

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S DAY-STAR OF PEACE

Many traditions associated with the Lincoln story have taken on a new significance with the availability of the Lincoln Papers in The Library of Congress. On March 4, 1865, the very day that Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office, Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase, who had presided at Lincoln's induction, wrote a presentation note to Mrs. Lincoln which accompanied the Bible kissed by Lincoln in the inaugural ceremonies. In this complimentary message the Chief Justice mentioned "The most beautiful sunshine which just at the time the oath was taken dispersed the clouds that had previously darkened the sky." He further expressed his wish that the incident "might prove an auspicious omen of the dispersion of the clouds gray and the restoration of the clear sunlight of prosperous years with the wise and just administration of him who took it (the oath)."

The day following the second inaugural exercises Bishop Simpson delivered an address in the House of Representatives. One who was present has left this reminiscence about a demonstration which took place during the speech. He recalls, "Suddenly the Bishop drew himself up to his full height and said, 'I hope and trust (here he raised his right hand with index finger pointed upward) that the star, which stood over the President yesterday at his inauguration is but the harbinger, the day-star of Peace.'" Our informant states that "The audience was receptive, the words like magic. Men whooped and shouted and yelled and tossed their hats in air and then repeated the same thing over and over again."

Clarence True Wilson in his book on Matthew Simpson uses what seems to be an accurate excerpt from the Bishop's speech on March 5. The author places in quotes these words: "I am not much of a believer in signs and omens; but when yesterday, just as the old administration expired and the new one began, the rifted clouds let God's sunshine flow, I could but regard it as an augury of returning peace."

One of Lincoln's close friends, Isaac N. Arnold, in a book published in 1866 notes the dual appearance of heavenly bodies on that inaugural day and the reaction of the negroes. He states: "When the clouds broke away, and the sun came out in its brilliancy on inauguration day—especially when a star appeared at midday, these simple excitable, strongly religious and superstitious people, saw in these natural exhibitions, the palpable interposition of God."

It appears as if we have two separate and distinct phenomena which attracted the attention of the great crowds who attend the dedication. The sudden appearance of the sun seems to have been remembered by the larger number of those in attendance at the services, especially due to the vivid change in weather conditions.

From a dispatch of a news correspondent to a Philadelphia paper on March 4 we observe this impressive account of the strange spectacle: "Such a wet, dirty morning as this . . . hardly ever dawned upon Washington. Rain had been falling all yesterday and last night, making the proverbial filthy streets of the political metropolis filthier and more unpleasant than ever. It continued to rain until about nine o'clock this morning when it ceased; but the clouds still hung heavily and the atmosphere looked and felt wattery . . . about eleven o'clock the rain began to pour down again, and the vast masses of people in the ceremonies got well drenched. . . . The fickle weather at half past eleven changed again. The rain ceased."

The news reporter then proceeded to describe the scene which occurred but a short time after the drenching rain, and just at the opening of the ceremonies: "Just at this moment the sun burst forth through the dense mass of clouds that had hung like a pall over the city all morning. . . . The clouds disappeared almost as by a miracle."

An interesting version of Abraham Lincoln's reaction to the abrupt change in weather conditions comes from Noah Brooks who claims that "as Lincoln rose to deliver his inaugural address, the sun burst through the clouds irradiating the scene with splendor and light. It was a hopeful omen, and, speaking of it the next day, Lincoln with tears gathering in his eyes said: 'It made my heart jump! Let us accept it as a good sign my dear friends.'" Brooks further continued in his narration: "A tinge of superstition pervaded Lincoln's nature and more than once he spoke of the sunburst that had illuminated the sky as he stood on the steps of the beautiful capitol to assume the obligations of another term of the Presidency."

While the sudden appearance and brilliant illumination by the sun was possibly the most sensational of the two phenomena, the appearance of the day-star, introduced a mystical element to the whole proceedings which caused much wonderment.

The reminiscences of Smith Stimmel, a member of the military escort which followed next to the President's carriage as it returned to the White House after the inaugural ceremonies, have been preserved in a handsome brochure. He states: "Shortly after we turned onto Pennsylvania Ave., west of the capitol, I noticed the crowd along the street looking intently and some were pointing to something in the heavens towards the south. I glanced up in that direction and there in plain view shining in all her starlight beauty was the planet Venus."

Another eye witness of the strange phenomena in Washington that inaugural day was Ervin Chapman who stated in his book of reminiscence: "I saw groups of people at several widely separated points in the city all gazing towards the heavens, and at length I, too, paused and looked and to my unspeakable surprise I saw a bright and beautiful star shining with undimmed splendor in close proximity to the unclouded king of day."

Judge Robert W. McBride was standing within twenty feet of President Lincoln when he delivered his second inaugural address. He states: "While the ceremonies were in progress the clouds suddenly parted, and, although it was about midday, Venus was seen clearly shining in the blue sky. The attention of the immense throng was directed to it."

One of the witnesses already mentioned was informed that, "President Lincoln and his attendants saw the star as they were returning from the capitol to the White House and that it gave the President great delight as did the welcome sunburst at the inauguration."

Note—Several years ago the late V. H. Bliddeson of Tulsa, Okla., did considerable research about the timeliness of the clearing weather and the appearance of a star at midday. Upon his death his file of correspondence was forwarded to the Foundation by his son which data has furnished many leads for this monograph.