

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THE HANDS OF LINCOLN

The hands are often used as the symbol of labor and Labor Day should offer a congenial atmosphere for a monograph on "The Hands of Lincoln." In his famous speech at the Wisconsin State Fair in 1859 Lincoln said:

"As each man has one mouth to be fed, and one pair of hands to furnish food, it was probably intended that that particular pair of hands should feed that particular mouth."

Up to the time that Lincoln was in his middle twenties all of his earnings had come from manual labor and his hands bore the brunt of providing for his livelihood. But the surgeon, the sculptor, the artist, the musician and all who succeed by the mastery of a delicate and unerring touch are also largely dependent on the hands to carry out the dictates of the mind.

Lincoln lived in a day when the phrenologists and the palmists interpreted and divined through observing bumps and lines on head and hands respectively, all done in the name of science. The palmists are still with us but some of them prefer to be known as "analysts of the human hand." One of these advanced palm readers came across the casts of Lincoln's hands about fifteen or twenty years ago admitting that to her it was "the climax of hand study" and concluding that "such greatness was revealed in Lincoln's hands that it would have been impossible for Lincoln not to have cut a heroic swath in history." Some of her deductions are of interest although we rather suspect that the identity of the hands and some of the general characteristics for which Lincoln is famous were known to her before the analysis of these particular hands were undertaken. She approached her study on the assumption that with persons who are right handed the left hand denotes "natural bent and is a clear guide to your career" and the right hand shows "what you have done so far and whether in addition to your work you have responded to your creative force." The analyst was especially struck by the marked difference between Lincoln's hands "the left hand gaunt and rugged in structure looked years and years older than his right."

Preliminary to the Chicago Wigwam Convention which nominated Lincoln, Leonard Volk, who had already made a life mask of Lincoln arranged to make casts of his hands at his home in Springfield on May 22. While Mr. Volk was on his way to Springfield he learned that on that very day, May 18, Lincoln had received the Republican nomination for the presidency. We are fortunate in having in Volk's own words this account of the making of the casts:

"By previous appointment I was to cast Mr. Lincoln's hands on the Sunday following this memorable Saturday, at 9 a.m. I found him ready, but he looked more grave and serious than he had appeared on previous occasions. I wished him to hold something in his right hand and he looked for a piece of pasteboard, but could find none. I told him a piece of round stick would do as well as anything. Thereupon he went to the woodshed and I heard the buck-saw go and soon he returned to the dining room (where I did the work) whittling the end of a piece of broomhandle. I remarked to him that he need not whittle the edges. 'Oh, well,' he said, 'I thought I would like to have it nice.'

"When I had successfully cast the mold of the right hand grasping the piece of broomstick, I began the left, pausing a few moments to hear Mr. Lincoln tell me about a scar on the thumb. 'You have heard them call me a railsplitter and you saw them carrying rails in the procession last evening. Well, it is true; I did split rails, and one day, while sharpening a wedge, on a log, the axe glanced and nearly took the end of my thumb off and there is the scar you see.'

"The right hand appeared swollen as compared with the left on account of excessive handshaking the evening before. The difference is distinctly shown in the cast."

Returning to Chicago Volk used the hands as models to be studied in the creation of an heroic statue of Lincoln and later on other sculptors were calling for the casts. Five days after Lincoln's assassination *The New York Tribune* carried the following notice about a cast of the martyred president's right hand:

"Messrs. Leconte & Dirne, No. 214 William St., have a mold of Mr. Lincoln's hand, taken from life, casts of which in plaster are for sale at Ball, Black & Co.'s, Broadway. The hand is closed over a round stick, and is, unquestionably, a very perfect representation of the original. We presume it to be the same as that referred to by a correspondent in another column, as taken by Mr. Vaux (Volk) of Chicago, soon after Mr. Lincoln was first chosen President. The cast has been displayed in Ball & Black's window, where it is attracting a good deal of sad interest."

William Dean Howells tells of a tragic episode which occurred in the home of James Lorrimer Graham one evening when a group of friends were being entertained. The bronze cast of a hand lay upon a shelf in the room where they had assembled and Edwin Booth observed it and enquired, "Whose hand is this, Lorry?" as he took it from the shelf and admired it. Mr. Graham appeared not to have heard the question but again the question came, "Whose hand is this?" All that was left for the host to reply was, "It's Lincoln's hand," and as Mr. Howells observed, "The man for whom it meant such unspeakable things put it softly down without a word."

These original casts of Lincoln's hands are preserved for posterity in the Smithsonian Institute at Washington. The descriptive card referring to the life mask and casts of Lincoln hands reads:

"This case contains the first cast made in the mold taken from the living face of Abraham Lincoln by Leonard W. Volk, sculptor, in Chicago, in the year 1860; also the first cast made in the molds from Lincoln's hands, likewise made by Leonard W. Volk in Springfield, Ill., on the Sunday following Lincoln's nomination for the presidency in May, 1860. Also the bronze cast of the face mold and bronze casts of the hands. Presented to the government of the United States for deposit in the National Museum by thirty-three subscribers."

Edmund Clarence Steadman wrote a poem of twelve stanzas entitled "The Hand of Lincoln" which is well known to Lincoln students. Thomas Curtis Clark wrote a poem of but twelve lines under the same caption, appearing in the book *Lincoln—Fifty Poems*. Clark explains that it was "written upon seeing a bronze of Lincoln's hand at the Art Institute in Chicago."