

# 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 1402

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

February 20, 1956

## THE INITIATORY PATRIOTIC ADDRESS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

The birthday of the father of his country reminds historians of The Farewell Address of George Washington which he prepared three years before his death. One of the memorable experiences of the editor of *Lincoln Lore* was the privilege of holding in his hands the scroll which contains the original transcript of the first President's final message to the American people. One cannot read this most famous of Washington's manuscripts without being reminded of what we might term the Initiatory Address of Abraham Lincoln. Both Washington in his late years and Lincoln in his early years show the same earnest concern for the welfare of the nation.

When Lincoln was not more than ten or twelve years old he read Weems' Washington. It not only contained the story of the Revolutionary War, and a character sketch of the first President, but also The Farewell Address of Washington. Comments which Lincoln made in later life about his early reading of Weems' book reveal that he was greatly impressed by its contents. Lincoln's initial patriotic address at Springfield is his first printed reaction to the Washington story. The following glowing tribute to the founding fathers reveal the close association of the Washington-Lincoln saga:

"They were a fortress of strength; but, what invading foemen could never do, the silent artillery of time has done; the levelling of its walls. They are gone. They were a forest of giant oaks; but the all-resistless hurricane has swept over them, and left only, here and there, a lonely trunk, despoiled of its verdure, shorn of its foliage; unshading and unshaded, to murmur in a few more gentle breezes, and to combat with its mutilated limbs, a few more ruder storms, then to sink, and be no more. They were the pillars of the temple of liberty; and now, that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall, unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason."

This maiden patriotic address of Lincoln's delivered before the Young Men's Lyceum at Springfield, Illinois, up until recently carried a date one whole year too early. This fact has been partly responsible for the failure to comprehend its true significance. Incorrectly dated January 27, 1837, it left the impression that certain important episodes which occurred later in 1837 followed the delivery of the address. In reality these same events preceded the address and were largely responsible for the argument developed in the address which was not delivered until January 27, 1838. In other words, the first patriotic speech of Abraham Lincoln to attract attention was not a flowery literary society declamation prepared for a specific occasion as has been implied, but a genuine passionate outburst of indignation towards mob action and lawlessness.

The most dramatic event in the struggle between the friends and foes of abolitionism in the western country occurred on the night of November 7, 1837 when Elija P. Lovejoy, a newspaper editor, was murdered at Alton, Ill. and his printing press for the fourth time was thrown into the Mississippi River. Alton was only about 75 miles from Springfield and the whole state aroused, also in cities as far away as Boston, mass meetings were held to protect against what was called the "infamy of Alton." Late in the same month of No-

vember, a mob hung three white men, professional gamblers, at Vicksburg, Miss., which lawless violence was reported in the *Illinois State Register* for November 24, 1837.

Two months after these mob demonstrations Lincoln delivered his initiatory speech on January 27, 1838 using as his title "The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions." After an eloquent introduction referring to the nation's prosperity and security from attack overseas, Lincoln plunged into the main argument of his speech suggesting that "as a nation of free men we must live through all time, or die by suicide." He continued, "I hope I am not over wary; but if I am not, there is, even now, something of ill-omen amongst us. I mean the increasing disregard for law which pervades the country. . . . Accounts of outrages committed by mobs, form the every-day news of the times. They have pervaded the country, from New England to Louisiana."

Lincoln first delves into specific cases at Vicksburg and St. Louis and observes: "Thus, then, by the operation of this mobocratic spirit, which all must admit, is now abroad in the land, the strongest bulwark of any Government, and particularly of those constituted like ours, may effectually be broken down and destroyed. . . . Whenever this effect shall be produced among us; whenever the vicious portion of population shall be permitted to gather in bands of hundreds and thousands, and burn churches, ravage and rob provision stores, throw printing presses into rivers, shoot editors, and hang and burn obnoxious persons at pleasure, and with impunity; depend on it, this Government cannot last. . . . If the laws be continually despised and disregarded, if their (the people's) rights to be secure in their persons and property, are held by no better tenure than the caprice of a mob, the alienation of their affections from the Government is the natural consequence; and to that, sooner or later, it must come."

After pointing out mobocracy as a point of danger to the country, Lincoln raises the question, "How shall we fortify against it?" He feels that the answer is a very simple one, namely: "Never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violence by others." Lincoln then suggests how this may be accomplished and the following paragraph is easily the outstanding appeal in the address:

"To the support of the Constitution and laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor;—let every man remember that to violate the law, is to trample on the blood of his father, and to tear the charter of his own, and his children's liberty. Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be written in primmers, spelling books, and in almanacs;—let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars."

Lincoln concluded this address with an appeal for "general intelligence, sound morality, and in particular a reverence for the constitution and laws." A tribute to George Washington is used as the closing sentence.