

# LINCOLN LORE

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## CENTENNIAL OF "THE LOST SPEECH"

Among the many factors contributing to Abraham Lincoln's ascendancy to the chief executive's chair his forensic ability must be given an important place. We are in agreement with one of his biographers who concluded: "Had Abraham Lincoln been everything else that he was and lacked his oratorical power he would never have been President of the United States." We are approaching the one hundredth anniversary of the occasion at Bloomington, Illinois on May 29, 1856 when he delivered what has been called his most eloquent early address now known as the Lost Speech. Appropriate ceremonies have been arranged for this centennial anniversary day and a bronze tablet will be dedicated calling attention to the historic oration delivered there a hundred years ago. In the Spring of 1836, 20 years before the Lost Speech was delivered one who heard Lincoln stated, "I was fresh from Kentucky and had heard many of her great orators. It seemed to me then . . . I never heard a more effective speaker."

Four years before the famous speech at Bloomington, Lincoln delivered at Springfield a eulogy on Henry Clay who had passed away at Washington on June 29, 1852. Lincoln first appeared in Bloomington in 1838 and then at frequent intervals during his Illinois residence. The night before his famous "Lost Speech" was delivered, he among others, was called on for a talk by an assembly of people at the Pike House. According to the press "Lincoln led off; said he didn't expect to make a speech then; that he had prepared himself for one, but 'twas not suitable at that time; but that after awhile he would make them a most excellent one."

It is not known generally, that Henry Clay also delivered a "Lost Speech," which Lincoln mentions in the Springfield eulogy in this manner. "Several of his speeches, on these occasions (Congress 1812), were reported and are still extant; but the best of these all never was. During its delivery the reporters forgot their vocations, dropped their pens, and sat enchanted near the beginning to quite the close. The speech now lives only in the memory of a few old men; and the enthusiasm with which they cherish their recollection of it is absolutely astonishing. The precise language of this speech we shall never know."

This same comment made by Lincoln about Clay's lost speech parallels remarks about his own effort at Bloomington when "reporters dropped their pens, and sat enchanted." The similarity of the reaction to these two lost speeches is something more than a coincident as we shall observe.

While the contents of Lincoln's unrecorded speech was lost to posterity, the enthusiasm it engendered burst forth again but three weeks later at the National Republican Convention at Philadelphia. Unknown to Lincoln, his Illinois friends in attendance still under the spell of his oratory at Bloomington, put forth his name as a vice presidential candidate. Although no organized effort was made on his behalf the convention aware of his grand contribution in the West to the new party, gave him a testimonial recognition on the first ballot of 110 votes in the vice presidential contest. Lincoln was in court at Urbana while the convention was in session, and when showing a Chicago paper giving an account of the balloting for the vice presidency with

his name and the number of votes cast for him he commented: "I reckon that aint me, there's a great man up in Massachusetts named Lincoln, and I reckon it's him."

Just how much the attitude of the first Republican Convention in 1856 encouraged his candidacy in 1860 is problematical. While he may not have been very optimistic about gaining the first place on the ticket he must have been convinced at least of his availability as the Vice Presidential candidate at Chicago.

Too little attention has been paid to the importance of the Bloomington speech as it was related to subsequent events in Lincoln's political career. Nicolay and Hay claimed that the speech "crowned Lincoln's right to the popular leadership in his own state which thereafter was never disputed." More important was the impact of the speech on Lincoln himself. He could never have been the same man after the "Lost Speech" and its aftermath at Philadelphia, which had demonstrated his popularity with the party as a whole. We are in error if we assume that the debates with Douglas offered the first indication of Lincoln as a national political leader in the new party.

"Joseph Medill of the *Chicago Tribune* commented on the importance of the Bloomington effort: "He bounded to the leadership of the Republican Party of Illinois. On that occasion he planted the seed which germinated into a presidential candidacy."

Returning to the eulogy which Lincoln pronounced at Springfield we find an interesting analysis of Henry Clay's oratory which Lincoln expressed in these words:

"Mr. Clay's eloquence did not consist, as many fine specimens of eloquence do, of types and figures—of antithesis, and elegant arrangement of words and sentences; but rather of that deeply earnest and impassioned tone, and manner, which can proceed only from great sincerity and a thorough conviction in the speaker, of the justice and importance of his cause. That it is, that truly touches the chords of human sympathy; and those who heard Mr. Clay, never failed to be moved by it, or ever afterwards, forgot the impression."

When Lincoln discovered what he felt to be the secret of Clay's eloquence in his "deeply earnest and impassioned tone and manner" and also his sincerity, conviction, and his justice, while observing Clay, Lincoln had inadvertently turned the spot light of analysis upon the charm of his own oratorical powers. One Illinois editor stated in 1856 referring to Lincoln's oratory, "Here is a southerner with eloquence that would bear a comparison with Henry Clay." There were those who commented after hearing Lincoln, "This is Henry Clay speaking to us again."

While Lincoln was not the first public man to introduce the conversational method in his speeches he did very much to popularize it. He spoke to audiences as he would speak to a friend but of course with a stronger voice. His attitude towards an assembly is well illustrated by the scriptural passage: "Come let us reason together." His arguments were presented so simply and clearly but with such logic and sequence, that one went away believing what Mr. Lincoln believed and resolving to do as he suggested.