

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S CHOICE OF SPIRITUAL SONGS

Praise, as it finds expression in the singing of spiritual songs, was a vehicle of appreciation which Abraham Lincoln seemed unable to use. Although sensible to the beauty of harmony, being more or less a poet himself, it is not known that he ever attempted to use his voice in either private or group singing. Lincoln's boyhood associate, Dennis Hanks, wrote "Abe youst to try to sing pore old Ned But he never could sing much."

One of the Newhall sisters, who belonged to a company of singers that travelled over Illinois giving concerts, said that Lincoln told her, "I never sang in my life," and he intimated that he could not sound a note.

The question is often asked, "What was Abraham Lincoln's favorite hymn?" The Thanksgiving season seems to offer the proper atmosphere to review what little is known about his interest in devotional music.

Of course, one immediately thinks of "Mortality" in connection with this theme, as the favorite poem of the President, who was often credited with its authorship. As it was not set to music until shortly after his death, we cannot feel that Lincoln associated it with hymnology.\*

### "Adam's Mate"

Strange to say, the first poem of any length which has been credited to Abraham Lincoln was, in reality, a religious folk song called "Adam and Eve's Wedding Song." It is very doubtful if Lincoln was the author but like the poem "Mortality," the song has so long been associated with Lincoln that the authorship has been assumed. Mr. John Lair in *Stand By*, has made an interesting discovery with reference to this song. He found a copy of it set to music in an old hymn book entitled *Social Harp*, published by John J. McCurry in 1858. Mr. Lair states that there is no date given to the hymn and that the authorship is credited to Mr. McCurry, himself.

In his biography of Abraham Lincoln, Herndon, referring to this same hymn wrote, "In 1826 Abe's sister Sarah was married to Aaron Grigsby, and at the wedding the Lincoln family sang a song composed in honor of the event by Abe himself." It is quite likely that Herndon was wrong in the name of the author, although the song may have been used at the wedding at the suggestion of Lincoln.

The title of the song as it appears in the *Social Harp* is called "Adam's Mate" which differs considerably from the title as used by Herndon. There are also some slight variations in the text, indicating that the Herndon and the hymnal versions used different sources.

### Miscellaneous Hymns

In the Herndon collection of manuscripts, there was also a letter written by Dennis Hanks in 1865 in which he comments on the religious music of the Lincolns in the early Indiana days. He says that the only hymn book they possessed was Dupee's old song book, which was used by the old Predestinarian Baptists in 1820. Hanks remembered the titles of two hymns which were favorites: "O When Shall I see Jesus and Reign with Him Above" and "How Tedious and Tasteless the Hour."

James Grant Wilson in some reminiscences which he prepared in 1909, recalled a visit which he made to the White House once with Isaac N. Arnold, a member of

Congress from Chicago. In the course of their conversation with Mr. Lincoln, the President expressed his admiration for a poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes called "The Last Leaf." He also remarked that his favorite hymns were "Rock of Ages" and "Father What Ere of Earthly Bliss Thy Soverign Will Design."

### "Your Mission"

The United States Christian Commission held its third anniversary meeting in the Hall of the House of Representatives on Sunday evening, January 19, 1865. The Secretary of State, Mr. Seward, presided and President Lincoln attended the ceremonies. There were six formal addresses, also special music consisting of the singing of the "Hallelujah Chorus" and a solo "Your Mission" by Mr. Philip Phillips, of Cincinnati.

The chairman of the commission, Mr. George H. Steward, has made this signed statement referring to the original program which Mr. Lincoln had in his possession. In commenting on the souvenir years later, he said:

"This is the original Programme used by President Lincoln in the Hall of the House of Representatives, Washington on the occasion of the third anniversary of the U. S. Christian Convention January 29th, 1865 when Mr. Philip Phillips sang 'Your Mission.' At the close of the hymn the President wrote on the other side with his own hand a request that it repeat which was done between 11 & 12 o'clock P. M. Geo. H. Steward."

There are two facsimiles extant of the note supposed to have been written in Lincoln's hand on the back of the programs. One is evidently a copy of the original. Just the name Lincoln is signed to one while the other is signed A. Lincoln. One spells the name of the singer Philips and the other spells it Phillips. The wording of the note which is the same in both instances follows:

"Near the close let us have 'Your Mission' repeated by Mr. Philips. Don't say I called for it.

"Lincoln"

The hymn was written by Mrs. Ellen Gates and the last two stanzas which follow were especially appreciated by Lincoln.

If you cannot in the conflict  
Prove yourself a soldier true—  
If, where fire and smoke are thickest,  
There's no work for you to do;  
When the battle field is silent,  
You can go with careful tread,  
You can bear away the wounded,  
You can cover up the dead.

Do not then stand idly waiting  
For some greater work to do,  
Fortune is a lazy goddess—  
She will never come to you,  
Go and toil in any vineyard,  
Do not fear to do or dare;  
If you want a field of labor,  
You can find it anywhere.

\*(See LINCOLN LORE No. 417)