



Lincoln Lore

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Mr. Lincoln's Whiskers

Abraham Lincoln was the first President of the United States to wear a beard, and in the late months of 1860 and the early months of 1861 practically everybody was talking about this "noble hirsute appendage" which the President-elect had affected. When Lincoln's beard first started to grow, a newspaper reporter with a whimsical sense of humor wrote that "the President was putting on (h)airs."

Those close to Lincoln in the Republican party were quick to point out that bearded men of action were now destined to take over the reins of government from clean-shaven men who dressed in broadcloth and whose chief attribute was oratory. The opposition press saw "something supremely ridiculous . . . in having a President-elect . . . devote his energies to cultivating whiskers." Nevertheless, beards were becoming popular in the 1860s.

Perhaps there were several good reasons why Lincoln grew a beard while waiting to assume office. Lincoln had no illusions about his appearance, but no one knows for certain that he grew whiskers to cover up his homeliness. Some influential political leaders in the Republican party advised a beard to give the incoming President a look of distinction. In the Robert Todd Lincoln papers of the Library of Congress, there is a letter addressed to Lincoln, by the True Republicans, suggesting that he should "cultivate whiskers and wear standing collars." The letter, dated October 12, 1860, (three days before Grace Bedell wrote Lincoln) follows:

October 12, 1860

To the Hon. Abm. Lincoln

Dear Sir

Allow a number of very earnest Republicans to intimate to you, that after



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Grace Bedell wrote Mr. Lincoln that "My father has just (come) home from the fair and brought home your picture and Mr. Hamlin's." Further on in her letter she made the comment that "your face is so thin." Undoubtedly she was referring to the "National Republican Chart" featuring the Presidential Campaign of 1860. This broadside, measuring 28"x36", was copyrighted in 1860 by H. H. Lloyd and Co., Inc. through the Clerk's Office of the District Court for the Southern District of New York. In a letter to H. W. Fay of DeKalb, Illinois, dated April 3, 1890 Mrs. Billings stated that "a glance at the huge and gaudy poster brought us children by our father was rather disappointing . . ." This political broadside in color is perhaps one of the most valuable to be found today in any Lincoln collection. The Foundation has owned an excellent copy for many years. In 1965 a copy sold for \$500.

oft-repeated views of the daguerreotypes; which we wear as tokens of our devotedness to you; we have come to the candid determination that these medals would be much improved in appearance, provided you would cultivate whiskers and wear standing collars.

Believe us nothing but an earnest desire that "our candidate" should be the best looking as well as the best of the rival candidates, would induce us to trespass upon your valued time.

Your most sincere and earnest well wishers

True Republicans

P.S. We really fear votes will be lost to "the cause" unless our "gentle hints" are attended to.

T. R.

Address in reply box 1444, New York City.

C. D. L.

It was eleven-year-old Grace Bedell of Westfield, New York, who forthrightly broached the subject. She wrote Lincoln that her father (Norman Bedell, a foundry man) had brought Lincoln's picture home from the fair, along with that of Mr. Hamlin (Lincoln's vice-presidential running mate). She discreetly pointed out in her letter that "all the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husbands to vote for you . . . If you would let your whiskers grow." Grace was convincing. She wrote, "I have got four brothers and part of them will vote for you anyway and if you will let your whiskers grow I will try to get the rest of them to vote for you." She continued, "You would look a great deal better for your face is so thin." Lincoln's eleven-year-old correspondent assured him, "My father is going to vote for you . . . if I was a man I would vote for you to but I will try to get everyone to vote for you that I can."

Lincoln replied to Grace on October 19, 1860, "As to the whiskers, having never worn any, do you not think people would call it a piece of silly affection (*sic*) if I were to begin now?"

Private
Springfield Ill Dec 19 1860
Miss Grace Bedell
My dear little Man

Dear Sir
Your kind letter has just come to me and brought home your picture and Mr. Hamlin's. I am a little girl only eleven years old but want you should be President of the United States very much. I hope you won't think me very bold to write to such a great man as you are. Have you any little girls about as large as I am if so give them my love and tell her that I would like to see her. I have got 4 brothers and part of them will vote for you any way and if you will let your whiskers grow I will try and get the rest of them to vote for you that I can. I think that rail fence around your picture makes it look very pretty. I have got a little baby sister she is nine weeks old and is just as cunning as can be. When you direct your letter to Grace Bedell Westfield Chautauqua County New York I must not write any more answer this letter right off. Good bye
Grace Bedell

From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

This two page letter, preserved by President Lincoln, came into the possession of Robert Todd Lincoln on April 15, 1865. Upon his death July 26, 1926 at Manchester, Vermont, the letter became the property of Mary Harlan Lincoln. Mrs. Lincoln, thinking the letter should become the property of Mrs. Grace Bedell Billings, gave the document to the Hon. George A. Dondero, a congressman from Royal Oak, Michigan, to deliver. Mr. Dondero, upon offering the letter to Mrs. Billings, received a letter from her in 1929 in which she made the following comment: "It seems quite wonderful that the letter written almost sixty nine years since should yet be in existence. I think you should retain it if you really wish, with my thanks for your interest in it." Mr. Dondero accepted the gift; however, he took the letter to Delphos, Kansas and showed it to Mrs. Billings.

The original letter is today in a vault in Royal Oak, Michigan. Mr. Dondero, in his article "Why Lincoln Wore a Beard," which appeared in the July, 1931 issue of the *Journal of The Illinois State Historical Society*, has provided a great deal of information concerning the Bedell family; namely, that Grace's two Republican brothers, Stephen and Frank, voted for Lincoln, but her two Democratic brothers, Levant and George, voted for Stephen A. Douglas. The "little baby sister" was Eunice Bedell who grew to womanhood and died in 1890. Of the ten children born to Norman Bedell and Amanda Bedell, five boys and five girls, Grace outlived them all.

On March 17, 1931, Mrs. Grace Bedell Billings wrote Dr. Louis A.

Warren from Delphos, Kansas, "It seems so remarkable that the letter sent to Mr. Lincoln should still be in existence, a fact of which I was ignorant until a little more than a year ago."

Westfield, Chautauqua Co., N.Y.

Oct. 15, 1860.

Hon. A. B. Lincoln,
Dear Sir:

My father has just home from the fair and brought home your picture and Mr. Hamlin's. I am a little girl only eleven years old, but want you should be President of the United States very much so I hope you won't think me very bold to write to such a great man as you are. Have you any little girls about as large as I am if so give them my love and tell her to write me if you cannot answer this letter. I have got four brothers and part of them will vote for you any way and if you let your whiskers grow I will try and get the rest of them to vote for you you would look a great deal better for your face is so thin. All the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husbands to vote for you and then you would be President. My father is a going to vote for you and if I was a man I would vote for you to but I will try to get every one to vote for you that I can. I think that rail fence around your picture makes it look very pretty. I have got a little baby sister, she is nine weeks old and is just as cunning as can be. When you direct your letter direct to Grace Bedell, Westfield Chautauqua County, New York. I must not write any more. Answer this letter right off.

Good Bye,
GRACE BEDELL.

Sometime after this correspondence, Lincoln let his whiskers grow and thereby made obsolete all the paintings, lithographs and engravings that had been published and widely circulated during his 1860 presidential campaign. The first photograph of Lincoln with a beard (0-40) was made by Samuel G. Alschuler, Chicago, Illinois, on Sunday, November 25, 1860. The first photograph of Lincoln with a full beard (0-41) was made for the Ohio sculptor, Thomas D. Jones, by C. S. German of Springfield, Illinois. The photo was probably taken on Sunday, January 13, 1861.

Several years ago State Senator Norman G. Flagg, of Illinois, found an old letter, written by an ancestor, while visiting Springfield. The letter reported that "Old Abe is raising whiskers and is not as ugly as he was." The date was January 1, 1861, midway between the election and the inauguration.

Many people wondered how the beard could have grown so rapidly when they first saw the President-elect on his inaugural tour en route

Private
Springfield Ill Dec 19 1860
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Dear Sir
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Grace Bedell

From a Lincoln National Life Foundation photograph

This original letter was sold for \$20,000 to David L. Wolper of Hollywood, California at the Charles Hamilton Autograph Auction, held at The Waldorf Astoria in New York City on March 22, 1966. Mr. Wolper, a long-time collector of Civil War documents, produces documentary films for television.

This letter, marked "Private" at the top of the page, is said to have changed "the face" of history and it is one of the most publicized in all Lincolniana. It is quoted in many elementary school text books, and numerous books and pamphlets have featured it because of its human interest aspect.

For many years this letter has been retained as the property of Grace Bedell (Billings') family. It was kept in a bank vault in Delphos, Kansas and exhibited only on special occasions. The Billings family received many offers for the letter over the years from historical societies, private individuals, institutions and dealers. The offers were always declined until it was finally decided to place the letter at auction in March, 1966.

In Charles Hamilton's Auction Catalogue, Number 12, the physical condition of the manuscript is described: "This letter is matted and slightly browned. The center-fold is strengthened with tissue on blank verso, and there are several very small tears. Some of Lincoln's writing is smudged, and there are numerous water-stains, caused, as Grace Bedell related, by falling flakes of snow as she opened Lincoln's letter, 'a slight skiff of snow was falling . . . and it melted as it fell . . . flakes of snow fell on it as a very excited little girl was trying to read a letter and run home as fast as she could at the same time.'"

This is said to be the most famous and valuable Lincoln letter ever to be offered at auction. In an interview with the press (*New York Times*) "Mr. Wolper said he bought the letter because I happen to be a Lincoln fan. As a collector and from an emotional point of view it's worth \$20,000 to me."

to Washington, D.C. On February 16, 1861 an interesting incident in connection with Lincoln's beard occurred in Westfield, New York. An early account of what happened has perhaps been best related in a letter Grace Bedell wrote to William H. Herndon on December 14, 1866. Writing from Albion, Orleans County, New York, she addressed the lawyer-biographer incorrectly as Hon. L. R. Herndon: "Hearing that you were preparing for press, the life of the noblest of men, and that you wished all unpublished letters of his composing sent to you, I concluded that I would ask if a letter which he once wrote me would prove acceptable. I do not know that it would answer your purpose or I would send a copy of it now, however, I will tell you its subject and you shall judge. Before Mr. Lincoln's election in 1860, I, then a child of eleven years, was presented with his lithograph. Admiring him with my whole heart, I thought still, that his appearance would be much improved should he cultivate his whiskers. Childish thoughts must have utterance, so I proposed that idea to him, expressing as well as I was able, the esteem in which he was held among honest men. A few days after I received an answer to my communication, a kind and friendly letter, which is still in my possession. It appears that I was not forgotten for after his election to the presidency, while on his journey to Washington, the train stopped at Westfield, Chautauqua Co., at which place I then resided. Mr. Lincoln said 'I have a correspondent in this place a little girl, her name is Grace Bedell and I would like to see her.' I was conveyed to him, he stepped from the cars extending his hand and saying 'You see I have let these whiskers grow for you Grace,' kissed me shook me cordially by the hand, and was gone. Afterward I was frequently assured of his remembrance. If this letter would be of any



From Life of Abraham Lincoln by Clifton M. Nichols Mast, Crowell & Kirkpatrick, 1896, page 141

Grace Bedell Billings

Grace Bedell was married in 1867 to George N. Billings, a veteran of the Civil War, having served in the 8th New York Heavy Artillery under General Grant. In 1870 Billings went to Greeley, Colorado, but not liking the soil of that region he returned by stage coach to Kansas, where he took up a homestead near Delphos in the Salomon River Valley. There Mrs. Billings joined him. He later became identified with the banking business. The grandsons of Grace Bedell are presently engaged in the banking business (The State Bank of Delphos) where they hold positions of President, Vice President and Cashier. Mrs. Billings died at the age of 88 years on November 2, 1936.



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

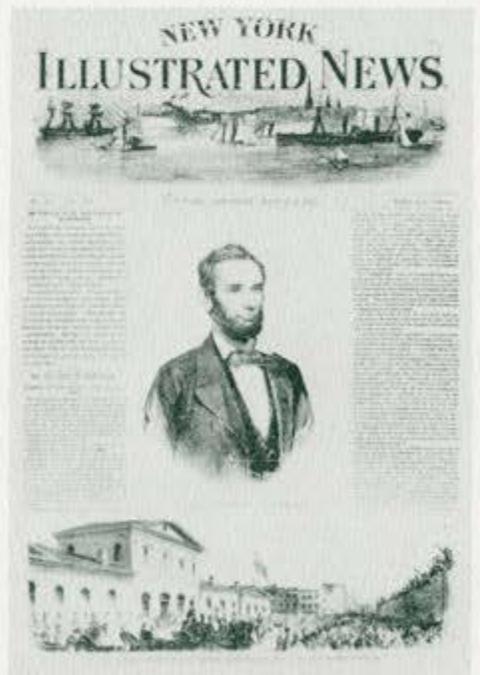
Railroad Tracks at Westfield, New York

The Lincoln inaugural train stopped at Westfield, Chautauqua County, New York on February 16, 1861. Grace Bedell went to the railroad station to see the President-elect, accompanied by two older sisters, one of whom had an escort by the name of McCormack. Lincoln could be heard, but because of the crowd Grace got only a few glimpses of the new President. Once she heard him inquire for her, she took the hand of her sister's beau who made a line through the crowd and led her to a low platform along the track beside the train.

service in completing your book, I should be pleased to send you a copy." Apparently, Herndon requested a copy of Mr. Lincoln's letter as one, in Grace Bedell's handwriting, is to be found in the Herndon-Weik collection in the Library of Congress. Miss Bedell was a very poor copyist. She left out the word "Private" and her arrangement of Lincoln's words to the line are different. She also left out three words, "years of age", and changed "affection" to read "affectation." Her closing lines were unlike those written by Lincoln, and it appears that she furnished Herndon with a copy of the letter written from memory.

A more complete account of the Westfield incident was prepared by Mrs. Grace Bedell Billings to be read at the dedication of the Foundation's Lincoln Library-Museum on February 11, 1931. Mrs. Billings, then 83 years of age, recalled the most exciting episode of her entire life.

"Before President Lincoln's special train arrived at Westfield, N.Y. Mr. Lincoln is said to have asked Hon. Geo. W. Patterson whose home was in Westfield if he knew a family there named Bedell. Mr. Patterson replied in the affirmative whereupon Mr. Lincoln told him that he had received a letter from a little girl named Grace Bedell in which she had advised him to wear whiskers, thinking it would improve his looks. He said, 'The character of the letter was unique, so different from the many self-seeking and threatening ones I was receiving every



From the New York Illustrated News

The newspaper dated March 2, 1861 which featured Lincoln's beard with a picture of the President-elect entitled, "Mr. Lincoln In His New Facial Appointments" and a short article bearing the same title. On page 272 of this same issue is to be found the Bellingham Ointment advertisement, a product which Mr. Lincoln is alleged to have used to stimulate the growth of his whiskers.

BELLINGHAM'S
STIMULATING
ONGUENT
FOR THE
HAIR &
WHISKERS.

PRESIDENT LINCOLN.
PRESIDENT LINCOLN.
PRESIDENT LINCOLN.

DID YOU SEE HIS MUSTACHE?
DID YOU SEE HIS MUSTACHE?
DID YOU SEE HIS MUSTACHE?

DID YOU SEE HIS WHISKERS?
DID YOU SEE HIS WHISKERS?
DID YOU SEE HIS WHISKERS?

BELLINGHAM'S ONGUENT.

One Dollar a Box.

HORACE L. HOGEMAN & CO.
DRUGGISTS, &c.
24 William Street, New York

DO YOU WANT WHISKERS?
DO YOU WANT A MUSTACHE?
BELLINGHAM'S

STIMULATING ONGUENT.
For the Whiskers and Hair.

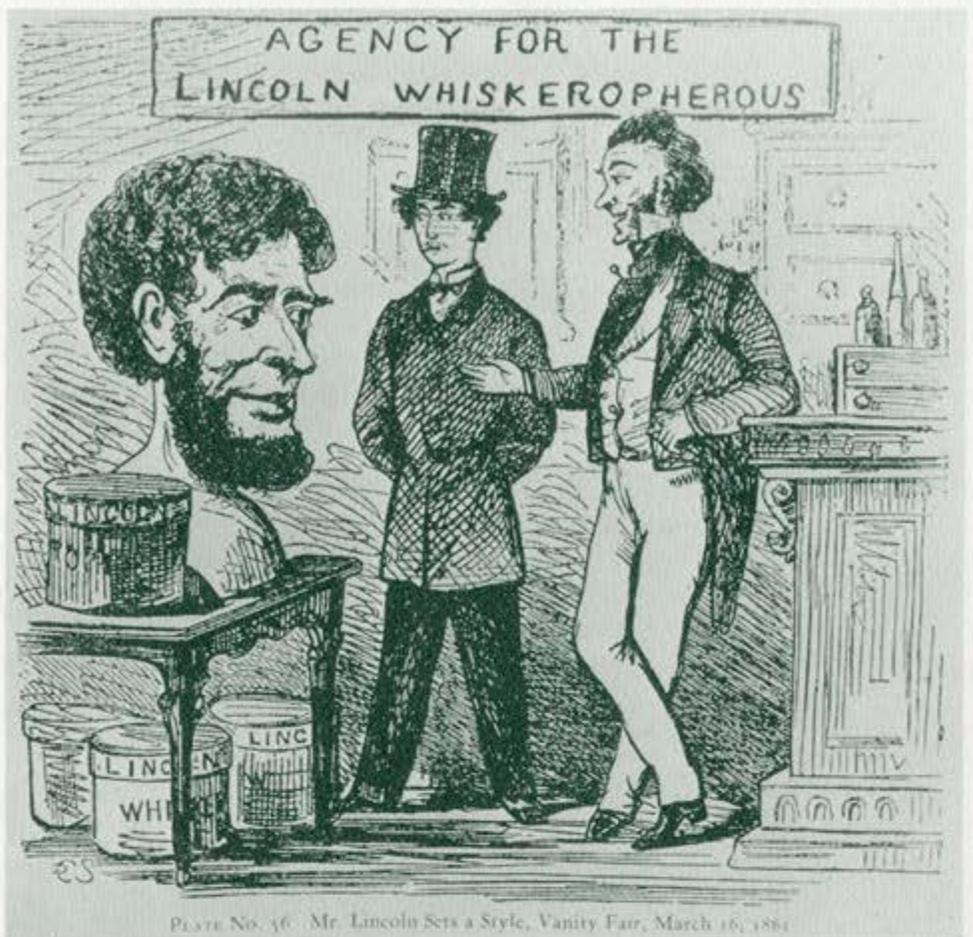
THE STIMULATING ONGUENT

WHISKERS OR A MUSTACHE.

HORACE L. HOGEMAN & CO.
DRUGGISTS, &c.
24 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y.

*From a Lincoln National Life
Foundation Photograph*

This unauthorized and fictitious advertisement concerning Lincoln's use of a whisker-growing concoction appeared in *The New York Illustrated News* on March 2, 1861, just two days before he was inaugurated President of the United States. It is worth while to note that a Bellingham Stimulating Onguent advertisement was also run in the March 2, 1861 (page 239) issue of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspapers* but apparently the editors of that journal would not sanction the mention of Lincoln's beard in the advertising copy.



Photograph from Vanity Fair

The *Vanity Fair* cartoon which lampooned Lincoln's whiskers, taken from page 126 of the March 16, 1861 issue. The caption follows: "Delusive Druggist. — There's 'is Heffigy in wax, Sir, whiskers and all. Try one of them pots, and in three weeks you'll be as 'airy and 'ansom as 'im." (meaning Lincoln).

day that it came to me as a relief and a pleasure.

"I was at the station with my two sisters and a Mr. McCormack who had escorted us there when the president's train arrived. In my hand was a bouquet of roses which a neighbor had furnished so that I might give them to the president. The crowd was so large and I was so little that I could not see the president as he stood on the rear platform of his train making his address. But at the end of a short speech he announced, 'I have a little correspondant in this place, and if she is present will she please come forward?'"

"Who is it? — What is her name?" shouted a chorus of voices from the crowd.

"Grace Bedell," answered Mr. Lincoln.

"Taking my hand, the gentleman who had escorted us to the station made a lane through the crowd and led me to the low platform beside the train. The president stepped down from (the) car, shook my hand, and kissed me. 'You see,' he said, indicating his beard, 'I let these whiskers grow for you, Grace.'"

"The crowd cheered and the president reentered his car. I was so surprised and embarrassed by the president's unexpected conduct that I ran home as fast as I could, dodging in and out between horses and

buggies and once crawling under a wagon. Such was my confusion that I completely forgot the bouquet of roses that I was going to give to the great man to whom I had offered such rare advice, and when I arrived home I had the stems, all that remained of the bouquet, still tightly clutched in my hand.

"It seemed to me as the president stooped to kiss me that he look very kind, yes, and sad."

This statement was most appropriate for the Foundation's Lincoln Library-Museum dedication as the short play "Why Lincoln Grew A Beard" by Dr. Louis A. Warren was presented to the assembled audience. Some of the Foundation director's own children played roles in the skit. This dramatic presentation was never published, but it was widely distributed many years ago to interested *Lincoln Lore* subscribers.

To be sure, the whiskers stirred up much ridicule in the contemporary press. The newspaper *Atlas & Argus* of February 23, 1861 carried an article copied from *The Orleans Republican* as follows: "There seems to be something supremely ridiculous in these troubled times, when our very national existence is imperilled, in having a President elect who devotes his energies to cultivating whiskers, and otherwise improving his personal appearance.

(To be continued in the Jan., '68 issue)