

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 696

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

August 10, 1942

MATTHEW B. BRADY, 1823-1896

The fame of Matthew B. Brady was recognized as early as 1863 when it was stated by one leading publication, "When the history of American photography comes to be written, Brady more than any other man, will be entitled to rank as its father," and in further comment the periodical stated, "If any man deserves credit for accumulating materials for history, that man is M. B. Brady."

Little information is available about the parentage and early life of Matthew B. Brady. It is said he himself did not know what name the initial "B" in his signature stood for. He was born in 1823 in Warren County, New York and as a child had some artistic inclinations.

It is difficult to learn just how Brady happened to direct his attention to photography, although it is fairly well established that Samuel F. B. Morse was primarily responsible for such encouragement as he received at the beginning of the enterprise. Brady, a boy but sixteen years old, interested in art, seeking employment in New York met Mr. Morse just after Morse returned in May 1839 from an eleven month sojourn in England. Morse had met Daguerre just three months before in Europe and had learned of his photographic process. Morse was without funds at this time, however, and experienced the most severe financial reverses of his career at the time photography was invented. Morse states that following his return from Europe he had to borrow money to pay for his meals. Referring to this period one of Morse's biographers said, "His only support was derived from a few students that he taught art, and occasional portraits he was commissioned to paint."

One might raise the question whether or not Brady was one of these art students who helped to support Morse in this period when the inventor was in "almost abject poverty." It is also interesting to note that Brady was but nineteen years old at the time he set up his daguerreotypy studio in New York in 1842, the same year that Morse had been awarded \$30,000 by Congress to carry on his experiments in telegraphy. One wonders if possibly Morse, now in better circumstances, did not help to finance his youthful art pupil, Brady, in the photographic business.

Brady's first gallery was located at the corner of Fulton and Broadway streets, but later moved to 359 Broadway where most of his New York work was done. This early studio was in reality a "gallery" and it was so called. People who had no intention of having their picture made, visited the gallery as sight-seers with as

much freedom as they viewed an exhibit in a museum. "The last new portrait at Brady's" was as interesting a news item as the announcement of some rare relic acquired by the New York Historical Society.

Harper's Weekly, more than any other publication, was responsible for allowing Brady to share with the public the results of his photographic work. This illustrated weekly stated in the issue of November 14, 1863 that nine-tenths of all the portraits they published came from the Brady studio, and further commented, "For the last twenty years there has hardly been a celebrity in this country who has not been photographed here."

With the coming of the "wet plate process" Brady brought to this country from Great Britain in 1855 an expert in this method of photographer's art by the name of Alexander Gardner. It is difficult to learn just what the business relationship was between Brady and Gardner. The Washington studio was opened in conjunction with Gardner in 1859. Two years later when the war began Brady fitted out a studio on wheels and went with the troops to record the history of the war in pictures. The excessive cost, however, made it necessary for him to return to Washington in 1862 and he did not again follow the troops until Grant's final campaign.

There is an account in the *Cleveland Leader* for October 1, 1885 of an interview in which Brady was asked "When did you first take President Lincoln?" This was Brady's reply: "It was before his election, when he was coming through New York, on his way to Washington. I remember Lincoln, he was so tall, gaunt, and angular, and his neck was so long that I had great trouble in making a natural picture. When I got him before the camera, I asked if I might not arrange his collar, and with that he began to pull it up.

"'Ah,' he said, 'I see you want to shorten my neck.'

"'That's just it,' said I, and we both laughed. The picture taken at this time had a wide sale, and Lincoln used to speak of me afterward as the man who made him acquainted with the people."

Evidently Brady was referring to the Cooper Institute portrait, although he was somewhat confused about the time the picture was taken and the destination of Mr. Lincoln. There appears to have been six different sittings which Lincoln gave Brady and on each occasion, with the possible exception of the first one just mentioned, several views were made. They

might be tabulated chronologically as follows:

1860, February 27. Speaker at Cooper Institute, New York.

1861, February 23. President-elect upon arrival in Washington.

1861, Sixteenth President. Shortly after first inauguration.

1862, October 2. Commander in chief at Antietam battlefield.

1863, Signer of the Emancipation Proclamation.

1864, February 9. Candidate for reelection.

1864, April 20. Chief Executive in White House.

Although Brady made at least a total of forty-three negatives of Lincoln during the seven sittings noted, only one of the prints has become known as "The Brady Lincoln." It was taken on February 9, 1864 and appears on the five-dollar bill. It was considered by Robert Lincoln as the best likeness of his father.

Brady made a great financial sacrifice to contribute to posterity the 3500 or more pictures he had taken of Civil War scenes. It is said that he expended more than \$100,000 in this effort. When the panic of 1873 struck the country he was easy prey and many of his creditors seized his negatives for debt. Two years later the government purchased the 2000 war pictures he was able to preserve for which they paid him \$25,000, although with this fund he was able to again open a gallery and for nearly twenty years conducted it with more or less success, however he never succeeded in capturing the preeminence he had attained in the earlier days.

An article by James Edward Kelly in *Recruiting News* for March 1939 gives an interesting description of Brady. One who knew him well describes him at sixty-one years of age (1884) as follows: "He stood about 5 feet, 7 or 8 inches, and was more slight in build than I expected to see him; had strong black, curly hair, beginning to show tinges of gray; a bold and powerful head, beaked nose, flowing mustache and long imperial. Through all of his life he was troubled with weak eyes, and was wearing delicately tinted violet glasses. Brady was square-shouldered and full chested, erect and active; was well dressed and talked with ease and fluency."

Note: This is the first of a series of biographical sketches on the ten persons selected by the Foundation Advisory Group for enrollment on the Lincoln Recognition Roster.