

LINCOLN LORE

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HOOSIER HUMOR

The recent passing of George Ade, who was born the year after Lincoln died, closes a life span of these two Hoosier humorists of over a century and a quarter. Ade's demise, coming so shortly after the death of Irving Cobb, who lived just across the Ohio River from Indiana, makes it appropriate to gather a few notations under the title, *Hoosier Humor*.

The Lincoln National Life Foundation recently acquired a large plastic panel containing the full length figures of six humorists, who have been brought together in an informal study. The artist, Jullian Lee Rayford, has called the portrait, "The Great American Humorists of the 19th Century." The six men included in this illustrious company of laughter-makers are Bret Harte, Mark Twain, James Whitcomb Riley, Abraham Lincoln, Josh Billings, and Artemus Ward, named in this order according to the positions, from left to right, which they occupy in the Rayford portrait.

Possibly we should have used the term "a half dozen humorists" rather than the specific number six, because it carries with it the idea of speaking in round numbers. The artist must have had this in mind, for under the inscription identifying the figures, is this notation: "P.S. Bill Nye was here but he's out to lunch right now."

The two Hoosiers, Riley and Lincoln, occupy the center of the study, where Lincoln towers above the others with his right arm resting on Riley, and his left hand on the shoulder of Artemus Ward. The entire group is presented in a story telling pose, each with some peculiar physical or property stamp to identify him.

The panel also contains a brief quotation from each humorist:—"Did you ever have the measles, if so; how many?" A. Ward.—"Be virtuous and you will be eccentric." M. Twain.—"The heathen Chinese is peculiar." B. Harte.—"The goblin 'ill get you." Riley.—"If I did not laugh I should die." Lincoln.—"Good for 90 daze, yours without a struggle." J. Billings.

The expression taken from Lincoln's words about laughing, recalls that in his much quoted farewell letter, Irving Cobb mentioned his book, *Exit Laughing*. While Lincoln may not have contemplated that his exit from life would find him laughing, the fact is he was witnessing a comedy at the time of his assassination and in his last conscious moments he must have been smiling at least.

If we were to choose Lincoln's favorite half dozen humorists, we would select J. G. Baldwin, Charles Farrar Browne (Artemus Ward), David Ross Locke (Petroleum V. Nasby), C. G. Halpine, Joe Miller, and R. N. Newell (Orpheus C. Kerr). Lincoln's interest in many of the humorists rested in their ability to make him laugh, as he is reported to have said during the war that "laughter is my anecdote for tears."

While the Lincoln student may be interested in the humorists that made Lincoln laugh, most people are more familiar with Lincoln himself as the story teller. Often, in starting to tell a story, Lincoln would preface his remarks with "As my old father used to say." It was during the fourteen Hoosier years that Lincoln received his tutoring in humor, under the direction of his story telling father.

It is very difficult to organize with any degree of satisfaction, data which might fall under the general caption of Lincoln Humor. The first problem is to sort out the spurious from the genuine. Don Marquis in the *Saturday*

Evening Post, of fifteen years ago, stated, "I developed a bad habit of inventing Lincoln stories . . . When I couldn't find anything better to fill up my column, I used to invent a story and attribute it to Lincoln." We wonder how many columnists have been just as industrious as Don Marquis.

After having done sufficient culling of the fake stories by observing the time element, and internal evidence, the first division of importance is to separate the stories told about Lincoln from the stories told by Lincoln. The first division, although they may be of a humorous nature, belong, in reality, in a biographical classification, this also applies to stories which Lincoln may have told about himself or his autobiographical references. A large part of the humorous data about Lincoln should be gathered under biography.

The anecdote, yarn, tale, fable, or whatever term we may apply to incidents, real or imaginary, which Lincoln used for so many varied purposes, should be surveyed from an entirely different viewpoint.

The organization of the anecdotes themselves is an interesting and enlightening pursuit, and reveals the genius of Lincoln's humor, which can be gained in no other way. Here are some of the caption heads that might guide one in such a quest and which present some of the objectives for which Lincoln used his matchless power of story telling.

Objectives in Lincoln's Story Telling

ENTERTAINMENT.—The primitive cracker box type, which also extends over into the circuit riding days.

RIDICULE.—A devastating instrument used in the early political canvasses.

ILLUSTRATIONS.—A substitute for definition, and laborious explanation.

DIPLOMACY.—To relieve tension, remove barriers, dismiss applicants, evade decisions, forestall demands.

SOCIABILITY.—A medium for putting at ease those brought into his company.

STIMULATION.—To arouse the inert and to cheer the discouraged.

Laughter apparently served as a stimulant to Lincoln himself and in seasons when he seemed to be in the very depths of despondency he would himself become the story teller or seek some source of humor which would lift him out of remorse and nerve him for another trial. Often his humor was confused with what his critics referred to as a ribald and degenerating amusement and his reputation suffered from these exaggerations, especially during the latter part of the war.

This story about the efficacy of Lincoln's prayers is timely. Two women of the Quaker faith, during the rebellion, were discussing the probable outcome of the war. One said, "I think that Davis will succeed." When she was asked the reason for her opinion she stated, "Because Davis is a praying man." "And so is Lincoln, a praying man," her friend replied. The final retort, however, seemed to be convincing: "Yes, but the Lord will think Lincoln is joking."