

LINCOLN LORE

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TEACHING AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY

The Fall opening of the institutions of learning has made every worthy educator restudy his own contributions to the American youth who have come under his influence. In the light of what is now happening, instructors in the social sciences must feel, either, some degree of pride in their accomplishments, or very much humiliated by the lack of patriotic sentiments which they may have failed to instill in their pupils. While there has been a smattering of American biography taught in courses featuring history, government, and literature, there has been no general, standardized plan of study dealing primarily and directly with biographical data.

On the ceiling of the governor's reception room in the state capitol building at Lincoln, Nebraska, one may observe inscribed in ornate medallions the names of these six outstanding American figures, Washington, (military leader), Lincoln, (humanitarian), Jefferson, (statesman), Hamilton, (financier), Marshall, (jurist), Franklin, (inventor). Is there not ample source material available about these characters of diversified accomplishments for an inspirational course in American biography?

There has been at least one serious attempt to attack this problem of teaching biography and inasmuch as it has passed through the experimental period, it should be observed with some degree of interest. It is a course in Lincoln Biography offered at Lincoln Memorial University, located near Harrogate, Tennessee.

Recently in conversation with Professor Gerald R. McMurtry, who teaches this class in Biography, the editor of *Lincoln Lore* gathered some interesting facts about this contribution to the social studies. The course has now been offered continuously for five years and although an elective, it has enrolled each semester many of the advanced students of the University. Three hours a week are allotted to this course and credits gained by pursuing it are accepted in the most conservative institutions of higher learning.

The course is a lecture period with outlines required and supplemental reading assigned. Essays are requested on such subjects as Lincoln's qualifications as a lawyer, Lincoln and the Constitution, etc. Certain text books are designated which reveal the scope of the subject which begins with Lincoln's ancestry and concludes with Lincoln's place in the hall of fame. The textbooks used by Prof. McMurtry for the different periods of Lincoln's life are as follows:

- English Ancestry—Barton, *The Lineage of Lincoln*
- Colonial Lincolns—Tarbell, *In the Footsteps of the Lincolns*
- Parentage—Warren, *Lincoln's Parentage and Childhood*
- Indiana Years—Vannest, *Lincoln, the Hoosier*
- Illinois Years—Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858*
- Lawyer—Woldman, *Lawyer Lincoln*
- Politician—Shaw, *His Path to the Presidency*
- Statesman—Barton, *The Presidential Years*

While it is the opinion of Prof. McMurtry that some of these texts are inadequate, nevertheless they seemed to meet the requirements of the course more satisfactory, than some of the better known discussions in these fields. While modesty apparently prevented the instructor to say very much about the acceptance of the course, it is very evident from the reminiscences of some of his students who have taken it, that it is one of the inspirational courses that is remembered after school days are over. Fundamentally it is a course for the making of better Americans.

This year a second university also bearing the name of the Emancipator, Lincoln College, at Lincoln, Illinois is

offering a course on Lincoln biography. Independent from the choice of books by Prof. McMurtry, the institution has provided the following texts for students' reference work in the Lincoln biography course.

- Barton—*The Lineage of Lincoln*
- Warren—*Lincoln's Parentage and Childhood*
- Vannest—*Lincoln, the Hoosier*
- Thomas—*Lincoln's New Salem*
- Angle—*Here I Have Lived*
- Whitney—*Life on the Circuit*
- Woldman—*Lawyer Lincoln*
- Seitz—*Lincoln, the Politician*
- Sparks—*The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*
- Baringer—*Lincoln's Rise to Power*
- Sandburg—*Storm over the Land*
- Lewis—*Myths after Lincoln*

Dr. William D. Coleman, president of the College, has advised the editor of *Lincoln Lore* that since the above list of books was printed others of equal value for reference work has been called to his attention. He also states that cash prizes of \$25.00, \$15.00 and \$10.00 respectively are available to those who excel in the writing of Lincoln essays in this course.

It would seem that now is the appropriate time to launch these special study classes as many great universities are in possession of outstanding Lincoln collections. The following twenty-two institutions have Lincoln collections of note and would have ample research facilities to establish a course in Lincoln biography:

- Allegheny College—Pennsylvania
- Berea College—Kentucky
- Brown University—Rhode Island
- Butler College—Indiana
- Carleton College—Minnesota
- Chicago University—Illinois
- Colby College—Maine
- Drew University—New Jersey
- Harvard University—Massachusetts
- Illinois University—Illinois
- Indiana University—Indiana
- Iowa University—Iowa
- Lincoln Memorial University—Tennessee
- Mills College—California
- Santa Barbara State College—California
- Syracuse University—New York
- University of Michigan—Michigan
- Upsala College—New Jersey
- Washington State University—Washington
- Washington University—Missouri
- Western Reserve University—Ohio
- Western State Teachers College—Michigan

Fifty years ago Woodrow Wilson, president of an outstanding university and later President of the United States, contributed an article to *Forum Magazine* under the caption, "A Calendar of Great Americans." After discussing the certain characteristics of other national statesmen, he concluded, "But Lincoln was the supreme American of our history . . . what a marvelous composit figure he is! The whole country is summed up in him."

Wilson felt that more than any other figure, Lincoln personified the country, and to read his biography was much like reading the history of the country. How much more interesting certain periods of our history could be made by using biographical approaches.

Thirty-four years ago, Charles W. Fairbanks, a former vice-president of the United States, put forth some effort to have a biography of Lincoln offered as a course of study in our schools as a personal interpretation of Democracy. Now, if never before, such a course is needed, if the ideals of our fathers are to be preserved.