

# 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. 297

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

December 17, 1934

## THE COUNTENANCE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Photography has failed to record the transformation which took place in Lincoln's countenance when fired by the spirit of some oratorical effort. His features when in repose lacked expression, and the radiance which beamed from his face when animated was lost in the still photographs of his day.

Lincoln did not live to see instantaneous photography developed, and it was twenty years after his death before the idea which finally produced the snapshot was made practical. During the era of picture taking which he knew, it was dangerous to smile, and a mechanical device in the form of a clamp was often used to prevent the slightest movement of the head while the exposure was being made.

One author, in preparing a magazine article, about thirty years ago, wrote to some of the people then living who remembered Lincoln, and the reaction was that no picture of him was satisfactory because it did not show the light that was in his eyes when he was speaking or listening.

Regret has been expressed that sound reproducing instruments were not available in Lincoln's day so that his speeches could have been preserved as he delivered them, but the tardiness of the moving picture in making its appearance has robbed us of a much more vital contribution, the visualization of Lincoln as he actually appeared. To have had both sight and sound reproduction, as we have them combined today, would have settled the much debated questions about his voice inflections and his facial expressions.

One cannot read at any length about Lincoln without being confronted with the wide divergence of opinion about how he looked. All the synonyms which harmonize with such words as homely, ugly, repulsive, etc. have been used to describe his countenance by some writers, while others have given him an angelic appearance, one author going so far as to compare him favorably with the Greek God, Jove.

### *The Changing Countenance*

These descriptions, so far apart in their interpretations, may be harmonized to some extent by accepting the well-established fact that Lincoln's face underwent a phenomenal change when inspired by certain contacts with his fellow men.

The rapidity with which the countenance of Lincoln changed is an interesting study. "When affected by humor, sympathy or admiration for some heroic deed or sacrifice for the right his face changed in an instant, the hard lines faded out of it, and the emotion seemed to diffuse itself all over him. His sad face of a sudden became radiant; he seemed like one inspired." So one writer describes the transition.

"The dull, listless features dropped like a mask. The melancholy shadows disappeared in a twinkling," according to another writer; who continued: "The eyes began to sparkle, the mouth to smile and the whole countenance was wreathed in animation."

### *Emotional Climaxes*

The stories of the rapidity with which Lincoln's countenance changed are not so remarkable as the accounts of the extravagant descriptions of his appearance upon attaining these emotional climaxes. Joseph H. Choat said, "When he spoke he was transformed; his eye kindled, his voice rang, his face shone and seemed to light up the whole assembly."

In a volume entitled "Wayside Glimpses" published in 1859, we find this description of Lincoln by Lillian Foster, a southerner, who observed Lincoln at a political rally in Chicago in 1858. She wrote, "His face is certainly ugly, but not repulsive; on the contrary, the good humor, gener-

osity, and intellect beaming from it, makes the eye love to linger there until you almost fancy him good looking."

George W. Julian visited Lincoln in 1861, and he states that "His face when lighted up in conversation was not unhandsome and the kindly and winning tones of his voice pleaded for him as did the smile which played about his rugged features." Another contemporary remarked that "When Mr. Lincoln was in conversation his every feature gave expression to the subject spoken of and so strong was the peculiarity that I have seen him, when speaking on subjects that gave him pleasure, look actually handsome."

Nicolay, one of Lincoln's secretaries, thus described him in the act of summing up a connected series of logical propositions: "His form would straighten up to full height, the head would be slightly thrown back, and the face become radiant with the consciousness of intellectual victory, making his personal appearance grandly imposing and impressive."

A noted American writer prepared an article on "The Beauty of Lincoln" and drew this conclusion, "Abraham Lincoln by every just cannon of the esthetic, was probably the most beautiful being that ever walked the earth. With the single exception of Jesus he is 'the gentlest and sweetest memory of man,' and I think that when tested by every true rubric of beauty, he will always remain, both in face and in person, the most beautiful memory of the human spirit."

### *Professional Appraisals*

Those who make a business of studying faces have also contributed some very complimentary statements about Lincoln's facial expression. From them we might expect to secure a scientific appraisal of Lincoln's ugliness or beauty.

The famous Lincoln mask by Volk drew this reaction from a French sculptor: "What a beautiful face! Why it is more beautiful and has more character than the Abbé Lamenaïs and we think that is the handsomest one in France."

In the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin for November 14, 1860, there is a sketch of Lincoln by a Philadelphian who visited Springfield for the purpose of making a portrait of the president-elect. This was his impression:

"His eyes are deeply 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. . . . No facial muscles show more nobility than his and consequently his face is an ever-varying mirror in which various expressions are constantly flashing."

Gutzon Borglum gives us one of the most unique descriptions of Lincoln's countenance. He says, "Lincoln laughed with the right side of his face and rippling all over it are delicate streams of humor, as from some freshening spring. They pour toward the right corner of his mouth where his laughter issued with a loud hearty guffaw. The left side is the side of melancholy and written all over it are the sufferings of a great, lonely soul."

"The divinity of beauty is nowhere better shown than in the rhythmic lines that grace the face of Abraham Lincoln," according to an American student of physiognomy; and he attempts to support this thesis by discussing some of Lincoln's attributes, such as the thinker's brow, classic eyebrows, relaxed muscles, and lines of beauty. He concludes his analysis with this paragraph:

"If Raphael was the greatest in his conception of rhythmic form, Lincoln was his superior in the method of attainment; for without colors or brush he painted upon his own countenance a portrait of celestial beauty of the master mind of the ages."