

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 1140

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

February 12, 1951

LINCOLN STATUES IN CONTRAST

Boy Scouts will participate today in the eighteenth annual pilgrimage to Lincoln Shrines. Six or seven thousand youths will place their memorial wreaths at the foot of some Lincoln statue and a program appropriate for the occasion will be conducted. There will be presented to each boy making the trek, an award in the form of a certificate embellished with a picture of a Lincoln statue. These annual awards have followed a chronological sequence in the presentation of statue pictures and the series have now reached a point where Lincoln is depicted as The Reelected President. The seated Lincoln by St. Gaudens, in Grant Park, Chicago, has been chosen to represent this episode in the life of Lincoln.

One of the reasons why statues of Lincoln have been selected as the mecca of these birthday pilgrimages is the very large number of them located throughout the country from coast to coast. Another factor which has made the Boy Scout treks so popular is the inspirational value to be found in the works of art themselves. There is no better illustration of this contribution and certainly no more inspiring study than the statue by French in the Lincoln Memorial at Washington. Observers are safe in claiming that this seated Lincoln, within the beautiful structure designed to enclose it, is our most revered piece of American statuary. On Lincoln's birthday, three years ago, two little girls were observed standing in front of the statue and were overheard to be singing, "Happy Birthday to you."

There are a great many works of art in Washington featuring Lincoln and most of them of more or less merit. One of them, however, has been severely criticized and is in direct contrast to the French masterpiece. It is by Louis Slobodkin known as "Abe Lincoln" and it stands in the cafeteria court of the Department of Interior Building.

Thirty-five years ago George Gray Barnard created a Lincoln in bronze that not only divided art critiques, but Lincoln students as well, with respect to the artistic merits of the statue. It was an attempt to introduce "realism" as opposed to "idealism" in the field of Lincoln sculptural art. Barnard like most realists in so many fields of art, overdid his realism until he created a grotesque figure, just as far withdrawn from the objective Lincoln as an exalted figure by an idealist. Robert Lincoln, son of the President, still lived and he was fully justified in his condemnation of such an interpretation of his own father as Barnard created.

Nothing approached the realistic interpretation of Lincoln by Barnard until about a dozen years ago when the modernistic urge in art, bordering on caricature, found expression in the work of Louis Slobodkin. The United States Commission of the New York World's Fair on February 28, 1939 allocated to the procurement committee the sum of \$10,000 to be used in a national competition for sculpture to occupy a site on the facade of the Federal Building at the fair. While the statue of Lincoln by Slobodkin was not awarded the grand prize, the jury recommended that it be given "special consideration" and the study was enlarged and placed in the center of the fountain in the Federal Building's court of sculpture. Public disapproval of the statue caused Edward J. Flynn, the commissioner general of the World's Fair Commission, to have it broken up and removed before the fair opened. Flynn was severely

censured for this act by Edward Bruce, one of the members of the commission. Bruce, strange to say, secured Flynn's permission to use the original model, and put through a recommendation which was accepted under the following proposition:

The United States of America on June 15, 1938, acting through the Secretary of the Treasury, represented by the Secretary of Procurement, entered into a contract with Louis Slobodkin, sculptor, "for a bronze statue with black marble base of 'Abe Lincoln.'"

Following an exhibition of the model from which the bronze was made, Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt commented in her column of May 5, 1939, "The one of 'Lincoln as a Young Man' is most appealing and the head is very beautiful." There are many people who have made a specialty of studying portraits of Lincoln and have a fairly good idea of how he must have looked as a young man who would never be able to recognize him in the Slobodkin portrait. A youth of the western country with six generations of American Anglo-Saxon pioneers back of him would not have the appearance of a first generation emigrant from Asia. The statue was ready for inspection and approval on October 28, 1939, and was on exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

A caricature is defined as "an exaggeration or distortion of characteristics of particular features" and the Slobodkin statue certainly qualifies for classification under this definition. The grotesque figure is all out of proportion to the well known stature of the tall impressive figure America has come to revere. It is known generally, even among those not expected to be authorities on anatomy, that Lincoln's height was due primarily to his long legs and that when he was seated it is well established he was no taller than the average man. The Slobodkin statue emphasizes a long body rather than long limbs, which throws his figure all out of proportion.

The only indication that the sculptor has attempted to portray a tall man is the long neck, possibly the longest neck ever set on two human shoulders. Lincoln did have a long neck but nothing like the ill shaped, stump like pedestal on which the sculptor has set Lincoln's head. Leonard Volk, the sculptor, made casts and measurements of Lincoln's neck and shoulders and there is no such deformity as Slobodkin reveals. The first impression one gets from sizing up the statue is that the sculptor is conscious of the necessity of portraying a tall man. Starting with the feet, he formed a normal pair of legs. To increase the stature, a longer than average body was added, and still failing to gain the height desired, the sculptor apparently stretched out the neck for that purpose.

When there are available numerous photographs revealing the general appearance of Abraham Lincoln and dependable descriptions about his stature, it does not seem that government authorities, even in the name of freedom in art, should encourage casting of bronze, caricatures of one of our national benefactors. Even though the primary essence of the sculptor's artistic concept seems to center about two crooked sticks held together by "Abe Lincoln," symbolizing the preservation of the Union, there is no call for making a bronze cartoon out of the savior of the Union. It is doubtful if any city in America offers so great a contrast in sculptural art than the French and Slobodkin statues of Lincoln at the national capital.