were large, measuring ten inches following the glove fitter's process of determining size. We are not left in ignorance about the size and shape of his hands as casts have been made from life of both his left and right hands. One writer spoke of his arm as a long, swinging one; and another called it the arm of a Hoosier who could "whip his weight in wildcats." His feet were also large and according to his shoemaker the right foot was twelve and one-quarter

inches long and the left one twelve inches.

We would also expect his chest to be thin and narrow when compared with his great height, although Herndon's statement that he was so thin through the chest to the back and so narrow through the shoulders that he was a consumptive type should not be taken too literally. Lincoln's own statement that at fifty he was lean in flesh but weighed on an average of one hundred and eighty pounds indicates that he was a thin, wiry, sinewy man.

Carriage

There has been much difference of opinion about his bearing, one observer stating that "unlike most very tall men he is lithe and agile and quick in all his movements." Herndon, however, claims that "when he walked he moved cautiously but firmly. He walked with even tread the inner sides of his feet being parallel. He put the whole foot flat down on the ground at once, not landing on the heel; he likewise lifted his foot all at once not rising from the toe and hence he had no spring in his walk."

An Englishman who observed Lincoln said that he walked slow "like many other thoughtful men—Wordsworth and Napoleon for example—keeping his head inclined forward and downward." It must be admitted that he did not appear to advantage when walking.

Head

One student, a sculptor who made a bust of Lincoln, claimed that his head was neither Greek nor Roman nor Celt, concluding that "there were few such men in the world and where they came from originally is not known."

Nicolay referred to Lincoln's head as large with high crown of skull. Another contemporary said "his forehead is high and full and swells out grandly." The size of his hat has been given as seven and one-eighth and seven and one-quarter.

Hair

Lincoln said that he had "coarse black hair." It was thick and bushy and luxuriant, falling carelessly but not ungracefully around his well-formed head. One of Lincoln's visitors at Springfield who saw him after he reached Washington claimed "He had a fine suit of hair until the barbers at Washington attended to his toilet." At fifty years of age his raven black hair had not started to turn gray.

Eyes

Lincoln's dark grey eyes have been the subject of many monographs and poems. A sculptor describes them as follows:

"His eyes are deep set and when his face is reposing are not remarkable for brightness, but kindle with his thoughts and beam with great expression. His eyebrows are heavy and move almost incessantly as he becomes animated."

One author went to the trouble to compile a list of the following descriptive phrases referring to Lincoln's eyes.

"Bright dreamy eyes that seem to gaze through you without looking at you"; "Patient, loving eyes"; "The kindest eyes ever placed in mortal head"; "His eyes had an expression impossible to describe, as though they lay in deep caverns, ready to spring out at an instant call"; "A sad, pre-occupied, far-away look, so intense that he seemed to be in a trance"; "Inexpressible sadness in his eyes, with a far-away look, as if they were searching for something they had seen long, long years ago"; "Melancholy eyes that seemed to wander far away."

Complexion

One of the most unfavorable characteristics of Lincoln's personal appearance was his complexion. His face had a "battered and bronzed look without being hard." To another observer his cheeks seemed to be leathery and there was a sallowness which prevented any show of the usual flesh color. His face is described as "half Roman, half Indian, so washed by climate and so seared by life's struggles."

Countenance

Lincoln's nose was especially prominent. It is described as large, long, fleshy, blunt, and a little awry towards the right eye. His ears were large but they most certainly did not stick out "at almost right angles from his head" as alleged by Herndon.

Lincoln had a large mouth. The upper lip was quite thin while the lower lip was thick, hanging, and undercurved. His chin was slightly upturned. He had an Adam's apple that was quite prominent, and on the right side of his face not far from his mouth a conspicuous mole.

On November 14, 1860, an excellent description of Lincoln appeared from which the following excerpt is taken:

"The lower part of his face is strongly marked by long angular jaws. His prominent cheek-bones and the hollowness of his cheeks give him a somewhat haggard look, but as he is now cultivating whiskers and a beard, his appearance in that respect will soon be improved."

He was growing a beard eight days after the election and it is likely he never shaved after he became president.