

LINCOLN LORE

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CONTEMPORARY LINCOLN CARICATURES

The Hallowe'en atmosphere usually recalls to Lincoln students the grotesque figures which were drawn of Abraham Lincoln by contemporary cartoonists during the political campaigns in which he was the central figure.

Nowhere in the annals of American politics have the cartoonists found such an acceptable model as they immediately recognized in Abraham Lincoln. He had everything that these crude artists could desire, and they may never have his equal again.

His Personal Appearance

Lincoln was six feet four inches tall, about eight inches taller than the average man. This was his most distinguishing mark, and along with it he was "lean of flesh" which of course accentuated his great height. Long legs and long arms were attached to this long body which was crowned with a head of hair that was ever unruly, and at the other extremity were enormous feet.

His profile also was unique with its large Roman nose, deep set eyes, and an overhanging underlip. A mole on the right side of his face was not overlooked. His ears were very large and the angle at which they were attached to his skull invited attention.

Lincoln had coarse, wiry hair which was usually uncombed and for a time he parted it on one side of his head, then changed to the other, and at other times it appears as if he did not part it at all. When he started to grow whiskers shortly after his election in 1860, the cartoonists' joy was complete for he was accordingly the perfect model.

Some of Lincoln's accessories were apparently made to order for the cartoonist. His clothes were not always cut in the latest fashion and he had carried a big umbrella once upon a time. The ever-present, exceedingly tall hat and the proverbial shawl also contributed to the artist's conception of Father Abraham.

Even Lincoln's given name, Abraham, with all its Biblical significance was a rich and fruitful source for many ideas in the fertile imagination of the picture makers.

His Occupations

When John Hanks carried into the Republican Convention at Decatur, Illinois, some rails which Abraham Lincoln split and the poster attached with the inscription, "The Rail Candidate," all was set for the most sensational political publicity which the nation had ever seen.

The rail seemed to be a symbol of Lincoln himself. "Thin as a rail" was the cartoonist's idea of him and only five rails, one for body, four for legs and arms, were needed to present "A 'Rail' Old Western Gentleman." He was immediately brought forth riding a rail and introduced as "The Rail Candidate." Rails were used in every imaginable way for the numerous caricatures. In the field of athletics a rail served as a horizontal bar and as a baseball bat. It was also used in Lincoln hands as a battering ram in "Storming the Castle", and as a mighty lever illustrating "The Power of the Rail."

Rails with which to build political platforms, rails which observed "The nigger in the woodpile", rails which were burdensome, and rails which paved the way to the White House also had their place in the cartoons of the political campaign of 1860. While his experiences as a river man, soldier, lawyer, and so on were not overlooked, it was Lincoln the Railsplitter that caught the fancy of the cartoonist.

Current Events

In the midst of the first political campaign, Charles Blondin, the French acrobat, was making his appearance in America and causing a sensation wherever he went. On August 19, 1860, with a man upon his back, he walked a tight rope stretched across Niagara Falls. Immediately the cartoonists presented Lincoln as an acrobat walking a tight rope with a negro on his back and of course a rail as his balancing pole. Other burlesque presentations based on circus performances featured the versatile Lincoln.

Personnel

Of course there was associated with Lincoln in these early cartoons a group of sympathizers and opponents. Lincoln's man Friday was the negro, representing the ever-present troublesome question of slavery. Introducing the black man into the cartoon story created tremendous political disturbances.

The opposition candidates in the first campaign naturally came in for their share of ridicule, especially the Little Giant, Stephen A. Douglas, another character who was the cartoonist's delight. Twelve inches shorter than Lincoln and with a waist line about twelve inches greater, these two Presidential candidates made a most remarkable pair.

The Inauguration Trip

An episode which occurred early in 1861 while the President was enroute to Washington overshadowed even the inauguration in the eyes of the cartoonist. An alleged attempt on Lincoln's life made it necessary to change his plans for arrival at Washington, and the cartoons which visualized his secret approach to the Capitol worked the artists overtime.

It is likely that none of the cartoons issued up to this time brought so much real pain to Lincoln as the pictures of his arrival in Washington incognito.

Political Issues

In the campaign cartoons for 1864 the same Lincoln was available, but he had acquired a beard and the railsplitter appeal had given way to the symbolizing of political issues. The negro remained very much in evidence, but the Constitution, the Union, and especially the division of the boundaries between North and South were played up.

There seems to be a more serious tone in the cartoons and at the same time a more vicious undercurrent in the themes portrayed. As might be expected, Jefferson Davis was often the figure placed over against Lincoln, although Little Mac, Lincoln's political opponent, was not neglected. Davis and McClellan were not so fine subjects for the cartoonist as the Little Giant.

Lincoln's Humor

One new feature which was woven into the cartoons of 1864 was the story-telling proclivities of the President. Already famous as a humorist, Lincoln was made as ridiculous as many of his stories, and many of the cartoons were vicious attacks on his character and his administrative policies. Lincoln's visit to the Antietam Battlefield, as visualized by the opposition artists, was perhaps the most offensive—to the American people—of all the Lincoln cartoons released.

The English cartoonists had not been idle during Lincoln's administration, and *Punch* had been unduly offensive, especially after the cotton embargo. The vicious cartoons are now forgotten, but the *Punch* tribute to Lincoln by Tom Taylor will live forever.