

# 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 673

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

March 2, 1942

## DRAMATIZING ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Readers of *Lincoln Lore* have seldom, if ever, been invited to review personal reminiscence of the editor. This issue, however, falls within the scope of such a classification and is submitted with an apology.

On the evening of February 22 I was on a father and son program in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and attempted to utilize the atmosphere created by this anniversary day as a proper environment in which to speak on the contributions which George Washington, the Father of the Country, made to the nation's most illustrious son, Abraham Lincoln. Time consciousness, given so much emphasis on this occasion, gave way two days later to place consciousness, as my itinerary took me into Berks County, Pennsylvania, where three generations of Abraham Lincoln ancestors resided and where his grandfather, for whom he was named, was born.

After a day spent in old records dating back nearly 200 years and rich in Lincoln historical data, it was with some degree of interest that I observed that one of the movies at Reading was showing an old picture produced about a dozen years ago, featuring the life of Abraham Lincoln. Being somewhat influenced by the historical atmosphere in which I had been working, I was very sure that I was in a mood to appreciate the showing of this Lincoln film.

Although I remembered having once seen the picture a decade ago, some of the details of the presentation had been confused in my mind, so I was pleased to have the opportunity to again study the work directed by a famous playwright and the interpretation of the character of Lincoln by a celebrated actor. It was with little significance that I observed the other feature picture of the evening, was entitled, "New Wine."

Although conscious of the fact that historians are usually unduly critical of pictures which attempt to portray some historical episode, I found myself at the very beginning of the film especially disturbed at my inability to discover anything about the picture that was either authentic or inspirational. The Ann Rutledge romance, although pure fiction, contributed nothing whatever to an appreciation of the character of Lincoln, but developed into a sort of a farce, which came to a climax with Lincoln at the bedside of his dying sweetheart. The audience shed no tears over the tragedy but the snickers and merriment audible throughout the theatre gave evidence of the utter failure of the players to interpret the scene.

Thinking I might have been too harsh in my judgment of the Rutledge episode I have been somewhat vindicated in my conclusions by the discovery of an excerpt from a review made at the time the picture first appeared. The critic commented:

"Ann Rutledge in the film and voice of this play is a little baby-face blond softy who had no business in that rough frontier country, and most certainly did not represent the sort of strong character who would read law to the young Lincoln while he split rails. I don't believe a big, rawboned Abe Lincoln would ever fall in love with such a doll with a child-like voice . . . When the audience giggled and tittered at every scene in which Lincoln and Ann Rutledge had their best parts, that is the scenes which should have been best, I couldn't laugh with them. I felt a deep personal hurt that one of my favorite characters had been made ridiculous by miscasting."

This reviewer expressed my own feeling exactly, except it was Lincoln whom I felt had been made ridiculous throughout the whole affair.

As the play moved into the atmosphere of Springfield, Illinois I expected to observe a more appreciative presentation of the character, who for so many years was the first citizen of the community. The romance with Mary Todd, as portrayed by the artists, was, if possible, more grotesque than the Rutledge episode. In a dance scene Lincoln is made to appear like a common fool while the climax of the first courting of Mary finds Lincoln a refugee from certain alleged wedding ceremonies, when it is well known that such an episode never occurred.

Even as the play approached the more serious aspects of Lincoln's career there was no time when I felt I was observing Lincoln as I have come to know him and I am in entire agreement with that part of an article appearing in the *Literary Digest* of September 20, 1930 which reviews the portrayal of Lincoln by the leading character of the play in these words:

"I believe he could have improved upon his facial make-up. For at no time from the beginning to the conclusion of the story do his eyes express the weariness which was Lincoln's. Youth—and I thought just a trace of Broadway—showed through the actor's paint and powder." I think I could go just one step further than the reviewer and say that at no time did the actor seem to be the Lincoln we have come to know in portraying any of the more dominant traits and mannerisms which we have come to associate with him.

One reviewer was so disgusted with the casting of Ann Rutledge that he really felt reconciled to her death. I am not sure but what I felt the same way about Abraham Lincoln when I observed him in the White House scenes, a character who often seemed to be the weakest personality in the group, and I felt somewhat relieved when Lincoln was dead and freed from further humiliation.

At the close of the Abraham Lincoln picture I was thoroughly depressed and fully anticipated from the name, "New Wine," that the other feature would be a cheap comedy. I observed, however, from the preliminaries and cast of characters, it was to be another biographical production portraying the struggles for recognition of Franz Schubert, the famous musician.

Schubert was a Moravian peasant boy who lived contemporary with Lincoln and about twelve years his senior. When Lincoln was born, Schubert was at school in Vienna. The great musician died when but 31 years old, the same year that Lincoln first saw the New Orleans slave market. Yet these thirty-one years have been vividly brought back through excellent casting and sympathetic acting, until one felt upon viewing the picture that Schubert is alive again and will keep on composing through all time.

Beethoven may have considered Schubert, "New Wine," in the field of music, but the cineograph presentation of his life so far excelled the Lincoln picture which I had just viewed previously, that it was certainly "Old Wine" in comparison. In the light of the glorified Austrian musician, Franz Schubert, I saw the possibilities of some day viewing a more sympathetic interpretation of the historical Abraham Lincoln, the personification of American Democracy.