

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN FINDS HIS VOICE

Steps to the Wigwam, No. 3

Occasionally, when something in the political scene takes a peculiar twist and the generally accepted conclusions go awry, without being too inquisitive, as to causes, we accept the result as an accident and let it go at that. This current series of Lincoln Lore is an attempt to demonstrate that Lincoln's nomination at the Wigwam in 1860 was no accident, as so often contended, but the result of careful planning. The progress of Lincoln's candidacy actually evolved in proper sequence through closely related episodes in which Lincoln himself played the leading role.

Lincoln had practically retired from politics when the rescinding of the Missouri Compromise, engineered by Douglas, brought him back into the political arena with a bounce. On November 9th, of the same year the compromise was annulled, Lincoln for the fifth time was elected to the Illinois Legislature, apparently starting his political career all over again as he had commenced it twenty years before. Withdrawing from the legislature to enter the Senatorial race he contributed much to his political prestige by sacrificing himself for the sake of the Anti-Nebraska effort.

Lincoln wrote a letter in August 1855 to his closest friend, Joshua Speed, in which he made some comments on the Kansas and Nebraska situation. He acknowledged his own responsibility under the Constitution with respect to the Fugitive Slave Law and concluded:

"I confess I hate to see the poor creatures hunted down and caught and carried back to their stripes and unrequited toil: BUT I BITE MY LIPS AND KEEP QUIET."

The spring of 1856 witnessed a series of startling developments associated with the slavery controversy and the Nebraska situation which brought Lincoln to his feet again. Possibly for the first time he stopped "biting his lips" and spoke out fearlessly and convincingly against the institution of slavery and especially its extension into the territories. He reached the pinnacle of his oratorical powers, in the field of politics, at the Bloomington convention. Here he found his voice and spoke so eloquently that the pencils of the scribes were arrested and no recording of what he said was made. The address is known as The Lost Speech.

John Cockel, a visitor from New York City, was in the convention and stated to Gen. Thomas J. Henderson after Lincoln closed his speech that he had listened to Clay, Webster, Calhoun, Van Buren, Woodbury, Wright and others, but he had, "Never before heard from any one so great a speech as the one just delivered by Lincoln."

One of the resolutions passed at the Decatur editors' meeting in February 1856 called for the state convention to be held at Bloomington on May 29. It will be recalled that although Lincoln had been suggested as a candidate for governor by the newly formed party he had declined. He is said to have recommended Col. William H. Bissell as the nominee. During the interval which had passed between the conference of Anti-Nebraska editors at Decatur on Washington's Birthday 1856, and the convention at Bloomington on May 29, a continual flow of sensational events had occurred. They were of such a nature that the emotions of the people were stirred as they had not been since the anti-compromise measure itself was passed.

On May 10 Lincoln took the lead in heading a call for a convention to be held in Springfield on May 24 to elect delegates to the state convention at Bloomington. On the very day the call was issued Governor Charles Robinson of Kansas while en route to Washington was seized by a mob at Lexington, Missouri, and held a prisoner. Ex-Governor Reeder, who had been thrown to the floor and kicked during his administration, was able to escape his pursuers and fled the state.

Three days before the Springfield meeting a group of ruffians marched upon Lawrence, Kansas, burned the home of Governor Robinson then destroyed two printing presses and plundered the town. The following day, on May 22, Charles Sumner was struck down on the floor of the Senate at Washington by Preston Brooks. This cowardly act, which aroused the ire of the anti-slavery forces throughout the nation, occurred but two days before the Springfield meeting and but one week before the Bloomington convention itself.

Lincoln started to the convention from Danville where he was in court. On Tuesday, May 27, the day before, one of his close friends, Paul Selby, the man who was primarily responsible for bringing the editors together at Decatur, was attacked by a mob as he went from his office to his hotel, and received such injuries that he was not able to attend the convention. En route to Bloomington, Lincoln and several other delegates were obliged to spend part of Tuesday and Tuesday night at Decatur, where Lincoln informally reviewed for his friends the story of his arrival in the town, direct from Indiana, twenty-six years before. The recent editors convention held there and the part Shelby played in it would not be overlooked.

Lincoln arrived in Bloomington the day before the convention and went directly to the home of David Davis where he was to stay. That very day five prominent citizens of Lawrence, Kansas, were driven from the city and the life of the press correspondent of the New York Tribune was threatened. That evening Ex-Governor Reeder arrived in the city from Kansas with a first hand account of conditions there. Lincoln and others made brief speeches from the balcony of the Pike House.

When the convention opened it was discovered that Mrs. Robinson, wife of the imprisoned governor of Kansas, had come to the convention with a group of delegates. A refugee from Kansas named Emory was on the platform to tell the story of the ruffian rule there. It would be impossible to overemphasize the highly emotional pitch to which the convention was brought by the time the business was over. Everything had apparently been cleared on the agenda for the concluding address of the day by Abraham Lincoln.

It is doubtful if a speaker ever entered a situation where everything seemed to be made to order, more strategically arranged, than Lincoln did at Bloomington. The Brooks and Selby attacks and incidents related about Kansas had, combined with Lincoln's visit the day before to his old home community at Decatur, put him in fine trim psychologically, for his major effort. Although he may not have utilized the occasion for unduly cultivating the already highly wrought emotional situation, he did have a receptive hearing that accentuated the importance of every word spoken.

At Bloomington Abraham Lincoln found his voice and he came out of the convention the most highly honored exponent of the principles of the new party in the entire western country. He had taken another step toward the Wigwam.