

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 1259

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

May 25, 1953

A GOOD OMEN AT WASHINGTON FLAG RAISING

The sun breaking through the clouds at the very moment Lincoln took the presidential oath at the First Inaugural exercises appeared to him to be a good omen. This display of the elements found a counterpart at a flag-raising in Washington a few weeks later when a stiff breeze sprang up to unfurl the flag, instantaneously with the President's raising it to the top of the mast. This, too, he thought to be a good omen.

Postmaster General Montgomery Blair and the associates in his department planned for May 22, 1861, at noon, a public demonstration of the raising of an American flag over the General Post Office Building in the nation's capital city. The *New York Herald* referred to the event as "one of the most interesting and enthusiastic scenes of the kind that ever was presented in the city of Washington."

The invitation to participate in the program must have reminded the President of the occasion when he was invited to raise the flag on the staff at a similar celebration in which he participated at Philadelphia en route to Washington. At Independence Hall on February 22 in the early morning he performed this same service and referred to the incident later in the day at Harrisburg in these words:

"Our friends there had provided a magnificent flag of the country. They had arranged it so that I was given the honor of raising it to the head of its staff; and when it went up, I was pleased that it went to its place by the strength of my own feeble arm. When, according to the arrangement, the cord was pulled and it flaunted gloriously to the wind without an accident, in the bright glowing sun-shine of the morning, I could not help hoping that there was in the entire success of that beautiful ceremony, at least something of an omen of what is to come. Nor could I help, feeling then as I often have felt, that in the whole of that proceeding I was a very humble instrument. I had not provided the flag; I had not made the arrangement for elevating it to its place; I had applied but a very small portion of even my feeble strength in raising it. In the whole transaction, I was in the hands of the people who had arranged it, and if I can have the same generous co-operation of the people of this nation, I think the flag of our country may yet be kept flaunting gloriously."

For the Washington celebration a platform had been erected for the accommodation of the President, his cabinet and several distinguished visitors. General Skinner on behalf of the officers and clerks of the Post Office Department addressed the President in part as follows:

"They, in manifestation to their devotion to the Country's Constitution, and the preservation of the Union, had determined to raise over the building the glorious Stars and Stripes, under which our forefathers fought, and under which they achieved our independence, under which it was now hoped freedom would be perpetuated in all coming time . . . they were proud of the opportunity of testifying to the President their fidelity and devotion to the Union which they were determined to maintain to the end."

The comments of the President were in two parts, one being the acknowledgement of the introductory remarks previous to the raising of the flag and another brief observation after the flag had been raised. In reply to General Skinner the President said:

"Sir—Permit me to say, in response to your invitation, that I am very happy, upon this, as upon all occasions, to

be an humble instrument in forwarding the very worthy object which you have expressed. I therefore shall take pleasure in performing the part assigned me upon this occasion, and I hope in a satisfactory manner. I suppose that extended remarks are not expected of me at this time, but that it is desired by all that we shall proceed at once to the work in hand, of raising our glorious national ensign to the proud and lofty eminence from which it is designed to have it wave. I am now ready to perform my part."

After these remarks the ropes attached to the staff which were to raise the flag to its proper location were placed in the hands of the President and "amid the most deafening applause from the crowd below the flag was raised to its prominent position." A reporter for the *New York Herald* states: "There being but a slight breeze at the time of its reaching its place at the top of the staff, it remained for a moment or two motionless, when suddenly, a gentle wind rising from the north, its ample folds were extended to the breeze in a most graceful and beautiful manner."

This good omen again brought the President to the front of the platform saying, "It occurred to me that a few words would be appropriate to this occasion." He then addressed the audience as follows: "I had not thought to say a word, but it has occurred to me that a few weeks ago the "Stars and Stripes" hung rather languidly about the staff all over the nation. So, too, with this flag, when it was elevated to its place. At first it hung rather languidly, but the glorious breeze came, and it now floats as it should. And we hope that the same breeze is swelling the glorious flag throughout the whole nation."

The above is the version of the speech as released by the *New York Herald*. While the *New York Tribune* reported the same general sentiment, the wording ascribed to the President is somewhat different, with the last sentence a better rendition than the *Herald* copy: He hoped "that the same breeze was now spreading out our glorious flag over all the nation."

Following these last remarks by the President several members of the cabinet spoke briefly, but the *New York Tribune* reporter gave more space to the remarks of Secretary of the Interior, Caleb Smith than to any of the others as he was known back in Indiana as a spell-binder on the platform. A paragraph from his address follows:

"No sight has ever been presented to the American eye, whether on the shores of our own country, or on distant soil, or on the wide extended ocean, which is more calculated to warm our hearts and excite our patriotism and kindly anew the flame of love for country than the sight of that glorious banner, the emblem of freedom and civil liberty."

Postmaster General Blair in behalf of the officers and clerks thanked the audience for their presence. He said in part: "The old flag is yet dear to all parts of the Union, and the people are coming forward everywhere to uphold and maintain it. It was not because of the beauty of its colors; but because it is associated with all that is dear to American freedom and because it is the emblem of freedom and glory, the emblem of popular government, so deep in the hearts of the nation."

See *Lincoln Lore*, Nos. 169, 795, 1195.