

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 1077

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

November 28, 1949

SANDBURG—BARRETT

LINCOLN COLLECTOR. The story of Oliver R. Barrett's Lincoln Collection by Carl Sandburg. Profusely illustrated, 344 pp. Limited Edition, signed. \$15.00.

Approaching the beginning of the last half of the twentieth century no two names associated with the writing and collecting aspects of Lincolniana are more familiar in their respective fields than Sandburg and Barrett. It is a happy arrangement indeed which brings them together in a delightful volume entitled *Lincoln Collector*.

It is always a pleasure to write a review of a worthy book written by a friend but especially pleasing when the subject matter of the volume features still another friend. Carl Sandburg and Oliver R. Barrett for a great many years have served on the advisory committee of the Lincoln National Life Foundation and through all this period have been helpful in advancing the constructive work of the Foundation.

When it was first noised about that Sandburg was preparing to write a story of the Barrett collection it was immediately concluded by those who had been guests of the genial and obliging Chicago lawyer that the famous author would not lack for source material. No author in the Lincoln field can write biography more entertainingly than Sandburg. He takes Barrett as a small boy out of a country school where he finds him seated, for punishment, beside a colored girl about his own age, and follows him through many escapades which cultivated the collecting instinct. Eventually through a lifetime of colorful episodes the author presents him as the dean of Lincoln treasure hunters.

Messrs. Sandburg and Barrett will not object if one word of tribute is paid to Charles F. Gunther, whose unprecedented collection so greatly enriched the Barrett archives. In fact Mr. Sandburg uses three full pages to tell about the Chicago candy man from whom Barrett made purchases for a period of more than twelve years. From this voluminous Gunther collection, just one day's acquisition by Barrett netted him twenty Lincoln letters. After the death of Mr. Gunther, the Chicago Historical Society purchased the collection which the Librarian of the society called, "The most remarkable private collection in the country relating to American History."

Few people can match the human interest experiences of a collector; the grand surprises, the occasional gold brick, the priceless manuscripts and also the forgeries, the tireless searching and the coincidental discoveries. Then there are the times when even food and clothes become secondary to the acquisition of a long desired item. In the editor's collection of book plates there is a lithograph showing a small nude child reaching up into a bookcase for a volume and under the picture the statement, "And after this some clothes."

No one doubted Sandburg's ability to tell a stirring story about Oliver Barrett's search for rarities, but there was some misgiving about the qualifications of any one to do justice to such a magnificent collection of photographs, autographs, manuscripts and curios which

he had gathered. This doubt was largely dispelled for the reviewer when he saw at first glance that the book was profusely illustrated. It became apparent that the publisher had collaborated with the author in making available display space, for how can one describe a collection such as Barrett's without a generous contribution of photographs, reproductions and facsimiles. A general survey of this illustrative material might be in point. The book presents: 47 photographs of individuals, 11 of historical sites, 29 of Lincoln relics, and 10 of broadsides. The documents present the larger part of the illustrative matter with 106 facsimiles of important writings and over 200 printed letters, plus hundreds of excerpts from documents and correspondence.

No one among us would be better qualified to choose from such an enormous collection, exhibits of special interest to Lincoln students, than the author of *The War Years*,—the most exhaustive study of Lincoln since Nicolay and Hay's history. The value of the Barrett compilation for the research student can be illustrated by a single case story. The first facsimile of a printed page exhibited in the book is a reproduction of the *Rail-splitter*, published at Cincinnati, Ohio, on October 10, 1860, a rarity indeed. The first item on the page is a letter written on Oct. 2, 1860 to Dr. J. B. McKeehan of Cincinnati by R. Wintersmith of Elizabethtown, Kentucky, in which he states he is sending by express "a set of canes cut off the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln in Larken (LaRue) County formerly this county (Hardin). I cut them myself last summer. . . . The long plum stick was cut from the very place in the house where the bed stood when he was born. The house has been removed . . ."

This notation is the earliest recording of a visit to the birthplace farm after the nomination of Lincoln to the Presidency. Although its statement about the cutting of the plum stick would imply the cabin had been razed by the time of the summer visit, it most certainly had been removed before the writing of the letter on October 2, 1860. This evidence nullifies the tradition that the birthplace cabin was standing at the time of Lincoln's election. The letter does contribute to the supposition that the exact location of the cabin itself was known and pointed out in the summer of 1860.

Out of the vast collection of manuscripts one might select for human interest appeal, the batch of Letters written to Lincoln by Joshua Speed. Here and no where else do we more nearly approach the inner reactions of this secretive man in the letters written to the closest friend of his young manhood. Of course the biographical pages from the family Bible and the pages from Abraham's arithmetic copy book would be almost priceless from the viewpoint of the collector. The book is replete with similar exhibits of valuable source material and it allows every reader to thumb over reproductions of the priceless documents gathered by Mr. Barrett during his lifetime.