



# Lincoln Lore

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## MY LIFELONG PURSUIT OF LINCOLN

By R. Gerald McMurtry

*One of the special delights of my job as Director of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum is my association with the distinguished Directors Emeritus, Louis A. Warren and R. Gerald McMurtry. I see them weekly, and I benefit from their knowledge, their willingness to help, and their fabulous ability to tell stories of an earlier era in the Lincoln fraternity. About a year ago, I persuaded Dr. McMurtry to write a memoir of his life in the Lincoln field so that others could enjoy some of the stories I had heard. This memoir, entitled **My Lifelong Pursuit of Lincoln**, will be published in May. I have chosen four episodes to give **Lincoln Lore's** readers a preview of the memoir.*

M.E.N., Jr.

*From 1937 to 1956, Dr. McMurtry was the head of the Lincoln collection at Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee. These were the important years of collection-building at the university, and in the following excerpt Dr. McMurtry describes his largest acquisition, his greatest loss, and the colorful character of the school's most generous donor, Carl W. Schaefer.*

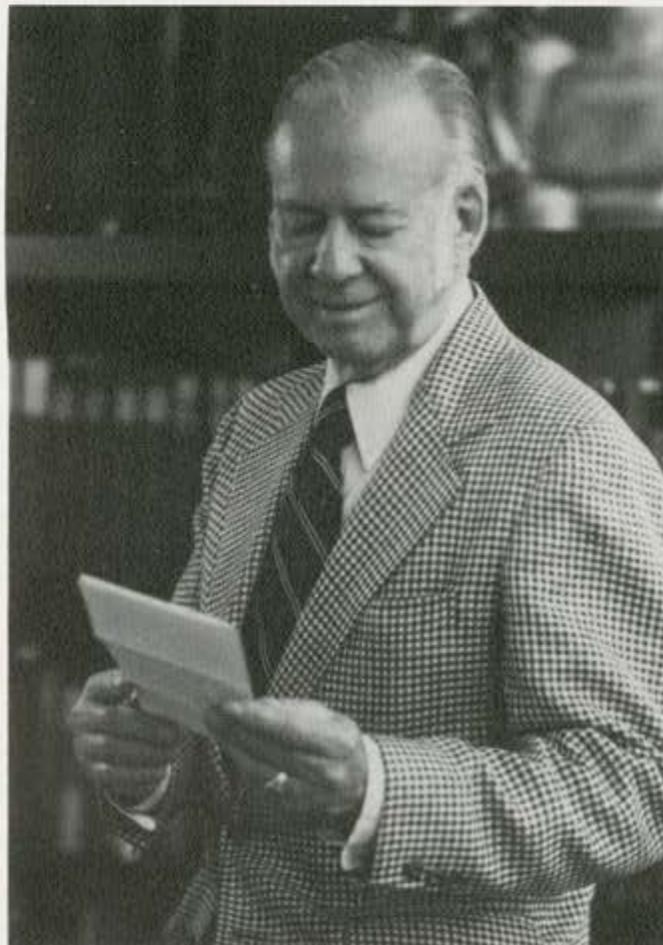
The most generous donor was Carl W. Schaefer, an attorney in Cleveland, Ohio, who served a number of years on the college Board of Trustees. He instructed me to go to New York City, to visit the Argosy Book Store, to go through their entire stock, and to pick out every Lincoln and collateral item I wanted for the L.M.U. collection. What fun! Not only did I find books, brochures, and pamphlets, but also steel engravings, lithographs, and many other miscellaneous items. I was not to worry about price. Mr. Schaefer's own Cleveland book dealer would go to New York City and haggle with the Argosy people about price. This was the largest single acquisition made during my tenure at the college.

The thrill was so great that Mr. Schaefer allowed me to go

to New York City again, after the Argosy Book Store had acquired a new stock of Lincolniana and Civil War items. After about three days, I made my selection. There was a voluminous amount of material. The donor had attempted to alert the Argosy Book Shop that his Cleveland bookdealer would soon arrive to discuss the price of the collection. Unfortunately, the Argosy people shipped the collection to Harrogate immediately and sent the donor a fantastic itemized bill of sale. I received orders from the angry donor in Cleveland to return the entire collection unopened — which I reluctantly did. This represented my greatest loss as a Lincoln collector. To this day I still recall items in that collection that I have never seen since.

Mr. Schaefer was a fine personal friend of mine as well as of my family. At this juncture of my career my family had increased to three. My son Stephen was born May 5, 1938, and my daughter Susan was born May 8, 1941. Mr. Schaefer would often purchase a very rare Lincoln book, bring it to Harrogate, and demand that I become ecstatic about it before he would let me accept it for the library. On one occasion when he presented me with an extra-illustrated *Boyd Bibliography* beautifully bound in full leather, he inquired, "If you held this book in one hand and Susan in the other and had to drop one, which one would you drop?" Usually I am nonplused when confronted with difficult questions, but I replied, "The Andrew Boyd book is a first edition — after all Susan is a third edition." This reply was sufficient to get the book into my possession.

On another occasion after an extended trip East, and then west to Cleveland, when I was physically exhausted, Mr. Schaefer handed me an *Oakleaf Bibliography*. I replied, "Oh, an Oakleaf." He took the book back and would not let me have it for several months.



Stedman Studios

FIGURE 1. R. Gerald McMurtry.



From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 2. R. Gerald McMurtry at Lincoln Memorial University.

*Dr. McMurtry met the most colorful character in the Lincoln fraternity, Carl Sandburg, on many occasions. Sandburg had a reputation for rising to the occasion more willingly when he received a generous fee for an appearance. The following excerpt describes Sandburg's appearance at a college which could not afford an honorarium.*

I recall very well the visit of Carl Sandburg to the campus of Lincoln Memorial University. He spoke (without benefit of honorarium) before a large audience. He presented a weird portrayal of forensic art. On a darkened stage, with his shock of white hair, he swayed back and forth, and he told of the Southern couple who presented their infant child to General Robert E. Lee with the remark that he was to be named after the general. Sandburg reiterated over and over again the admonition of General Lee: "Teach him to deny himself."

I had just published in 1940 a pamphlet entitled *The Lincoln Log Cabin Almanac* containing "Divers and Sundry Information About Abraham Lincoln — With Very Little Scientific Data Concerning the Weather, the Constellations and the Firmament." I was thrilled when Sandburg told me he liked my AL-MA-NACK. This was my first meeting with the poet. On several future occasions I was fortunate to be in his company.

*The sesquicentennial celebration of Lincoln's birth and the Civil War centennial that followed provided a busy schedule of public events for everyone in the Lincoln field. In the following excerpt, Dr. McMurtry describes some of Carl Sandburg's activities in this period.*

One of the first of the important events that occurred during the Lincoln Sesquicentennial year was Carl Sandburg's address before a joint session of Congress on Lincoln's

birthday. As a member of the National Commission, I was able to secure a choice seat near the Speaker of the House, and I heard the nation's poet describe Lincoln as a man who was "both steel and velvet, — as hard as rock and soft as drifting fog." This was undoubtedly one of the most important Lincoln addresses ever delivered. When Sandburg completed his address there was a standing ovation. Many people who were present on that occasion (February 12, 1959) were of the opinion that they had heard one of the great orations of our modern day.

In November, 1960, Sandburg came to Fort Wayne to open the Moring Lecture Series at the Fort Wayne Art School Auditorium. I was asked to introduce him. Among other things I said that, "While America will ever be grateful for his poetry, one of his greatest contributions has been his monumental biography of Abraham Lincoln." "He is," I added, "the only literary artist among the myriad historians and biographers to devote a lifetime of study to the Sixteenth President." I continued, "Many people attempt to explain Abraham Lincoln's present day popularity. Undoubtedly one explanation is that the events of Lincoln's colorful prairie years in Illinois and his tragic war years in Washington, D.C., are best revealed to us in his (Sandburg's) magnificent prose."

An account of Sandburg's visit to Fort Wayne is worthy of relating. He was expected by the Fort Wayne Art School to arrive on Saturday. He was flying from Los Angeles from the 20th Century Fox motion picture lot where he had been working as a consultant. He did not arrive on Saturday. Likewise, he did not arrive on Sunday. His address was scheduled for Monday evening.

On Monday evening Bob Belot, an insurance salesman,

saw Sandburg wandering aimlessly about the airport. He greeted him with a statement that he hoped he would enjoy his visit to Fort Wayne. Belot also inquired whether he had transportation downtown. The poet replied that he did not, and he was delighted to accept the invitation that was offered.

En route to the city the subject of hotels came up. Where would Sandburg stay? Sandburg stated that he hated all hotels. Belot suggested that he stay at his home. Sandburg thought this was an excellent idea.

That day happened to be Bob and Barbara Belot's first wedding anniversary. That morning Bob had promised his wife a surprise anniversary gift. En route into downtown, Bob stopped at his office, called Barbara, and told her Carl Sandburg was the surprise. She could hardly believe her ears. After the usual amenities Sandburg took a rest. This was not unusual because by nature he was a night person — he slept all day and stayed awake all night. The press finally located the Pulitzer Prize winner and the anxiety of the Art School was alleviated. Sandburg told his hosts that he had to be at the Art School by 8:30 p.m. and that he would like a dinner of ham and eggs. Following his dinner the Belots took him to the Art School in their compact car.

The Belots found Sandburg very positive in his likes and dislikes, and the latter included cigarettes, cosmetics, and television. After his address, which was followed by the usual lionizing, he returned home with the Belots. Commenting on his address he said, "Boy, did I give cigarettes Hell tonight." Then with a chuckle he said to Belot, "Say, could I have one of your cigars?"

Sandburg told me that evening that he wanted to visit the Lincoln Library and Museum the next morning. He said, "We will have a quiet chat, no publicity, no radio or television cameras, and no newspaper reporters." When I arrived for work the next morning, the Library and Museum was crowded with the media. I feared Sandburg would not like this. When he arrived, he was delighted.

Finally he departed from the city, and, when thanking his hosts for their hospitality, he pulled out of his travel-worn bag a copy of his poems and he inscribed the flyleaf as follows:

For Bob and Barbara  
May the road to Hell grow green  
and flowering waitin' for you  
CARL SANDBURG 1960

Perhaps that inscription has a value today far exceeding the long distance telephone tolls, the cigars, the loss of sleep, other expenses, and disruptions in connection with his visit with the Belots.

*Dr. McMurtry grew up in an atmosphere of collecting. His mother collected antiques, and her son was interested in collecting from an early age. Throughout his life, Dr. McMurtry has been paid to collect for others. He describes some of his ventures in gaining materials for the Lincoln National Life Foundation in the following excerpt.*

When I became the Director of the Foundation in 1956, there were still available real bargains in rare Lincoln publications, if one looked in the right places. I always made it a practice upon receiving my morning mail to check first the book catalogues for "sleepers." This proved most successful and



*From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum*

FIGURE 3. Carl Sandburg visits the Lincoln National Life Foundation.



From the Louis A. Warren  
Lincoln Library and Museum

**FIGURE 4. Professor Richard N. Current talks with Dr. McMurtry before the first R. Gerald McMurtry Lecture.**

some great rarities were obtained.

One of the best dealers in the country, if you were looking for rare Lincolniana, although this dealer would insist that his specialty was Americana, was Ernest Wessen, who had a book shop in Mansfield, Ohio. He always published a very attractive catalogue. It so happened that there was excellent mail service between Mansfield and Fort Wayne, and, after having secured Mr. Wessen's home telephone number, I would call him while he was having breakfast and give him the catalogue numbers of the rarities I wished to purchase. This worked very well for a while. However, his other customers, such as the Library of Congress, were becoming disgruntled, and Mr. Wessen put a stop to my little game. I still grieve over the items that I failed to get after being subject to Wessen's restrictions.

One rarity that I acquired from Wessen was Ichabod Codding's *A Republican's Manual For The Campaign (1860). Facts For The People. The Whole Argument in One Book.* This ninety-six page publication is quite scarce. In 1962 I was able to locate only seven copies in the major Lincoln libraries and in the possession of some private collectors of Lincolniana. Perhaps one reason for the rarity of the Codding book is that it was suppressed by the political friends of Lincoln. This was likely done with the permission of the author. While Codding was a well-intentioned radical, he assumed the role of an apologist for Mr. Lincoln. He frankly discussed in his book several points of opposition to the candidate, all the while insisting that he favored the Railsplitter on the general issues of the campaign.

One book that I failed to purchase from Wessen, although I got my order in first, was Denton Offutt's rare book on training wild horses. Offutt had employed Lincoln as a flatboatman, grocery clerk, and mill hand at New Salem. He also boasted of Lincoln's intellectual accomplishments and offered to bet that Abe Lincoln could outrun or out-wrestle any

man in Sangamon County. I had often heard William H. Townsend relate that Offutt was once a resident of Lexington, Kentucky, and how a copy of his rare book was discovered in that city when an old chimney was demolished. Townsend was fortunate to obtain that book for his own private collection of Lincolniana. I was not so fortunate when I saw the same book in Wessen's catalogue. Wessen explained to me that he would have to let another customer have the rarity because for so long a period I had been receiving nearly everything I ordered for the Lincoln National Life Foundation.

Another Ohio book dealer who often handled fine Lincolniana had his book catalogues printed in Fort Wayne. The printer would often give me a copy hot off the press, and with no competition I would leisurely pick out the items I wished to acquire. This practice, also, soon came to an end after the dealer learned of my unfair advantage. Of course, I always made it a practice to order by long distance telephone.

I often recall the thrill I once experienced upon receiving from a dealer a long list of manuscripts for sale. They were miscellaneous documents bearing the signatures of Lincoln's New Salem contemporaries. After carefully going over the list, I asked the dealer to send me everything listed in his entire catalogue.

In the middle 1950s and early 1960s short, one-page, ordinary letters written by Abraham Lincoln were worth from \$400 to \$650. His endorsements on letters addressed to him or called to his attention were oftentimes available at \$250 to \$300. Letters written by Robert Todd Lincoln, the eldest son, had a going rate of \$10. Of course, if the content of any of the above should deal with a vital historical event or topic, the price was much higher.

On one occasion the executor of a woman's estate contacted me. The deceased lady's estate was without funds after paying all her burial expenses. She did, however, leave one Lincoln letter dated March 11, 1864, and addressed to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton. The letter concerned Daniel Christian, who was Mrs. Lincoln's coachman. He had been arrested for "constructive desertion" and was in jail in the Old Capitol Prison. Mrs. Lincoln wanted him released. She needed his services. Lincoln concluded the letter with the order, "Please send him to me." The executor wanted to purchase a gravestone for the deceased lady. I wanted the Lincoln letter for the Foundation. The deal was made. I was to pay for the gravestone and the lawyer-executor was to send me the letter. The whole procedure was carried out without any difficulty.

## AN IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

Robert V. Bruce, Professor of History at Boston University, will deliver the fourth annual R. Gerald McMurtry Lecture at 8:00 p.m., Thursday, May 14, 1981. His subject will be "Lincoln and the Riddle of Mortality." Lincoln's fatalism and his occasional preoccupation with death have long intrigued scholars and Lincoln biographers. Now the concept of death has come under serious scrutiny by the historical profession, and Professor Bruce will, for the first time, deal with Lincoln in the light of the recent scholarly literature on death.

Lincoln students know Professor Bruce for his first book, *Lincoln and the Tools of War* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), a lively work which gave us our first awareness of Lincoln's fascination with military hardware and the large role he played in furthering the development of advanced weaponry. Professor Bruce then wrote *1877: Year of Violence* (1959), a ground-breaking study of labor unrest in the Gilded Age. His continuing interest in technology led to the publication of the widely acclaimed biography, *Bell: Alexander Graham Bell and the Conquest of Solitude*, in 1973. For a number of years Professor Bruce has been at work on *The Scientific Enterprise in America, 1846-1876*, a history of American science and technology in the critical period in which they took their modern shape.

The R. Gerald McMurtry Lecture will bring Professor Bruce back to the Lincoln theme. Admission is free, and a reception follows the lecture. For further information write Mark Neely, Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum, 1300 South Clinton Street, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801.