

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 1338

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

NOVEMBER 29, 1954

BEHOLDING LINCOLN'S FACE FOR THE LAST TIME

A recent visit to the Lincoln Tomb at Springfield where the Cashmans make visitors welcome and send them away with a greater veneration for the memory of Lincoln, recalled to the editor of *Lincoln Lore* the story of the last opening of the martyr's casket.

An unsuccessful attempt made by vandals on Nov. 7, 1876 to steal the body of Lincoln and hold it for ransom, was indirectly responsible for the formation of the "Lincoln Guard of Honor." It became a corporation under the laws of Illinois on February 13, 1880, the organization meeting having taken place at the Lincoln tomb on the preceding Lincoln's birthday. The original incorporators were J. C. Power, J. N. Reece, G. S. Dana, Jas. F. McNeill, N. B. Wiggins and Clinton L. Conkling. The chief purpose of the group was "to guard the precious dust of Abraham Lincoln from vandal hands." Also the group on the anniversary of Lincoln's death and later on his birthday, conducted appropriate memorial services.

George Francis Train, an eccentric author, was in Springfield on October 15, 1887 and may have been responsible for starting the rumors that eventually led to the opening of the casket four years later. The press dispatch about his visit states that he "succeeded in creating a sensation today at the tomb of Abraham Lincoln. . . . Train declared unqualifiedly that the remains in the sarcophagus were not those of Lincoln but only a dummy or a sham." He went on to explain he had reason to believe a body was substituted for Lincoln when the attempt was made to steal the body.

A commission which had been appointed to reconstruct the tomb was ready to place the body in its final resting place when another widespread rumor was afloat. It alleged they no longer possessed the body, causing them to order the opening of the casket before it was finally interred. A steel container, reinforced by concrete several feet below the place where the sarcophagus was to stand, had been prepared for the casket. On September 26, 1901, the surviving members of the Guard of Honor were invited to join the commissioners with a few other guests for the purpose of viewing and identifying the body. The members of the Guard of Honor had last looked upon the face of Lincoln on April 14, 1887. The casket was opened, the body identified and secretly buried.

The commissioners: John J. Brinhold, acting Governor of Illinois; Wm. U. Williamson, treasurer; and Joseph H. Freeman, Assistant Superintendent signed a certificate identifying the body.

The above mentioned Mr. Williamson has left this reminiscence of the occasion: "There was Lincoln, looking just like his last pictures, seemingly asleep. His face was darker than yours or mine now, but that was to be expected. Otherwise there was scarcely a change. His features stood out as they had been engraved on my memory from pictures of him. It seemed as though we might have spoken to him and awakened him. He wore a black bow tie like the one I have on and one bow was slightly mildewed. But those were the only signs of decomposition we could observe."

Supplementing the commissioner's report the Guard of Honor also subscribed to this certification:

"Springfield, Illinois
September 26, 1901.

"We, the undersigned, do hereby certify that on this twenty-sixth day of September, in the year of our Lord, one thousand nine hundred and one, we were present at the Lincoln monument in Oak Ridge cemetery, at Springfield, in the state of Illinois, and by request of the commissioners of the Lincoln monument, acting in their official capacity under their appointment, by virtue of an act of the general assembly of the state of Illinois, we personally viewed the remains of Abraham Lincoln, the casket having for that purpose been opened by direction of said commissioners.

"We further certify that the remains so viewed by us are in fact those of Abraham Lincoln, that we saw the same before they were first laid to rest; that we were each personally present in the same place on the fourteenth day of April, in the year of our Lord, eighteen hundred and eighty-seven, and then viewed the remains, and we again identified them as the same.

"We further certify that we were present at the place and day first above mentioned and saw the same casket containing these sacred remains placed in their final resting place in the Lincoln monument, under the direction of said commissioners.

"Witness our hands the day and year first aforesaid.

(Signed) George N. Black, Secretary and member of the National Lincoln Monument Association; J. N. Reece, Edward S. Johnson, Joseph P. Lindley, Clinton L. Conkling, Members of the Lincoln Guard of Honor."

Aside from the three commissioners mentioned and the five members of the Lincoln Guard of Honor, these other persons were present on the occasion: Mrs. Albert Bayless, James S. Culver, Ross Culver, Leon F. Hopkins, Mrs. Edward Johnston, Fleetwood H. Lindley, B. D. Monroe, James S. McCullough, Jacob Thomson, Floyd K. Whittermore, Charles L. Wiley. It will be observed that there were two women present. Mrs. Bayless was the wife of the Superintendent of Public Instruction for Illinois, and Mrs. Johnston was the wife of the custodian of the tomb. There were also two boys who viewed the remains, Ross Culver, son of James Culver, and Fleetwood Lindley, son of Joseph Lindley.

Two of the men present were tinsmiths employed to first cut away the zinc covering of the casket and then reseal it. They were Leon L. Hopkins and his nephew, Charles L. Wiley. It was Mr. Hopkins who did the work on April 14, 1887 and he was again called to assist in opening the casket on Sept. 26, 1901. While he worked alone on the earlier instance, he brought his nephew with him on this later call. It was Wiley who did the actual task of resealing the casket in 1901 and therefore he was virtually the last man to behold the face of Abraham Lincoln.

This is Charles L. Wiley's description of how the face and apparel of the departed Lincoln looked in 1901: "The President's features were well preserved and he appeared just as he did in pictures I had seen of him. He was dressed in a black suit, white shirt with collar attached and black tie. The pillow of the coffin head receded and the head was thrown back and slightly to one side. The same melancholy look was upon his face."