

LINCOLN LORE

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HERNDON INTERVIEWED

No one of Abraham Lincoln's associates between the years 1844 and 1860 was better qualified to write about his life during that period than William Herndon, his law partner. Any interview which Herndon gave is of importance because of his close contact with the future president. Shortly after Mr. Lincoln's assassination, and fully twenty years before Mr. Herndon wrote his Lincoln biography, a correspondent writing from Springfield gave the following account of some incidents related to him by Mr. Herndon:

"Mr. Lincoln came to Sangamon County in 1831. He cut the timber for a canoe at the mouth of Spring Creek, on which he floated down to Sangamon town, seven miles north-west of Springfield. In April of that year he went to New Orleans on a flat-boat, and returned the following August. He was at this time fine and noble-looking, weighed two hundred and ten pounds, was six feet three or four inches in height, and of florid complexion. Going to the town of New Salem, the judges of election being minus one clerk, and impressed with the good appearance of the young man, chose him as the clerk of election.

"Mr. Herndon said that Mr. Lincoln approached more nearly the angelic nature than any person he ever saw, women not excepted. He had, he said, more of the angel-looking eye and face than he had ever seen. Yet he was not without passions. These in Lincoln were powerful; but they were held under control by a giant will. He was, said Mr. Herndon, a great animal, but a great angel was ingrafted upon it. He had a towering ambition, but that ambition was directed to the attainment of power with which to elevate man.

"He seems to have retained very vivid impressions of his mother's virtues and a tender sense of his obligations to her. Familiarly he once said to his partner, 'Billy, all that I am I owe to my blessed mother.'

"Because of his transparent honesty, he was taken as a clerk in a store by a man named Offutt. This Offutt reposed all confidence in him, and in no point was he deceived.

"He obtained the name of 'Honest Abe' as follows: A lady came to pay him for a dress she had purchased of him; and in computing the amount, he made it come to two dollars and thirty-seven and a half cents; whereas it was six and a half cents too much. In the evening, after business hours were over, he took the six cents to the woman and corrected the mistake. At another time, a lady came to buy a pound of tea. By mistake a half pound weight was placed in the scale. After Lincoln discovered the error, he closed the store about sunset, and took the half pound of tea with him to the lady.

"In addition to this business integrity, he was extremely humorous, sociable, and agreeable, becoming everybody's friend and nobody's enemy. By these qualities people

came to know him thoroughly. He was taken into every man's house as one of his own household. From his nature, honesty, purity, &c, people termed him 'Honest Abe.'

"When he first came to Springfield, he was extremely poor, having not a shilling in his pocket, and with but a very scanty wardrobe. He would stop a while with one, and then another, going from neighbor to neighbor, all esteeming it a favor to have him in their houses. At that time he had read well and thoroughly everything he had touched, including the Bible and Shakespeare, which were his leading books at the time of his death. He was, said Mr. Herndon, a good biblical scholar. When he was twenty-three years of age, he had read history and biography considerably, and he had mastered Burns when he was twenty-five.

"He never, while engaged in his profession, accumulated much property. He seemed not to have had much care to gather wealth. When he did a service professionally, he would charge accordingly as he estimated the value of the work done, and not according to the standard of other men's fees. If he regarded a service worth a dollar, he charged only that, although other men might charge twenty dollars for doing the same thing.

"His strict fidelity to principle was illustrated by his partner by the following incident. He said, when Mr. Lincoln collected any money belonging to the firm, he would always take half the amount received, and fold up the other half, write upon it the word 'Billy' (the name he familiarly called his partner), and lay it away in his pocket-book. One time Mr. Herndon said to him:

"'Why do you do that? Why not take the whole of the money, and use it?'

"'Because,' said Lincoln, 'I promised my mother never to use anybody's money. Should anything happen to me, that money would be known to be yours.'

"Mr. Herndon took me into the law office where Mr. Lincoln used to sit and toil. It is plain and unpretending. Indeed, everything about the man was indicative of the simplicity of his character. And yet, though so transparent and unassuming, he was sagacious. His friend told me that he was a man of profound policy. His neighbor, to whom I have referred, said he was a great thinker—that he was accustomed to think much on the affairs of the nation. Sometimes he would pass his friends on the street without a sign of recognition—lost in his deep musings. Again, as a neighbor approached him, he would cast up his eye, smile, and remark, 'I've been thinking,' and then proceed to unfold the subject of his thoughts.

"Assassination cast its shadow on the hearts of his friends as early as the presidential election of 1860. Mr. Herndon told me that himself and two other friends guarded Mr. Lincoln to the polls in Springfield on that day to prevent a stiletto from being aimed at his heart. At length he fell, but not until his great work was done, and he was enthroned among the chiefest of the illustrious benefactors of humanity."