

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN'S SPECTACLES

One of the many interesting relics acquired by the Chicago Historical Society at the Oliver R. Barrett sale was a pair of spectacles. The catalogue gives but a brief description of them, stating they "were worn by Abraham Lincoln" and the further citation: "Complete; both lenses intact." They brought the sum of \$275, considerably more than the 37½ cents which Lincoln is said to have paid for a pair of glasses on May 26, 1856. Henry C. Whitney claims to have been with Lincoln at Bloomington, Ill. when he made the purchase in "a diminutive jewelry shop" remarking that "he had got to be 47 years old and 'kinder needed them'." Whitney further claimed that the glasses were the first Lincoln ever owned. We trust that Whitney's account of the business transaction will be more readily received than his reconstruction of the "Lost Speech" which Lincoln gave on the following day.

According to another story appearing in a newspaper of 1883 an unnamed veteran oculist of Chicago told a reporter of the Chicago Tribune: "I sold Abraham Lincoln his first pair of spectacles. It was about the time of the legislature of 1854, when he was a lawyer in Springfield. Some editor down there paid me \$15.00 to make Mr. Lincoln a pair of gold spectacles; and those were the first he ever wore. When he was elected President I made him three pairs, one of gold and two of steel."

The Illinois state business directory for 1860 lists two opticians in its classified directory, both practicing in Chicago, Lewis Mauss and John Phillips. The former in a display ad in the volume states that he was formerly with Benj. Pike & Sons of New York. His Chicago address he gave as No. 79 Clark Street, opposite the Court House. Among the items he advertised are "gold, silver, and steel spectacles and eye glasses." This Chicago oculist whom we have been unable to identify claimed he was also called upon to treat Robert Lincoln's eyes when he was a child.

Also there was in Chicago another doctor named Dr. Isom T. Underwood who called himself an oculist and aurist. His advertisement states that the Dr. "stands unequalled by any specialist for his science, skill and success" and further affirms that his surgery has "attracted patients from all parts of the Union, and given him a reputation as an eminent and skillful operator never before attained by any specialist on the continent."

James W. Somers, a close political friend of Lincoln who lived in Illinois, wrote a testimonial for the flyleaf of the identical Henry Clay works once in possession of Lincoln. After testifying to the authenticity of the volume he stated:

"In reading from this book I distinctly remember that Mr. Lincoln for the first time, used spectacles; apologizing to his audience, saying that he was not as young as he used to be. This was, I think, in the fall of 1856."

On Saturday evening, July 10, 1858 Lincoln spoke in Chicago. At the very opening of his speech he commented: "I do not intend to indulge in that inconvenient

mode sometimes adopted in public speaking, of reading from documents; but I shall depart from that rule so far as to read a little scrap from his (Douglas) speech . . . that is provided I can find it in the paper." At this point Lincoln hunted for the excerpt in the *Press and Tribune* which he held in his hand and a voice from the audience called out "get out your specs" as apparently he reached in his pocket for his glasses. Once again in the same speech he was interrupted when he stated that he held in his hand a statement he made a year ago on the Le Compton Constitution. He was interrupted by the double request to "read it." Lincoln replied, "Gentlemen reading from speeches is a very tedious business, particularly for an old man that has to put on spectacles, and the more so if the man be so tall that he has to bend over to the light."

An incident occurred on the occasion of the very first debate with Douglas at Ottawa which indicates that Lincoln had come to depend on his spectacles. He said to the audience, "I hope you will permit me to read a part of a printed speech that I made at Peoria." A voice yelled out to him, "Put on your specs." Lincoln acknowledged the deficiency in his eyesight with this retort, "Yes, sir, I am obliged to do so; I am no longer a young man." This comment brought laughter from the crowd. The excerpt was a long one of about 600 words.

An episode occurred on the way to Washington for the inaugural which reveals his impaired sight. Lincoln had written a special address to be delivered at Pittsburgh. When he was about half through his speech he had occasion to refer to a section in the Chicago platform. In mentioning the document he said, "Permit me, fellow citizens, to read the tariff plank of the Chicago platform, or rather, to have it read in your hearing by one who has younger eyes than I have." Although the passage was less than one hundred words, John Nicolay, his secretary, was requested by the President to read for him.

There is but one original photograph of Abraham Lincoln showing him wearing spectacles. Among all of the one hundred or more exposure made by various photographers this likeness of the spectacled Lincoln and his son Tad is the closest exhibit we have of what might be called a candid shot. Although it is true both father and son knew they were to be photographed, they were not posed by the photographer but fell naturally into the positions they occupied. The photographer observing this splendid opportunity to make a father and son portrait, created one of the most widely utilized Lincoln pictures extant. Most of the composite family groups are built around the portrait of the President wearing spectacles.

One who might be interested in a scientific discussion of Lincoln's eyesight might refer to a volume entitled *Lincoln and the Doctors*, by Dr. Milton H. Shutes, who suggests that while the President's eyes "were normal from an optical point of view" yet Dr. Shutes suggests from the strength of the lenses now in the spectacles in possession of the Chicago Historical Society, there is evidence of considerable eyestrain.