

LINCOLN LORE

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WAS LINCOLN "HOPELESSLY STAGE-STRUCK?"

The theatrical season now having reached its zenith, it might be appropriate to make some comments on Lincoln's interest in the drama. The fact that he was assassinated while attending a performance at Ford's Theatre in Washington has focused the attention of students on that particular episode. This has resulted in almost eliminating any approach to the normal interest which Lincoln had for professional entertainments.

One of the very few monographs available on the subject of Lincoln's theatre going was contributed by Art Hemminger to the Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society for December, 1940. In this article the author states that Abraham Lincoln was "hopelessly stage-struck." In support of this thesis he mentions six incidents occurring over a period of nearly twenty-five years where he is able to associate Lincoln with some kind of an entertainment. These episodes are as follows:

The Joseph Jefferson legal case and the meeting with Mrs. Hillis, an actress, both incidents occurring in Springfield; a magic lantern presentation at Danville in 1854; the Burton shows at Chicago in July, 1857; the Rumsey-Newcomb minstrel show at Chicago in 1860; and finally a church entertainment at Springfield. This evidence of Lincoln's interest in the drama is not very convincing when only three of the incidents could be classified as theatrical performances. It seems to be a very unimpressive repertoire to satisfy the longing of a "hopelessly stage-struck" man over a period of a quarter of a century.

We have available, dependable evidence in the form of reminiscences from a member of the Lincoln family which very clearly indicates that Lincoln was neither a regular, nor even a casual, theater-goer during the period of his married life in Illinois.

Edward Frieberger who was with the *Chicago Inter Ocean* and later the publisher of the *Saturday Evening Herald* of Chicago, wrote on February 15, 1910 to Robert Lincoln, oldest son of the President, making some inquiries about his father's theatrical interest. Here are a few of the questions he advanced.

"Do you happen to remember what was the first play your father ever saw? What was it, where was it given, and do you remember the names of the principal players and the date of the performance?"

"Could you tell me the names of your father's favorite plays, both tragedy and comedy?"

"Do you know who was his favorite actor? If so, who?"

Apparently Mr. Frieberger was under the same delusion that many students have been, namely that Lincoln was a lifetime devotee of the theater and well informed on matters pertaining to the stage. It must have been rather a surprise, to say the least, when Frieberger received from Robert Lincoln on March 10, 1910 a letter which failed to answer a single one of these questions and which definitely suggested that in the Springfield days as far as Robert knew, his father was

not a theater-goer and most certainly very far removed from a stage-struck man. Robert Lincoln advised that he had had his father's papers searched for anything which might be available on the subject but nothing was found "except a brief correspondence with Mr. Hackett", which was already well known.

Robert was born in 1843, a year after his parents' marriage and became sixteen years of age in 1859 which covers all but three years of his parents' married life in Springfield. This interesting paragraph is excerpted from Robert's letter to Mr. Frieberger.

"I left Springfield when a boy of sixteen and it is not my memory that I ever saw a play there and it is quite impossible for me to give any information about the plays my father may have seen before going to Washington, when, for instance he was attending court in Chicago. Of this I know nothing. . . . Personally I never attended a play with my father but that was a purely accidental matter, as I was very little in Washington while he was there. I have a general understanding that he frequently visited the theater there as a matter of recreation, but I know nothing of the particulars."

Mr. Hemminger in the Illinois Journal of History article also states with reference to Lincoln's stage struck Illinois years, "This spell of the footlights followed him to Washington." In support of this claim, but three well known artists are mentioned by Mr. Hemminger as having received the plaudits of Mr. Lincoln during the four Washington years: Mrs. John Wood, John McCullough, and James H. Hackett.

Lincoln's secretary, Stoddard, stated, "So much has been said about Mr. Lincoln's theater going that a great many people have imbibed the idea that his tastes were dramatic, but this was not so. With the exception of a few of Shakespeare's plays, I do not believe that he ever read a play in his life. . . ."

After witnessing the "Merchant of Venice" Lincoln is said to have remarked, "A farce or a comedy is best played, a tragedy is best read at home." Much of Lincoln's keen interest in Shakespeare, which is everywhere acknowledged, was apparently more fully satisfied by reading than by witnessing the productions on the stage.

Mr. Leonard Grover, manager of the theater in Washington which bore his name, has recalled Lincoln's visits to his playhouse. He states that "The President often came alone, many times he brought his little son Tad, and on special occasions Mrs. Lincoln. . . . It was evident that Mr. Lincoln came to be alone." It was Mr. Grover's opinion that Lincoln at times came for recreation but most often to find solitude.

It is generally known in his early days that Lincoln enjoyed an occasional minstrel show and because of his recognized sense of humor was equally pleased with a good comedy when it was presented in Washington. Characterizing Abraham Lincoln as a man who was "hopelessly stage-struck" during the Springfield years, or at any other time in his life, is a conclusion that cannot be supported by any dependable evidence.