

STILL THRILLS AT MEMORY OF HEARING LINCOLN 70 YEARS AGO

By DR. EDGAR DeWITT JONES.

FEW men who heard Abraham Lincoln speak are now in the land of the living. Mr. Lincoln was assassinated 63 years ago the fourteenth day of this coming April, and those who have any recollection of his political campaigns are necessarily advanced in years. Mr. Lincoln's great contemporaries are all gone and within a few years all who saw him and listened to his voice in public address will have passed away. This fact makes increasingly valuable the reminiscences of those who are still with us, who saw and heard Abraham Lincoln. Such a one is former Gov. Joseph W. Fifer, of Bloomington, Ill., now nearly 87 years old.

Mr. Fifer is one of the most interesting men of my acquaintance, and during my 14 years residence in Bloomington I many times reveled in his recollections of men of note who now have passed out of the picture. Especially interesting to me were the ex-governor's reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln. A dozen times, I suppose, I have listened to his vivid account of his first sight of Lincoln, and the speech he heard him make in the court house yard in Bloomington in 1858.

Two years ago when I was looking up some data in connection with Lincoln in Illinois I remembered Gov. Fifer's boyhood impressions of the Uncommon Commoner, and, knowing that he had not put them in permanent form, I wrote him with the request that he give me over his own signature his account of that first sight of Lincoln and the Bloomington speech that so impressed him. The governor's letter in response is herewith appended:

"I came with my father's family to McLean County from Virginia in March, 1857. Soon thereafter, I heard the neighbors and others talk of Lincoln, and I became interested and read everything concerning him that I could lay my hands on. Before the celebrated joint debate of 1858, I saw Mr. Lincoln a few times in the court room, but never heard him speak, either in court or other places, until the year of the debate. Lincoln and Douglas, between debates, frequently spoke in different parts of the state. They so spoke here in Bloomington.

"Through the influence of Judge Davis, Jesse W. Fell and other friends, Lincoln was induced to come to Bloomington in September of that year, and spoke in the court house yard; and my brother and myself came to Bloomington to hear him. A fine platform was erected in the north end of the yard from which the speaking was

conducted. Judge Davis presided, and Leonard Swett, a personal friend, introduced Mr. Lincoln. There were no seats for the audience, and my brother and myself, boy-like, pressed up within 10 feet of the platform from which Mr. Lincoln spoke.

"He arose very slowly, and I would say, awkwardly, and began talking in rather a hesitating way. He would run out on a sentence and it didn't seem to suit him. He would come back and start again. He did this several times, and some of the audience where I stood said in undertone: 'Why, that man can't talk. Why didn't they nominate Swett? He knows more than Lincoln.'

"Reporters from unfriendly newspapers in Chicago were present and I afterwards learned that this is why Mr. Lincoln seemed so cautious at the outset of his speech.

"It wasn't long, however, until he became thoroughly aroused and from that time on he seemed like one inspired. His principal gesture was with his right arm. He would raise that above his head apparently as far as he could reach and with his closed fist would bring it down with an emphasis that fairly made one's hair stand on end and the heart quit beating. At this time, my brother nudged me and called my attention to the faces of the audience. Their faces seemed riveted like statues upon Lincoln and so continued to the close.

"His speech made such a vivid impression upon my mind that I can repeat, after the lapse of these many years, whole sentences of it. The audience was very large and overflowed the Court House yard and extended on to the sidewalks and streets.

"These were serious times; the audience was serious and in fact the whole country seemed to feel that some great calamity was impending.

"In the years that followed, I have tried to analyse the influence that Mr. Lincoln exerted over that great audience. I feel sure it was not by reason of his well turned periods and flashes of rhetoric, for he seemed to avoid all flights of oratory. His logic, however, seemed to me unanswerable and his sentences, too, charged like a detachment of Sheridan's Cavalry. He was terribly in earnest and what he said seemed to gurgle up, as it were, from some great fountain of sin-

cerity and truth, and it is these things that held the audience spellbound for two hours, and at the end there was only one opinion concerning the speech.

"I have always believed and now believe that it was the greatest speech I ever heard.

"When Lincoln was in repose, his face was thoughtful and sad. When spoken to, however, his whole appearance changed and his face lighted up with good will and intelligence.

"In regard to my appraisal of his life and character, I will say that it is my belief that Mr. Lincoln during his mature years was conscious of his intellectual greatness; and I believe also that he always had some hope of the Presidency. He knew it was too great an office for a man in his humble situation to work for or lay schemes to obtain. He kept a clean record, and he kept himself in the right place, so that if the Presidency should come his way, it would be likely to fall upon him.

"I regard him as the greatest man of his century; the greatest, in fact, that America has yet produced. More has been written and said of him that has ever been written or said of any man that ever lived, and he will continue to grow as the centuries go by.

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