

# 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 926

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

January 6, 1947

## THE RESOLUTE LINCOLN

The calendar establishes the fact that Christmas Day and New Year's Day always come just exactly one week apart. Their proximity to each other, however, has not prevented, year by year, one of the most startling transitions from the sublime to the ridiculous in human behavior occurring among civilized people. The same voice that on December 25th caroled "Glory to God in the Highest," seven days later on January 1st strikes up the bibulous strain, "God only knows how dry I am." The spiritual uplift of the Christmas season is sunk in the moral abandon of the New Year's festivities. Thus a time honored symbol of "turning over a new leaf" with the coming of the new year has almost been lost to this present generation and with it there has disappeared the custom of making worthy new year's resolutions.

Abraham Lincoln lived in a day when much attention was given to the idea of character building through self discipline. School books, the press, popular reading matter, and especially juvenile publications were stressing the importance of moral stability. Lincoln to a very large extent was the product of the preachments he found in *Murray's English Reader*, *Scott's Lessons*, *Aesop's Fables*, and similar texts which began to diminish with the passing of the *McGuffey's Reader* period.

Many descriptive attributes have been used in referring to the Emancipator. One characterization which would be especially appropriate to observe at the beginning of the new year is "The Resolute Lincoln." For many years the editor of *Lincoln Lore* searched for some outstanding innate or acquired tendency which above all others might be considered most responsible for his rise to fame. At last there was discovered among the many references to Lincoln's boyhood days this memoir which reveals the spark that motivated him. This statement, by one who for a while lived in the same Indiana cabin home with Abraham, is of supreme importance:

"He was ambitious and determined, and when he attempted to excell man or boy his whole soul and his energies were bent on doing it, and he in this generally, almost always, accomplished his ends."

One of Lincoln's New Year's resolutions in 1841, however, seems to have gone awry as he referred to this day as, "The fatal first of January." He wrote a pathetic letter to his friend Speed with reference to this broken resolution in which he said:

"Before I resolve one thing or the other, I must regain my confidence in my own ability to keep my resolves when they are made. In that ability you know I once prided myself as the only, or at least the chief gem of my character; that gem I lost—how, and where, you too will know. I have not yet regained it; and until I do, I cannot trust myself in any matter of much importance."

In this statement Lincoln acknowledges that the virtue which he had tried best to cultivate with some degree of success was "resoluteness." We are convinced that Lincoln soon recovered the "lost gem" of his char-

acter, as it certainly finds expression, time and time again in later years when he stands firm on occasions where the average man would have been swept from his moorings.

Lincoln revealed the very essence of his own resolute attitude in the contents of three letters which he wrote to young men who needed encouragement in their contemplated tasks. One letter was written in 1855, another in 1860, and a third in 1862.

Isom Reavis wanted to study law in the office of Abraham Lincoln and wrote to Mr. Lincoln about the possibilities of so doing. Mr. Lincoln replied that he was away too much of the time for a young man to "read law with me advantageously" but did offer him some sound advice in these words:

"If you are resolutely determined to make a lawyer of yourself, the thing is more than half done already. . . . Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any one thing."

Mr. Lincoln's son Robert had a friend at Exeter Academy by the name of George Latham who had failed in the Harvard entrance examinations. On July 22, 1860 in the midst of the presidential campaign the Republican nominee wrote a letter of encouragement to George from which these excerpts are made.

"It is a certain truth that you can enter and graduate in Harvard University: and having made the attempt you must succeed in it. Must is the word. . . . You cannot fail, if you resolutely determine you will not."

Mr. Basler in his recent book on *Abraham Lincoln—His Speeches and Writings* comments on the above: "A remarkable glimpse into Lincoln's inner self is revealed in this letter. More succinctly and poignantly than any other statement, it reveals the quality of spirit which underlies all that Lincoln achieved."

We wish Mr. Basler might have included in his compilation, the letter which President Lincoln wrote on June 28, 1862, in the midst of his busy executive tasks, to a discouraged cadet, Quinten Campbell, whom he had never met. It seems to indicate the spirit of punch and backbone as much as the Latham letter. Lincoln wrote in part:

"Stick to the resolution you have taken to procure a military education. . . . adhere to your purpose and you will soon feel as well as you ever did.—On the contrary if you falter and give up, you will lose the power of keeping any resolution, . . . stick to your purpose."

If we reached out into the field of Lincoln axioms we would find many expressions revealing this same spirit of determination. To a group of colored men he said on one occasion: "You are intelligent, and know that success does not so much depend on external help or on self-reliance. Much therefore depends upon yourselves."

The phenomenal but gradual advancement of the boy born in a cabin and reared on the frontiers could not adequately be appreciated without some new year's portrait of The Resolute Lincoln.