

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 659

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

November 24, 1941

WILSON'S CENTENNIAL TRIBUTE TO LINCOLN

There are many remarkable tributes to Abraham Lincoln which have been obscured by the fact that fame and renown had not caught up with the composers previous to the delivery of the messages in question. Anything such as one has to say after his own preeminence has been assured is preserved with great care, but speeches made preliminary to reaching this pinnacle, often pass unnoticed.

Dr. Woodrow Wilson, president of Princeton University, delivered an address in Chicago on February 12, 1909, in commemoration of the Centennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth, which is a most remarkable presentation of Lincoln as "a man of the people." The larger part of the address follows:

"It was a very full century that has gone by since Abraham Lincoln was born, a century crowded for all the world, but particularly for America, with significant events which men could never turn back from nor forget. And Lincoln seems for us the epitome of much that it contained.

* * * *

"The man Lincoln had no special gift. He was of general use. He was like some great instrument of humanity. Wherever life touched him he spoke back its meaning, gave forth fire to kindle its life. Each power slumbered in him and waited to be awakened. He seemed slow of development, waited upon circumstances to quicken him, but always responded upon whatever scale the challenge came—seemed a great reservoir of living water which could be freely quaffed, but not exhausted. There was something native, natural rather than singular, and wholly inexhaustible about him. His nature suggested always a richness that had only been partly drawn upon, and his life ended as if unfinished, fuller of promise than when it began. His character stands colossal there amidst that troubled history of war and disunion, like one of Rodin's only half molded figures, revealing less than it suggests, only in part disclosed, shrouded in lines that lead the imagination off into infinity and very great conjecture.

"And so it is deeply difficult to conceive the man as a whole or to convey an impression of him, marked by any emphasis of distinguishing gifts and traits. We speak of him as characteristically honest, but his honesty does not seem a special trait, it is only part of his broad and open humanity, hardly more than a manifestation of his large and ample nature, which was without narrowness or pettiness and, therefore, without deceit.

* * * *

"Such was the man, with always a large way about him, natural and unaffected in his approach, not strenuous to be about any particular business, but inevitably roused whenever any matter of vital consequence touched his mind or invited his thought to exploration. A very normal man, with very normal gifts, but all upon a great scale, all knit together in loose and natural form, like the great frame in which he moved and dwelt.

"There was, of course, the special flavor of American about Lincoln. He belonged to the now fast disappearing type of the frontier. He was bred where states were forming. There seems something specially 'native' about him, therefore, nationally flavored, locally distinctive. His origin could never be mistaken. He could have been born and

matured only in America, was redolent of its soil, suggested always its condition and its forms of natural life.

* * * *

"And yet, however, unlike the conditions of our time may be to the conditions of his, it is still true that men such as he was, if they should arise again to renew the integrity and development of the nation, can be derived and matured only from the common stock, only from the stock which no particular experience has specialized and no particular interest set apart. Lincoln was in the profoundest sense a man of the people, and it is safe to predict that all men bred after his wholesome kind, and serviceable for the common use of humanity, will be, like him, derived from the unspecialized stock of the nation.

"What is a 'man of the people', judged by the standard and example of this man? He is a man with his rootage deep among the people of no class or specialized kind, but lifted above the narrowness and limitations of view of the mass by the insight and study which have enabled him to see what they did not see, and the genius which has fitted him to speak, not from them as if still one of them, but for them as if released from what holds them back from his leadership.

"A man of the people is a man who sees as the people do and not as the man of a class or a profession sees. He thinks, not in the terms of any particular interest, but in the terms of the general life about him. He is a man disengaged from his environment, free to move in whatever direction his nature impels him, unsubdued by the stuff of the life he lives in, seeing not one thing but many things, lending an ear to many voices and heeding them, not as if they were the disordered voices of a mob, but as if they were the concurrent voices of a chorus; a man to whom they are all familiar voices, conveying many meanings which are really only one.

* * * *

"God send us such men again! We are confused by a war of interests, a clash of classes, a competition of powers, an effort at conquest and restraint and the great forces which war and toil among us can be guided and reconciled only by some man who is truly a man of the people, as Lincoln was, not caught in the toils of any special interest, united by wide sympathy with many kinds of men, familiar with many aspects of life, and led, through many changes, to a personal experience which unites him with the common mass. He must not be too hot or intense, must be large and genial, and salted with humor, but as certain and definite as the veriest tool of precision in his penetration and in his exposition of all that he sees and knows, a man who speaks as fearlessly as he looks upon the affairs about him, and who never withholds himself from any use or declines the challenge of any call of duty; a man of universal sympathy and universal use, whom few men can approach in power, but to whom all men can feel akin, and with whom all men can dare to be familiar.

"And it is men of Lincoln's type, who feel the universal impulse and struggle, through whom it toils and by whom it is directed with a masterly of pilotage which no man can learn from books.

"Add to this the training which Lincoln gave himself, and the genius to see and speak the whole as he saw it, and the deep feeling of the poet, and you have Lincoln, the man whom today we celebrate and to whom we look back with the hope that as we gaze upon him we may recover some breath of the toilsome and heroic age in which he wrought and triumphed."