

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 697

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

August 17, 1942

THE SOBRIQUET—"HONEST ABE"

Some weeks ago there appeared a widely distributed article, released through the Associated Press, claiming that "the famous sobriquet 'Honest Abe' was put in print only after his death." The statement was given some credence due to the fact that the discovery originated with "University of Chicago Research Workers who were engaged in compiling the Dictionary of American English." The press dispatch states that Lincoln's friends used the term in conversation but that the title did not appear in print until after April 15, 1865.

In commenting on this claim there is no attempt made to discover the earliest time that the term "Honest Abe" appeared in print as this would involve a tremendous amount of reading and searching. The purpose of this bulletin is to reveal that Lincoln was not only referred to in print as "Honest Abe" long before his death, but that the sobriquet was widely used on all types of 1860 campaign publicity; and mentioned in print as early as the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858.

Mr. A. H. Chapman, who married a granddaughter of Abraham Lincoln's step-mother and knew the President well, was asked why he was called "Honest Abe." Chapman replied in part that in his law practice he was noted for "his unswerving honesty," and then gave this illustration to support his conclusion:

"I remember one case of his decided honest trait of character. It was a case in which he was for the defendant. Satisfied of his client's innocence, it depended mainly on one witness. That witness told on the stand under oath what Abe knew to be a lie, and no one else knew. When he arose to plead the case, he said; 'Gentlemen, I depended on this witness to clear my client. He has lied. I ask that no attention be paid his testimony. Let his words be stricken out, if my case fails, I do not wish to win in this way.' His scorn of a lie touched the jury; he laid his case before them magnificently, skilfully, masterly, and won in spite of the lie against him. From such work came his 'Honest Abe'."

There are those who believe the term "Honest Abe" originated as early as 1837 in Springfield when Lincoln settled his account with the government inspector for the money taken in while he was a postmaster. Others feel that still earlier two business transactions while he was in the store at New Salem were responsible for his nickname, as he walked some distance to reimburse a woman whom he unwittingly overcharged, and also delivered merchandise to a customer whom he learned he had given short weight.

It would appear that outside of Lincoln's circle of Illinois friends that the name "Honest Abe" had little use until the Lincoln-Douglas debates and then it was but one of several nicknames applied to Lincoln in an attempt to match the sobriquet "The Little Giant."

A reporter of the debates at Jonesboro, Illinois presented the result of the speeches in the senatorial race made by Lincoln and Douglas in the form of scoring heats in a horse race:

"Old Abe" entered by the people 1-1-1

"Little Doug" entered by S. A. D. 0-0-0"

Douglas was called by the opposition press "Little Dug," "Short Boy Senator," and "The Little Dodger." It might be of some interest to learn how Douglas is said to have acquired his title, "The Little Giant." The Peoria (Ill.) Transcript, for September 13, 1858, gives the following version:

"It is not generally known how Stephen A. Douglas received the sobriquet of 'Little Giant.' He is indebted to Joe Smith, the Mormon Prophet, for first applying it to him. It was elicited during an exciting discussion in the Illinois Legislature upon the Mormon difficulties, in which Douglas cut a conspicuous figure in the defence of the saints, when their great leader, in giving vent to his unbounded admiration for Douglas called him the 'Little Giant'."

It was necessary to find some term to apply to Lincoln to set off against "Little Doug" or "The Little Giant," and while "Old Abe" seems to have struck a more popular chord, these appellations were also used on banners and news references to Mr. Lincoln: "The Giant Killer," "Long Abe," "Tall Sucker." One of the opposition papers summed up the attempt to find a name for Lincoln as follows: "Abraham alias Old Abe, alias Abe, alias Spot Lincoln."

It is the same Peoria Transcript of about a month later, October 18, 1858 that we have one of the early references to "Honest Abe Lincoln" in this notation with reference to the debates just past:

"We predict that Douglas, giant though he has the reputation of being, will never again consent to meet honest Abe Lincoln in joint discussion."

Apparently the general use of the term "Honest Abe" was due more directly to Lincoln's straight forward and earnest manner in presenting his arguments during the debates than to any historic episodes of his early days. By November 11, 1858 *The Chicago Daily Democrat* suggests that, "It is not only in his own state that Honest Old Abe is respected."

While the term "Honest Abe" might have been used occasionally during the debates it was in the political campaign of 1860 that it was utilized along with "The Rail Splitter" as an appellation woven into song and story about "Honest Abe of the West." The former title appeared in the *Wide Awake Vocalist*, a campaign song book published in 1860—quickly thumbing through the book these lines were observed in different songs:

"'Old Abe' he is honest and truthful.

"Honest Lincoln's our watchword.

"And visit Honest Lincoln in his western home.

"There is an old hero and they called him Honest Abe.

"Honest Old Abe is our choice.

"We're for Honest Old Abe Lincoln."

It was in the campaign of 1860 that the sobriquet "Honest Abe" was displayed to greatest advantage, especially political posters and badges carried the insignia. A political rally at Edwardsville, Illinois for July 7, 1860 used this line on a broadside, "Rally for Honest Old Abe The Workingman's Candidate." A campaign ribbon badge bore this inscription: "Peoples Badge/Lincoln/Honest Old Abe/The People's Choice." An advertisement in the August 8, 1860 issue of the *Boston Transcript* for a Lincoln campaign biography refers to "Honest Old Abe." *Harpers Weekly* for October 27, 1860 presents a cartoon with this inscription: "So you say you are well acquainted with the illustrious Abraham: Honest Old Abe—Eh?"

It is difficult to understand why any one or any group of people qualified to do historical research work could escape running into the term "Honest Abe" if at all familiar with the 1860 campaign literature. To assume that the sobriquet "Honest Abe" did not appear in print until after he was dead rather indirectly implies that possibly he was not so honest while he lived.