

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 1076

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

November 21, 1949

LINCOLN'S "UNUSUAL POWER OF 'PUTTING THINGS'"

A reading of the first annual national Thanksgiving Proclamation which set aside the last Thursday in November 1863 as a day of thanksgiving and praise will impress one with Abraham Lincoln's unusual choice of words and command of language. Rev. John Putnam Gulliver heard Lincoln speak at Norwich, Connecticut in 1860 and enquired of the speaker how he got the "unusual power of 'putting things'." Lincoln's reply is too little known, so with his Thanksgiving Proclamation before us we seem to have the proper atmosphere for presenting his reminiscences, as recorded by Dr. Gulliver, which in a measure accounts for the unique phraseology mentioned.

Dr. Gulliver, to whom we are under obligation for the recording of the reminiscences under observation, was born in Boston in 1819, a descendant of emigrants who arrived in 1640. His father was the founder of the American Educational Society. Receiving his schooling at Phillips Academy, Yale University, and Andover Theological Seminary, Dr. Gulliver entered the ministry and served as a pastor at Norwich, Connecticut for twenty years. He was a clergyman there when Lincoln visited the city in 1860. In 1865 he became pastor of the New England Church at Chicago and in 1868 became president of Knox College, where he remained for four years, introducing coeducation into the institution. A daughter, Julia, became president of Rockford (Ill.) College. He was honored with both the D.D. and LL.D. degrees. While at Norwich at the time of Lincoln's visit he was an ardent anti-slavery advocate. He died January 25, 1894. A man of such fine culture and educational background should be heard with some interest on Lincoln's visit to Norwich in 1860.

The display of oratory by Lincoln in Connecticut is really a story of two parts. Reaching New Haven on the evening of March 6 Lincoln was the guest of James F. Babcock, publisher of the *Palladium*. In announcing Lincoln's appearance that evening Mr. Babcock's paper commented: "At Union Hall tonight we shall hear one of the most effective and eloquent speakers in the United States." Lincoln's speech was printed the following day in the *Palladium*. A special train was run from New Haven to Meriden on the evening of March 7 for the large number of people who had been unable to crowd into Union Hall at New Haven and others who wished to hear the speaker again. The *Palladium* made this comment about the Meriden speech: "His clear statement, irresistible logic, perfectly candid, courteous and honest manner carried conviction . . . while his side splitting humor entertained even those who bitterly hated his doctrines."

Two days later on March 9 he spoke at Norwich and made the same eloquent speech he delivered at New Haven. Lincoln left the next morning on the 6:00 A.M. train due in New London at 6:40 A.M. Upon departing from the Norwich station he was introduced to Dr. Gulliver who was taking the same train. Dr. Gulliver had heard Lincoln speak the night before and once the train was under way engaged him in conversation. During the interview, which may have lasted for forty minutes, some important episodes were recorded by Dr. Gulliver.

First Mr. Lincoln informed him of a "most extraordinary circumstance" that occurred at New Haven: "A professor of rhetoric in Yale College, he had been told, came to hear him, and took notes of his speech and gave a lecture on it to his class the following day; and not satisfied with that, followed him to Meriden the next evening and again heard him for the same purpose." All this seemed to Mr. Lincoln to be "very extraordinary." The professor of Rhetoric at Yale in 1860 was William

A. Larned, who died in 1862. Percy Coe Eggeleston writing about the incident as late as 1922 comments that he had not been able to find any member of the class of 1860 who remembered the lecture. Inasmuch as 62 years had lapsed, and those members still living must have been over eighty years of age, it does not appear that lack of such evidence should allow the Gulliver reminiscence, told almost contemporary with the event, to be nullified, especially as Dr. Gulliver himself was a Yale man. Considering that the New Haven *Palladium* advertised Lincoln as "one of the most effective and eloquent speakers in the United States" would it not be very natural for Professor Larned to attend and comment before his class on the speech?

Possibly this complimentary attitude towards Lincoln's oratory supplemented by his own observations may have suggested the following query which Dr. Gulliver put to Lincoln about his ability to speak as eloquently as he did. This is the way Dr. Gulliver put the question:

"I want very much to know, Mr. Lincoln, how you got this unusual power of 'putting things.' It must have been a matter of education. No man has it by nature alone. What has your education been?"

This question was answered by Lincoln in this language as closely as Dr. Gulliver could record it:

"Well, as to education, the newspapers are correct—I never went to school more than twelve months in my life. But, as you say, this must be a product of culture in some form. I have been putting the question you ask me, to myself, while you have been talking. I can say this, that among my earliest recollections, I remember how, when a mere child, I used to get irritated when anybody talked to me in a way I could not understand. I don't think I ever got angry at anything else in my life. But that always disturbed my temper, and has ever since. I can remember going to my little bedroom, after hearing the neighbors talk, of an evening, with my father, and spending no small part of the night walking up and down, and trying to make out what was the exact meaning of some of their, to me, dark sayings. I could not sleep, though I often tried to, and when I got on such a hunt after an idea, until I had caught it; and when I thought I had got it, I was not satisfied until I had repeated it over and over, until I had put it in language plain enough, as I thought, for any boy I knew to comprehend. This was a kind of passion with me, and it has stuck by me, for I am never easy now, when I am handling a thought, till I have bounded it north and bounded it south, and bounded it east, and bounded it west. Perhaps that accounts for the characteristic you observe in my speeches, though I never put the things together before."

Dr. Gulliver deeply impressed by this testimonial also records in these words his own reply to Lincoln's statement.

"Mr. Lincoln, I thank you for this. It is the most splendid educational fact I ever happened upon. This is *genius*, with all its impulsive, inspiring, dominating power over the mind of its possessor, developed by education into *talent*, with its uniformity, its permanence, and its disciplined strength, always ready, always available, never capricious—the highest possession of the human intellect."

Looking back at the remarkable diction of the Gettysburg Address and contemplating on the beauty and appropriateness of the Thanksgiving proclamation, so closely associated in their composition, we can better understand the early contributions made to Lincoln's "unusual power of 'putting things.'"