

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. 373

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

June 1, 1936

HUMBLE ABRAHAM LINCOLN

One who heard Lincoln make an announcement of his candidacy in the first political race which he entered claimed that Lincoln referred to himself as "humble Abraham Lincoln." A printed announcement of his intention to try for the legislature, in 1832, which was distributed as a hand bill, concludes with this statement: "I was born, and have ever remained, in the most humble walks of life." No characteristic has been more responsible for the universal appeal which the story of Lincoln makes to all classes of people than his meek and lowly appraisal of himself.

When first interviewed by one seeking biographical notes for a story, he said:

It is a great piece of folly to attempt to make anything out of me or my early life. It can all be condensed into a single sentence and that sentence you will find in *Gray's Elegy*, "The short and simple annals of the poor."

To another enquirer who contemplated a campaign biography, he wrote:

Herewith is a little sketch as you requested. There is not much of it, for the reason, I suppose, that there is not much of me. If anything be made out of it, I wish it to be modest and not go beyond the material.

Lincoln prepared a lecture on discoveries and inventions, which he delivered on several occasions in Illinois. To one man, however, who wrote with respect to his delivering a lecture, he made this reply:

I am not a professional lecturer, have never got up but one lecture and that I think a rather poor one.

Even Lincoln's elevation to Congress did not seem to lift him out of his inferiority complex. To an autograph collector who desired the signature of Congressman Lincoln, he wrote:

If you collect the signatures of all persons who are no less distinguished than I you will have an undistinguished mass of names.

While Lincoln was in Congress much controversy arose over the beginning and the conducting of the Mexican War. In comparing his stand which was similar to that of one of the country's great statesmen, Lincoln said:

What, then, is the difference, except that he is a great man and I am a small one?

After some unusual disappointment we might expect to find Lincoln even more humble in his own estimation of himself. Although he felt that he had made some marks in the Lincoln-Douglas debates that would count for civil liberty, he concluded:

I now sink out of view, and shall be forgotten.

The humility of Abraham Lincoln was more clearly revealed, however, when his name was first mentioned for the presidency. A friend wrote to him in March, 1859, with respect to his availability and he replied:

Seriously, I do not think I am fit for the presidency.

Before he was very seriously considered as a candidate he was approached by a friend who asked him his opinion as to who should be nominated. The reply is characteristic of Lincoln. He said:

As you request I will be entirely frank. The taste is in my mouth a little; and this, no doubt, disqualifies me to some extent to form correct opinions.

A more general reference to Lincoln as a possible candidate drew this comment:

Remembering that when a not very great man begins to be considered for a very great position, his head is very likely to be a little turned, I have concluded that I am not the fittest person to answer the question you ask.

After Lincoln's nomination he was deluged with letters; and corresponding with one friend, he wrote, referring to his success:

The humblest of all whose names were before the convention.

In the very midst of the political campaign of 1860, an author, who had prepared a text book on law, wrote to Lincoln asking permission to dedicate a new legal work to him. The following reply, which was recently discovered, is one of the most valuable source documents bearing upon the humility of Abraham Lincoln:

Gratefully accepting the proffered honor, I give the leave, begging only that the inscription may be in modest terms, not representing me as a man of great learning, or a very extraordinary one in any respect.

Even as the president-elect he revealed the same unpretentious bearing that always characterized him. While addressing the Ohio Legislature at Columbus, on his way to Washington for the Inaugural, he said:

I cannot but know what you all know, that without a name, perhaps without a reason why I should have a name, there has fallen upon me a task such as did not rest even upon the father of his country.

Lincoln never posed as a great man, even after he was inaugurated. It is doubtful if a more humble individual ever assumed so great a responsibility as rested upon Lincoln. In no field of Lincoln's administration activities did his humble spirit reveal itself more vividly than in military circles. His attitude no doubt was often less resolute than it should have been, as he could not adopt the unyielding attitude which may be necessary to enforce discipline and demonstrate authority. In a letter to General Hooker, who was complaining about General Halleck's attitude, Lincoln wrote with reference to former advice he had submitted:

Quite possibly I was wrong both then and now.

He continued this letter offering his assistance in this manner:

All I ask of you is that you will be in such a mood that we can get into our action the best cordial judgment of yourself and General Halleck, with my poor mite added, if indeed he and you shall think it entitled to any consideration at all.

To General Grant he wrote:

I now wish to make the personal acknowledgment that you were right and I was wrong.

As late as 1864, when the policies of Lincoln seemed to be succeeding he was reluctant to admit that his own personal efforts had accomplished the objectives which had been attained. He wrote these words to a correspondent in Kentucky:

I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.

James Russell Lowell, in the closing lines of the Commemoration Ode, has interpreted the spirit of Lincoln's humility in these words:

**Our children shall behold his fame,
The kindly-earnest, brave, forseeing man.
Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame,
New birth of our new soil, the first American.**