

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 1143

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

March 5, 1951

LINCOLN'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS ALCOHOLICS

The editor of Lincoln Lore has an acquaintance on the Pacific Coast whose business through the years had suffered greatly because of his intemperance. Recently upon arriving in the city where he resides a message from him was received urging that I pay him a visit. Upon meeting him the remarkable change in his appearance and mental vigor was immediately observed and he enthusiastically related that for several months he had been a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. As a student of Lincoln he had come to the conclusion that the basic elements in this comparatively recent organization, whose principles he had embraced, were clearly set forth in the remarkable temperance lecture which the Illinois lawyer had made one hundred years ago.

The observations of this regenerated man were supplemented by another speaker which appeared on the same program with me at the famous Los Angeles Breakfast Club on the morning of February 7. He likewise had been a victim of overindulgence and his recital persuaded me that to shake off the demon which had controlled him he had also followed the pattern advocated by Lincoln a full century before. I came to the conclusion after reading the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* that the movement was virtually a revival of the old Washington Temperance Society whose members were known as the Washingtonians.

On the evening of April 2, 1840 a public address was delivered in Baltimore on the subject of "social tipping." One citizen who heard the lecture was instrumental in having the group of tipplers with whom he was associated, consisting of two blacksmiths, a carpenter, a coachmaker, a silversmith and a tailor, pledge themselves to total abstinence. This group formed the nucleus for an organization named for the father of the country, certainly not for the city bearing his name—which then, and especially now if the statistics on the per capita consumption of liquor can be relied upon—would be a misnomer indeed.

One point of difference in the two organizations was in the qualification for membership. The Washingtonians required all who joined to sign a pledge of total abstinence, while Alcoholics Anonymous appeals to those who have passed from the early stages of social drinking into the human catastrophe bracket. However, the psychology used in the treatment of the unfortunates in both groups is almost identical.

Although Abraham Lincoln was always a teetotaler, being in sympathy with the Washingtonians' method of procedure, he joined the organization and gave several lectures supporting the movement. The most important speech extant which he made on the subject of intemperance was delivered on February 22, 1842 before the Springfield (Ill.) Washington Temperance Society, held in the First Presbyterian Church. How Lincoln's attitude towards alcoholics coincides with the modern technique, in this new crusade to rehabilitate men and women who have been ostracized by society, can best be revealed by the following excerpts from his address of 1842:

"When one, who has long been known as a victim of intemperance, bursts the fetters that have bound him, and appears before his neighbors clothed, and in his right

mind,' a redeemed specimen of long lost humanity, and stands up with tears of joy trembling in eyes, to tell of the miseries once endured, now to be endured no more forever; of his once naked and starving children, now clad and fed comfortably; of a wife, long weighted down with woe, weeping, and a broken heart, now restored to health, happiness and renewed affection; and how easily it all is done, once it is resolved to be done; however simple his language, there is a logic, and an eloquence in it, that few, with human feelings, can resist. . . . Nor can his sincerity in any way be doubted; or his sympathy for those he would persuade to imitate his example, be denied. . . . When the conduct of men is designed to be influenced, persuasion, kind, unassuming persuasion, should ever be adopted. . . . Those whom they desire to convince and persuade, are their old friends and companions. They know they are not demons, nor ever the worst of men. They know that generally, they are kind, generous, and charitable, even beyond the example of their more staid and sober neighbors.

"By the Washingtonians, this system of consigning the habitual drunkard to hopeless ruin, is repudiated. They adopt a more enlarged philanthropy. They go for present as well as future good. They labor for all now living, as well as all hereafter to live.—They teach hope to all—despair to none. As applying to their cause, they deny the doctrine of unpardonable sin. As in Christianity it is taught, so in this they teach, that 'While the lamp holds out to burn, The vilest sinner may return.' And, what is a matter of the most profound gratulation, they, by experiment, and example upon example, prove the maxim to be no less true in the one case than in the chief of sinners, now the chief apostles of the cause.

"But if it be true, as I have insisted, that those who have suffered by intemperance personally, and have reformed, are the most powerful and efficient instruments to push the reformation to ultimate success, it does not follow, that those who have not suffered, have no part left them to perform. Whether or not the world would be vastly benefitted by a total and final banishment from it of all intoxicating drinks, seems to me not now to be an open question. Three-fourths of mankind confess the affirmative with their tongues, and, I believe, all the rest acknowledge it in their hearts.

"Turn now, to the temperance revolution. In it we shall find a stronger bondage broken; a viler slavery manumitted; a greater tyrant deposed. In it, more of want supplied, more disease healed, more sorrow assuaged. By it no orphans starving, no widows weeping. By it, none wounded in feeling, none injured in interest. Even the dram maker and dram seller, will have glided into other occupations so gradually, as never to have felt the shock of change; and will stand ready to join all others in the universal song of gladness.

"And when the victory shall be complete—when there shall be neither a slave nor a drunkard on the earth—how proud the title of that Land which may truly claim to be the birthplace and the cradle of both those revolutions, that shall have ended in that victory. How nobly distinguished that People, who shall have planted, and nurtured to maturity, both the political and moral freedom of their species."