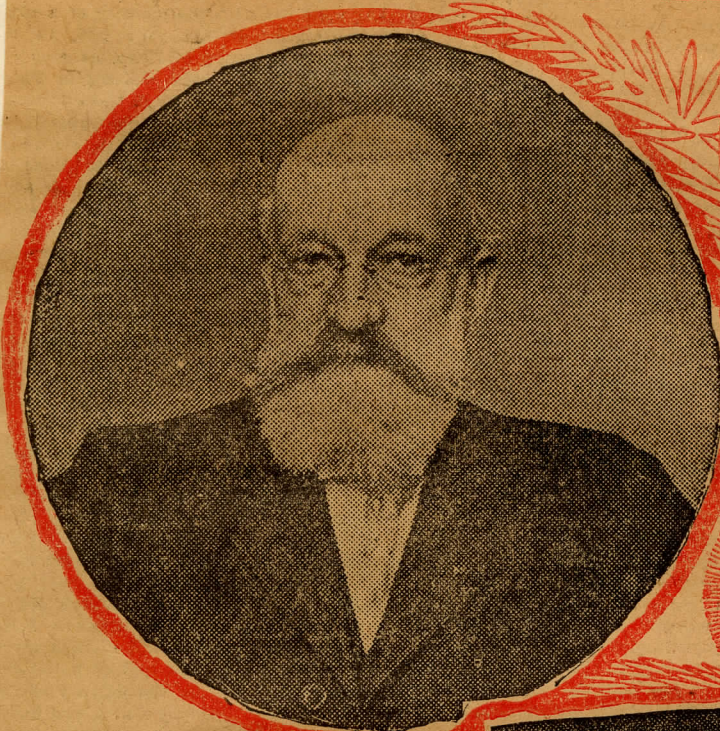


# LINCOLN'S BODYGUARD, His Relics and Reminiscences

By Waldon Fawcett



Col. Wm H. Crook

Of the men now living who knew Abraham Lincoln personally and intimately, none can rival Col. William H. Crook in the possession of vivid and unique recollection of the martyr president. Colonel Crook was the bodyguard of President Lincoln during the most interesting period of Lincoln's life, and naturally he came more closely and continuously in contact with the great American than did any other individual. At the time he was a young man, observant and keenly receptive of impressions. Fortunately there has also been an opportunity for Lincoln's bodyguard to supplement his close-range first impressions with an estimate of Lincoln formed from the vantage of greater perspective and rendered convincing by comparison with other Presidents. The latter has been possible because Colonel Crook has been continuously an employe of the White House from the days of Lincoln to the present time. Indeed, January of this year marked the completion of his forty-fourth year in the White House.

Colonel Crook is now in his sixty-ninth year and was thus little more than 20 years of age when the Civil War broke out. At 21 he enlisted in the Union Army and served for some time in the ranks. At the expiration of his enlistment he secured a position on the police force at the national capital. It was thus that he became eligible for the position of bodyguard to the President. In order to enable a rotation of service three other men, Elphonso Dunn, John Parker and Alexander Smith—all long since dead, were also detailed to act as special guards for the president, but through various circumstances Crook came to be closer associated with Lincoln than any of the others and was in the company of the war president on all the most interesting occasions of his later career.

Possibly the especial attention bestowed by Lincoln upon Crook was due in part



Plate, cup and saucer used at the White House by Abraham Lincoln, now in the possession of his old Bodyguard

at least to the fact that this particular bodyguard was comparatively young and, as he himself now confesses, had something of the attitude of a bashful boy toward the tall President. Lincoln did everything in his power to put his protector at his ease, and in their walks to and from the White House kept up a running fire of conversation with his companion. Not infrequently, Colonel Crook relates the topic discussed concerned the possibility of an attempt on the part of any person to do harm to the President.

A circumstance that contributed to the intimacy between President Lincoln and Colonel Crook was found in Lincoln's invariable practice of having his bodyguard walk by his side instead of some distance in his rear—after the fashion of an orderly—as has been the custom of President Roosevelt and other recent chief magistrates. Lincoln never liked the idea of being specially guarded and when, following the appearance of Garowski, a suspicious Pole, who skulked about the White House grounds, and a very narrow escape from a bullet fired at him as he

was driving in the outskirts of Washington, he finally did consent to special protective measures, but he insisted that no public announcement should be made regarding these precautions; that the guards should wear plain clothes instead of uniforms, and that the guard who accompanied him on his walks about the capital should ever remain at his side after the fashion of a personal friend, and with no suggestion of that protection, which was obnoxious to Lincoln, because it seemed an admission of lack of confidence in the people of the country.

Colonel Crook declares that he gained perhaps his best insight into the generous, patient, kindly nature of the war President during his nightly walks with Lincoln to the War Department. In those days, he explained, there was no telegraph and telephone station in the White House, such as there is today, and the President, when he wished to get, fresh from the wires, the latest news from the front, had to go to the War Department Building, where the telegraph office was located. This Lincoln did almost every



Photo's copyright by Waldon Fawcett

Plate, cup and saucer used at the

night, often remaining until long after midnight beside the operators at their keys. Colonel Crook's recollection of the President on these night pilgrimages to the news center presents an unusual picture of the mighty Lincoln—the tall figure striding beside him in the gloom, wrapped in the rough gray shawl he invariably wore on such night expeditions, and with his tall beaver hat emphasizing his enormous height. Withal, Lincoln's kindness of heart shone through his preoccupation, for occasionally he would draw his bodyguard to his side and walk some paces hand in hand or arm in arm with the younger man.

It fell to the lot of Colonel Crook, early in his career under Lincoln, to inaugurate what has since been an invariable rule at the White House—that against permitting guests at the White House receptions to enter the presence of the President clad in voluminous cloaks or other garments that might readily conceal weapons. Nowadays no woman carrying a muff or man with his hands thrust deep into the pocket of an overcoat would be permitted to approach the President, but until the latter part of the Lincoln administration such precautions had not been dreamed of. On the night on which Colonel Crook first put the innovation into practice he encountered some vigorous protests from some of the White House guests, notably the famous Kate Chase Sprague, who entered wearing a wrap that completely hid her dress, but the young and rather nervous bodyguard kept his temper, and when he



*Mrs. Wm. H. Crook  
Wife of Lincoln's  
Famous Bodyguard*

*I have two of my men—  
Lepock & Alexander  
and Cheftin & I saw  
not show them. P. M.  
G. please for  
March 2, 1865. A. Lincoln*

*Autograph Request of President Lincoln  
for the Release of Crook who had been  
drafted for the Army*

patiently explained to each protestant the reason for the new rule he succeeded in inducing them all to comply.

How intimate was Crook's association with Lincoln will be the better understood when it is explained that at night he was on duty in the corridor just outside the President's bedroom—so close that frequently he could hear the great man sigh or moan in his sleep after a day of unusual anguish and anxiety. Occasionally he would have to awake the sleeper to deliver some important telegram, but Crook declares that Lincoln never displayed any irritation at such interruptions. He tells, too, of one occasion when entering the President's room in response to the usual "Come in," he was surprised to find Lincoln busily engaged in sewing a button on his trousers. "Just repairing damages," explained the droll chief magistrate, with a half smile. Colonel Crook was frequently called upon to act as messenger between Mrs. Lincoln in the private apartments at the White House and the President in his private office, and these interchanges gave him an illuminating insight into the humor Lincoln found in yielding to the petty tyrannies of his wife. Once when his spouse had sent for him repeatedly and evidently to the limit of her patience to accompany her on a promised drive, Lincoln arose from his desk with a resigned expression, but with a merry twinkle in his eyes, and remarked to Crook: "I guess I would better go."

Lincoln's fondness for Crook was probably partly attributable to the fact that Crook and little Tad Lincoln, the apple of the President's eye, were fast friends. Incidentally, it may be mentioned policemen seem to possess an especial fascination for the young sons of our presidents. Readers of the newspapers may remember that during the early days of the Roosevelt administration the then very youthful Quentin and Archie were the almost inseparable companions of certain blue-coats on duty at the White House grounds. Tad Lincoln was 10 years old at the time of Colonel Crook's first recollection of him and the veteran White House employe adds his testimony to that of other intimates of Lincoln in the declaration that the sad-faced President's

lighter moods were in no wise so pleasingly disclosed as when he romped up and down the long upper corridor of the White House with Tad, playing all sorts of juvenile games. It was for Tad's sake, too, that Lincoln, accompanied by bodyguard Crook, made frequent visits to a quaint little toy shop, still in existence, a couple of blocks from the White House, and there in his rare intervals of leisure sought new playthings for the little lad who occupied the largest place in his heart.

Crook, who had been on duty with the President all day, did not accompany Lincoln to Ford's Theater the night of the assassination. He always refers to his absence with a certain regret, for he had a special system of his own for guarding the Chief Magistrate on such public appearances, and he is convinced to this day that if he had been at his usual station at the door of the President's box Booth would never have passed him. There would seem to be some ground for Crook's confidence, for the bodyguard did frustrate the plans of a man who sought to gain audience with Lincoln during the latter's famous visit to City Point, and who, when refused admission, made threats against the President. At the time the man gave the name of Smith, but Crook has always been confident that it was none other than the notorious Surrat, with whose appearance under normal conditions he was familiar through having lived in the same county in Maryland before the war.

After the death of Lincoln Colonel Crook accompanied Mrs. Lincoln to Chicago, and later returned to the White House as the bodyguard of President Johnson. Ere he retired from the presidency Johnson installed him in a permanent clerkship at the White House, and he continued in this capacity during the forepart of the Grant regime. In 1876 Grant appointed Crook acting secretary to the President, and in March, 1877, appointed him disbursing officer of the White House, in which position he has continued ever since, having in the aggregate expended hundreds of thousands of dollars for the maintenance of the presidential establishment.

Colonel Crook's home in the city of Washington is filled with relics and mementoes of Lincoln and other Presidents. Probably the most prized of all the keepsakes is a card in Lincoln's handwriting which the President addressed to the

provost marshal general when Crook and his other bodyguard, Alexander Smith, were drafted for service in the Army.

The President wrote that he could not spare these men and asked the official above-mentioned to "please fix" the matter. This precious bit of paper reposed for years in the War Department files, but when Robert T. Lincoln, son of the martyr President was Secretary of War he gave it to his father's old guard. Another of Colonel Crook's souvenirs is a mahogany cane made from the rail of the little spiral stairway whereby Lincoln reached his office and which has long since been torn down.

Colonel Crook has some almost priceless specimens of the china service which Mrs. Lincoln selected for the White House and which Colonel Crook declares to have been more beautiful than any tableware purchased before or since for use on the Presidential table. There is a dainty cup and saucer and a plate which Lincoln used—all ornamented by the broad maroon band and the eagle and coat of arms in colors. Old photographs of Lincoln, including the favorite one of the President, with Tad and other mementoes, also have place in the home presided over by Colonel Crook and his second wife, who was Mrs. Clara Robey Priddy, when Colonel Crook married her nine years ago.

One possession of Colonel Crook's which, though not a relic of the Lincoln period, he yet prizes very highly, is a violin which was once owned by Ole Bull. Colonel Crook is a "fiddler," he disdains to call himself a violinist. It is his one diversion and he has indulged in it ever since he was a boy of 15. He plays entirely by ear, never having read a note of music, but he displays exceptional talent. Many a night when business is not pressing at the White House the officials on duty at the President's offices will appeal to Colonel Crook by telephone at his home and he will, in response to their entreaties, be kept playing far into the night while each member of the White House staff, a telephone receiver at his ear, enjoys the long-distance concert.