

LINCOLN LORE

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PRELIMINARIES TO THE LOST SPEECH

The quest for the Lost Speech, delivered at Bloomington in 1856, has in a large measure obscured the much more important preliminary episodes leading up to the occasion of Abraham Lincoln's most captivating oration. Regardless of the power of his oratory, which hypnotized even the reporters who were supposed to make detailed reports of the proceedings, Lincoln's part in the deliberations of the group which arranged for the Bloomington Convention, probably was of more far reaching influence than the Lost Speech itself.

A large number of newspaper editors in Illinois were lined up with the Anti-Nebraska movement, and a few of them joined in sending out the following call for a conference: "All editors in Illinois opposed to the Nebraska bill are requested to meet in convention at Decatur on the 22nd of February next, for the purpose of making arrangements for the organization of the Anti-Nebraska forces in this state for the coming contest."

Abraham Lincoln, who had been awakened from his political lethargy by the Nebraska proceedings, was given a special invitation to attend the Decatur Conference and address the editors. The atmosphere in which the initial meeting was held, with reference to both the time and place elements, must have put Abraham Lincoln in very much of a reminiscent mood. The meeting was called for February 22nd, which date in itself was closely allied with July 4th, as a reminder of the revolutionary struggle and the patriotism of the founders. Years before Lincoln had revealed in a Washington's birthday speech his great admiration for the Father of the Country, and the influence exerted over him by Weems' *Life of Washington*, which he read as a small boy, is well-known to every Lincoln student.

Not only the holiday on which the conference was held, contributed to Lincoln's interest in the proceedings, but the place, Decatur, called to mind his first visit to that town at the time his father and family migrated from Indiana in 1830, stopping there while enroute to the site they had selected for their home, eight miles north of the city.

A few weeks later while visiting in Decatur he pointed out to a friend the very spot in the town square where he stood at twenty-one years of age twenty-six years before.

The Anti-Nebraska question, which now brought him to this place on Washington's birthday, would probably invite him to recall an early migration in which his father moved from Kentucky, a slave state, to Indiana, a free state, that his children might have a chance in the race of life. Now the Nebraska Act would make it appear to him that the very evils from which his parents had fled, when he was a small child, were now about to spread into the pioneer territories where other fathers were settling frontier lands. It would be interesting to know just how much this early migration of Thomas Lincoln contributed to Lincoln's Nebraska reactions.

Many of the interesting stories of Lincoln have been deprived of their timeliness by having been lifted out of their original setting and retold for no purpose, except to entertain. Such a story used by Lincoln, at Decatur, often repeated, but seldom reviewed in its original atmosphere, takes on a different emphasis. When Mr. Lincoln was introduced at the banquet on the evening of the conference, in making an apology for his intrusion in an editor's meeting, he suggested that it appeared as if he were an interloper which, of course, reminded him of a story. While Lincoln told the story in the third person, it was urged by one listener that he was reviewing a personal experience.

"A man, while riding through the woods, met a lady on horseback. He turned out of the path and waited for the lady to pass. The lady stopped and looked at the man a few moments and said:

"Well, for land sake, you are the homeliest man I ever saw."

"Yes, madam," the man replied; "but I can't help it."

"No, I suppose not," the lady said; "but you might stay at home."

When the editors stopped laughing, Mr. Lincoln said "that he felt on this occasion—a banquet of editors—with propriety, he might have stayed at home."

Among the twenty-five Illinois editors who opposed the Nebraska Bill was Paul Selby, of the Morgan Journal, who presided at the conference. He stated:

"The most important work of the convention was transacted through the medium of the Committee on Resolutions. Mr. Lincoln was in conference with the committee during the day, and there is reason to believe that the platform reported through Dr. Charles H. Ray, of the Chicago Tribune, the chairman, and adopted by the convention, bears the stamp of Mr. Lincoln's peculiar intellect."

The testimony of Paul Selby's is supported by another reminiscence from George Schneider who said:

"My friend, Paul Selby, placed me on the Committee on Resolutions, and I helped to form a platform containing a paragraph against the proscriptive doctrines of the so-called American party. This portion of the platform raised a storm of opposition, and in utter despair I proposed submitting it to Mr. Lincoln to abide by his decision. This was the troublesome resolution:

"That the spirit of our institutions, as well as the constitution of our country, guarantees the liberty of conscience as well as political freedom and that we will proscribe no one, by legislation or otherwise, on account of religious opinions, or in consequence of place of birth."

Mr. Lincoln, after carefully reading the paragraph, made the following comment:

"Gentlemen, the resolution introduced by Mr. Schneider is nothing new. It is already contained in the Declaration of Independence, and you can not form a new party on proscriptive principles."

"This declaration of Mr. Lincoln's saved the resolution, and, in fact, helped to establish the new party on the most liberal democratic basis."

Out of the Decatur meeting came an important item of business in the form of a call for a state convention of the Anti-Nebraska sympathizers at Bloomington on May 29, 1856.

Editor George Schneider, who was present at the Decatur, Bloomington, and Philadelphia Conventions claimed that from his personal knowledge, "Lincoln had more to do with the creation and establishment of the Republican Party, on lines which insured its success than historians have credited to him. . . . Lincoln crystalized sentiment, gave it a focal point." His name was placed before the National Convention in 1856 as a Vice-Presidential nominee largely because of his important contributions in shaping the policies of the new party.