

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S QUALITY OF MERCY

Certainly Abraham Lincoln's quality of mercy was not strained. It was the genuine outpouring of the sentiments of a tender hearted man. This characteristic of the commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic stands out more strikingly in this day of gallows and guillotines or their modern equivalents. Possibly the attribute so often observed in Lincoln during the war years, was an innate tendency which found expression even in some of his activities as a small boy. In his own words we have the story of an incident with a Thanksgiving flavor which may point us to early manifestations of this virtue, and which might be told more appropriately at this season of the year.

The Lincoln family consisting of the father, mother and two children, Sarah and Abraham, moved from Kentucky to Indiana during the Thanksgiving season in 1816. In after years the President described their new home as a "wild region with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods." In a reminiscent mood he continued that it was here he took "an early start as a hunter, which was never much improved afterwards." He stated that a few days before the completion of his eighth year while his father was away from home, "a flock of wild turkeys approached the new log cabin, and Abraham with a rifle-gun standing inside, shot through a crack and killed one of them."

This incident must have been one of the outstanding experiences of his boyhood but not one to gloat over as his further comment implies. As a sequel to the episode he stated, he had "never since pulled a trigger on any larger game." This conclusion is supplemented by the introductory statement with reference to his failure to make any progress in this avocation. So his career as a hunter which began so auspiciously just before his eighth birthday, with the woods full of game as an added incentive to improve his marksmanship, was brought to an abrupt termination.

At the time this youthful Nimrod shot his quarry from his cabin hideout. John J. Audubon the famous naturalist was living at Henderson, Ky., about 40 miles southwest of the Lincoln home.* Among all the birds which Audubon has preserved with pencil and brush none have been so greatly admired as his "American Turkey Cock." A traveler passing through southern Indiana in 1814 wrote to his friends in Pennsylvania about the wild life in the woods and mentioned especially the wild turkey, "the male bird of which often attains a weight of twenty-five pounds." Only those who may have hunted these birds in sparsely settled parts of the South can visualize the grandeur of these magnificent wild fowl of the forest.

The killing of the turkey must have kindled within Abe some strange and hidden impulse for when the boy saw the beautiful bird dead at his feet, because of his own act, apparently he was to find no pleasure, thereafter, in any kind of gory sport. While many of the stories told about his youth which refer to letting game out of traps, hitting the gun when his father was about to shoot a deer, and similar capers, may be largely folk lore, yet it is well known that Lincoln would stand for no cruelty to animals among his associates as the boys with whom he played have testified.

We are wondering if an episode which occurred in the White House when Lincoln's own son Tad was about the President's age at the time of the turkey incident, might not have brought back some rather vivid memories.

A live turkey had been sent to the White House to be used during the holidays. "Tad," the President's youngest son, immediately made friends with the turkey who soon

followed him about the grounds. The bird was named Jack and Tad fed him and made a great pet of him. When it came time to use the turkey for the table, Tad got wind of what was anticipated and immediately rushed with his complaint to his father who was in a cabinet meeting. One author recreates the episode in these words:

"Tad burst into the room like a bombshell, sobbing and crying with rage and indignation. The turkey was about to be killed. Tad had procured from the executioner a stay of proceeding while he hurried to lay the case before the President. 'Jack must not be killed; it is wicked.' 'But,' said the President, 'Jack was sent here to be killed, and eaten . . . 'I can't help it,' roared Tad between his sobs, 'he's a good turkey, and I don't want him killed.' The President of the United States pausing in the midst of his business took a card and on it wrote an order of reprieve. The turkey's life was spared and Tad, seizing the precious bit of paper, fled to set him at liberty."

Lincoln's mercy toward the unfortunate was often demonstrated in his legal practice. He wrote to a friend in 1852. "I could have got a judgment against Tarley if I had pressed to the utmost: but I am really sorry for him—poor and a cripple as he is."

Sometimes during the Civil War his tender heart collaborated with his sense of humor to demonstrate his mercy and bring about certain desirable results. Referring to one convicted man he remarked "I don't believe shooting will do him any good." Of another he said "I guess he can serve his country better above the ground than under it." And one will recall the more familiar message to a colonel by the name of Mulligan; "If you haven't shot Barney D— yet, don't."

Time and time again we find Lincoln appealing on behalf of soldiers who were in trouble whose sentences indirectly worked a great hardship on those at home. Lincoln wrote a note to Stanton on March 1, 1864, which illustrates this attitude.

"My dear Sir: A poor widow, by the name of Baird, has a son in the army, that for some offense has been sentenced to serve a long time without pay, or at most with very little pay. I do not like this punishment of withholding pay—it falls so very hard upon poor families. After he had been serving in this way for several months, at the tearful appeal of the poor mother, I made a direction that he be allowed to enlist for a new term, on the same conditions as others. She now comes, and says she cannot get it acted upon. Please do it.

"Yours truly,

"A. Lincoln."

A note from Governor Hoadley to Secretary Chase bears this indorsement by the President.

"The case of Andrews is really a very bad one, as appears by the record already before me. Yet before receiving this I had ordered his punishment commuted to imprisonment for during the war at hard labor, and had so telegraphed. I did this, not on any merit in the case, but because I am trying to evade the butchering business lately."

"A. Lincoln."

The Oxford dictionary defines mercy in these words, "Abstention from the infliction of suffering on the part of one who has the right or power to inflict it." Lincoln had the right and the power to inflict punishment and undoubtedly there were many during the war who should have suffered the death penalty and would have paid to the full for their folly if it had not been for Lincoln's quality of mercy.

*See Lincoln Lore No. 597.