

LINCOLN LORE

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

Number 1399

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

January 30, 1956

LINCOLN AND LAUGHTER

Several years ago the Foundation secured a plaster panel, 50 inches by 25 inches, which portrays in full length, figures of six American humorists: Bret Harte, Mark Twain, James Whitcomb Riley, Abraham Lincoln, Josh Billings and Artemus Ward. Physically at least, Lincoln towers above the group. On the panel there are brief comments of the humorists and credited to Lincoln is the statement: "If I did not laugh I should die."

The leading article in a recent number of the *Saturday Evening Post*, entitled "The Land Where Laughs are Born," presents Kentucky as the state of the story teller and several of her favored sons are introduced who have excelled in the art of humor. Among the earlier generations the names of Watterson, Cobb and the still active Barkley appear. A contemporary picture of a younger group at a story telling bee at Lexington contains at least four Kentuckians known to Lincoln students: Thomas Clark, J. Winston Coleman, Jr., Holman Hamilton and William A. Townsend.

Lincoln is featured in the monograph as the outstanding humorist among the Presidents and a portrait of him is displayed with the citation: "Abraham Lincoln's story telling powers was part of his Kentucky birthright." The author of this comment might have documented the affirmation with this statement, left standing when Lincoln corrected one of the early campaign biographies:

"From his father came that knack of story telling which has made him so delightful among acquaintances and so irresistible in his stump and forensic drolleries." Time and again in introducing some bit of humor Lincoln would begin, "as my old father used to say" then would follow some pioneer witticism coming from the senior Lincoln. These were probably reminiscences of the early days when Abe and his father were together for twenty-one years.

When the Lincolns moved from Indiana to Illinois it is very evident that they did not leave behind them their sense of humor. The life on the eighth judicial circuit was made merry by the stories of Abraham Lincoln and they are legion. One of the county seats where both Hoosiers and Suckers gathered around the open fireplace for an evening of laughter was the McCormick Hotel at Danville, Ill., near the Indiana line. Ward H. Lamon, friend of Lincoln conducted his law office in this town.

There has just come into the hands of the editor of *Lincoln Lore* a pamphlet published in 1910 at Danville entitled *Story of a Store*. It was distributed by the Woodbury Drug Co. on its 50th anniversary. Previous to 1860 the firm's name was Sconce and Woodbury. The pamphlet mentions a day book which reveals Lincoln traded with the firm and Doctor Woodbury states that on one occasion Lincoln left "an order for the funny book of those days viz: *Phoenixiana*," or as the subtitle states: "Sketches and Burlesques by John Phoenix." *Lincoln Lore* (No. 511) once published a compilation of titles which were designated as the important source books of Lincoln's humor. *Phoenixiana* was not included but apparently should be added to the list. The Foundation is fortunate in having a copy of this rather scarce item, it having been purchased in Long Beach, Cal., not far from where it was published.

Lincoln must have been amused at the frontispiece autographed, "Yours respectfully John P. Squibob." Under this signature is this printed note: "The autograph may be relied on as authentic, as it is written by one of Mr. Squibob's most intimate friends." Squibob as portrayed by the frontispiece is a laughing man with extremely long nose and large pointed ears. The book was copyrighted in 1855 and the tenth edition bears the date 1856 so it must have been widely distributed during its first year. It was dedicated to Dr. Charles M. Hitchcock of San Francisco and most of the monologues are oriented in either San Francisco or in San Diego, the city where it was published.

The first chapter of the book would be of special interest to any one like Lincoln who had been a surveyor and who was familiar with the various instruments used. They served as leads to numerous puns which were then popular vehicles for the humorist. Referring to the surveying party Phoenix said: "Each employee was furnished with a gold chronometer watch, and, by a singular mistake, a diamond pin and a gold chain; for direction having been given that they should be furnished with 'chains and pins' meaning of course such articles as are used in surveying." Each surveyor was instructed "to set his watch by Greenwich meantime, which though excellent to give one the longitude, is for ordinary purposes the meanest time that can be found."

The chapter on astronomy must have aroused memories in the mind of Lincoln having been interested in that science when but a youth. After commenting on Isaac Newton observing an apple fall from a tree, with his subsequent discovery of the law of gravitation, Phoenix concluded: "Thus we see that as an apple originally brought sin and ignorance into the world, the same fruit proved thereafter the cause of vast knowledge and enlightenment . . . had the fallen fruit been a pear an orange or a peach, there is little doubt that Newton would have eaten it up and thought no more of the subject."

Phoenix elaborated on the moon and stated that upon the latest advice no one had succeeded in reaching it. He ventures: "Should any one do so hereafter, it will probably be a woman as the sex will never cease making an exertion for that purpose as long as there is a man in it."

This further comment about the moon must have been appreciated by Lincoln especially in later years: "We may consider the moon an excellent institution, among the many we enjoy under a free republican form of government, and it is a blessed thing to reflect that the President of the United States cannot veto it."

During the afternoon of Lincoln's last day he was entertaining some Illinois friends, among them former Governor Richard J. Oglesby. Miss Ida M. Tarbell at one time had before her some reminiscences prepared by Oglesby, recalling this last visit to the President. He stated: "Lincoln got to reading some humorous book—I think it was by 'John Phoenix.'" So it appears that not only as a lawyer on the circuit in Illinois in 1855, but ten years later as President in 1865 he still found enjoyment in the book of humor. It may be that *Phoenixiana* was the last book from which Abraham Lincoln ever read.