1860-07-16

Article: An Interesting Letter -- Lincoln's Old Rail-mauling Partner, July 16, 1860

Illinois State Journal

http://hdl.handle.net/10456/29106

This item is in the public domain

All materials in the Allegheny College DSpace Repository are subject to college policies and Title 17 of the U.S. Code.
AN INTERESTING LETTER--LINCOLN'S OLD RAIL-MAULING PARTNER.

We find the following interesting letter from John Hanks--Lincoln's early partner in the rail-splitting business--in the Decatur CHRONICLE. Hanks is an honest old Jackson Democratic farmer, who shared with the next President the privations and hardships of pioneer life in Illinois, before the days of railroads and canals. His letter is a plain, unvarnished statement, that will find a response in the breasts of hundreds of Democratic farmers of the pioneer times:

Editor of the CHRONICLE--Dear Sir: The following article appeared in the Columbus STATESMAN a few days ago, which I take from the Coles County LEDGER:

"HANKS AGAINST LINCOLN.--We were informed a day or two ago by a delegate to the Baltimore Convention, who called at our office, that John Hanks, the man who assisted Abe Lincoln to make those rails about which the Republicans are making such a terrible hubbub, has announced himself opposed to the election of Lincoln. Hanks, who has never been a Democrat, is against the Republican nominee because he knows Lincoln to be a humbug, and nothing else. Hurrah for Hanks!"

To this article I desire briefly to reply. If my choice for President, or how I shall vote, as between the two candidates for that office, is worth considering at all, I claim it as a simple right to be correctly represented. I am but a farmer and regret to say not an educated one. I have never been a candidate for any office, nor do I expect ever to be; whilst I can with all truthfulness say this, yet I have never been a negative man in politics. From my boyhood I have been a constant
voter with the Democratic party in all essential elections; I have thought that party to be upright and straightforward in all the principles it has really adopted. So late as 1858, I voted for Mr. Douglas and against my old friend, Mr. Lincoln. For forty years I have looked upon the party with pride and hailed its success with pleasure; but as Mr. Douglas made a speech in Decatur in 1855, and in my hearing spoke so pleasantly and so honorably of the old Whig party and of Mr. Clay, its leader, after having for fifteen years, in discussing general politics, when I used to love to listen to him so well, spoken so complainingly and so abusively of that party and of Mr. Clay, charging upon it and him many very bad and mean things, until listening to him I learned to look upon both as dangerous and full of evil. The thought struck me that for the future I never would judge of a party or its leaders by what an opponent might say, and this conclusion I mean to follow the balance of my life. How foolish it is to abuse a party because my friend may do so, and then praise the same party because that friend may change and do so; he may be designing—I would, in all probability, be a dupe. Ever since Mr. Douglas made that speech in 1855 he has been abusing the Republicans just like he used to abuse the old Whigs. I am tired of this kind of warfare; I think it is not right to do so, and as Mr. Douglas further said in that speech that he was in the habit of sometimes changing his politics, I did not know but that it was about time for him to begin to excuse and cease to abuse the Republicans, and made up my mind to let him go in time. Now, as to entirely changing my politics, I cannot say I have done this, but for the life of me I can see nothing in the Republican party that any honest Democrat can seriously oppose. It is true, were they such a party as Mr. Douglas used to say they were, I could see objectionable features
about it; but then is it wise to believe everything Mr. Douglas has said, when he tells us he sometimes changes, and when we have near us honest men, known to be purely honest for more than thirty years, who deny all this and propose to tell us the true state of the case, and to give us the true principles of that party? I think not. Besides this when we have for years been opposed, in politics, to a man who has again and again seen his party defeated, and has himself sometimes failed, and still seen that man true to his colors, re-arming and re-entering the field to try to uphold and successfully plant his colors upon the side of victory; when all the time he knew he had but to change once to win, and yet has never changed, I think I may say never faltered, how are we to respect him? Such a man I have known Mr. Lincoln for thirty years to be. In boyhood days we toiled together; many are the days we have haggled the weary ear on the Ohio, the Illinois and the Mississippi rivers together; many are the long cold days we have journeyed over the wild prairies and through the forest, with gun and axe, and though it is now pleasant to refer back to it, well do I remember when we set out together in the cold winter to cut and nail rails on the Sangamon river, in Macon county, 30 years ago, to enclose his father's little home, and from day to day kept at work until the whole was finished and the homestead fenced in; we often swapped work in this way, and yet during the many years we were connected together as laborers, sometimes flat-boating, sometimes hog-driving, sometimes rail-making, and too, when it was nearly impossible to get books, he was a constant reader, I was a listener, he settled all disputes of the young men in the neighborhood, and his decisions were always abided by. I never knew a man so honest under all circumstances, for his whole life. Thus associated with Mr. Lincoln, I learned to love him, and when in 1862 he was a candidate for the first
time within my reach, against my feelings, and I may say against my convictions, my old party ties induced me to vote for Mr. Doug-
las; my Democratic friends all declared Lincoln was an abolition-
ist; I heard him make a speech in Decatur just before the election and I could see nothing bad in it; but I was told by the party he was wrong; I could not see how he could be, but they said so, and I was a Democrat and went it. My wife used to say to me that some day Abe would come out and be something; I thought so too, but I could not exactly see how a man in the lower walks of life, a day laborer, and hopelessly poor, would ever stand much chance to get up very high in the world; at last, one day at home, we heard that the Republican State Convention was to be held at Decatur, and that they were going for Abe for President. As soon as I found this out, I went into town and told a friend of Abe's that as great and honest merit was at last to be rewarded in the person of my old friend, Mr. Lincoln, by the Republican party, I thought of the hard and trying struggles of his early days, and recollecting the rails we had made together, thirty years ago, made up my mind to present some of them to that Convention as a testimonial of the beginning of one of the greatest living men of the age, believing they would speak more in his praise than any orator could, and honor true labor more than the praise of men or the resolutions of Conventions. On our way to get the rails, I told this friend of old Abe that if Abe should be nominated for President I would vote for him; everybody knows he has been, and I rejoice that I live to give this testimony to his goodness and honesty, and hope I shall live to vote for him for President of the United States next November. Is there anything wrong in this? Who ought to refuse to vote for as good and as great a man as he is. I know that in voting for him I vote with the Republican party, and will be considered as adopting its princi-
people; as I now understand them, I see no good reason why I may not do so; our own party is divided and we have no Solomon to tell who shall take the child. Slavery has divided the Democratic party; no body can blame Republicanism for the destruction that came upon us at Charleston; slavery has diminished us—it has united the Republican party; if there is any good about the question, they have it all, and we have the trouble. If I understand Mr. Douglas now, he occupies a position on this question just as distasteful to the South as Mr. Lincoln does—with this clear difference: the South seems to understand Mr. Lincoln's position better than his, and to respect it a good deal more; and I am convinced if Mr. Douglas does not reflect the nigger he does the mulatto, and one brings just as much in Mobile as the other, and stands as high in the market.

Many of my Democratic neighbors will say I have done wrong; but I know there are many who would do as I have done, were it not that they do not feel willing to break away from party ties, and to encounter "the talk" of old friends. As long as I have old Abe to lead me, I know that I shall never go very far from right. Should he be elected President, and find any trouble in steering his new boat, he has only to remember how we used to get out of hard places by rowing straight ahead, and never by making short turns. The tallest oaks in the forest have fallen by his giant arm; he still wields a tremendous maul; out of the largest timber he can make the smallest rails; I have seen him try a tough cut and fail once; on the second trial he never failed to use it up. Though not a very beautiful symbol of honesty, I think the rail a fitting one, and mean to present Abe with one of his own make, should he be elected, in the city of Washington, on the day of his inauguration, to be kept in the White House during his administration.

JOHN HANKS.