Lincoln's Lost Speech

There is no part of the work of writing a biography which interests me so much as the gathering of the materials. It is like going on a voyage of discovery into a new country—or so it should be. One should start by wiping out of his mind all that he knows about the man, start as if you had never before heard of him. Everything then is fresh, new. Your mind, feeding on this fresh material, sees things in a new way. You are making an acquaintance of one who if he is worth writing about grows more interesting to you whatever he has done or has not done as the time goes on.

And then you run upon such unexpected things. Thirty years or more ago when I was working in Illinois on a life of Lincoln and trying to find out what kind of a speaker he was from men still living who had heard him speak, heard his great debates with Douglas, the debates in 1858 which made him President of the United States, I kept running up against something of which until then I had never heard.

A man would tell me what he remembered about the debates—how Lincoln looked—what his voice was like—his arguments—and would end by saying, "Well, those were good speeches but they were nothing like the Lost Speech. That was the greatest thing Lincoln ever did."
Or he would begin by saying, "Well, you can never know much about him as a speaker, nobody can that never heard the Lost Speech."

Of course I had to find out about this Lost Speech. I found it was made in Bloomington, Illinois, on the 29th of May in 1856. A great convention had been called in the town to protest against the outrages that had been happening at the hands of pro-slavery sympathizers. Out in Kansas the Governor was a prisoner - the Capital was in ruins. Down in Washington a fierce attack had been made on Senator Sumner. Things were very bad indeed throughout these United States at that moment.

A new party had been formed - the Republican party - to fight against the extension of slavery into the free states, and a convention had been called in Bloomington, Illinois to re-organize the state.

Now Lincoln was a Whig but he had been deeply stirred by the efforts of pro-slavery sympathizers to extend slavery into territories set aside as free. He knew the time had come to do something to check it or the whole country would be slave.

He had not come to the Convention to make a speech but the crowd would not be quiet until he had mounted the platform and there, so these people who heard him told me, he made the greatest speech of his life, a speech which so stirred his
audience that the very reporters forgot to take their notes. Knowing reporters I was skeptical about that so I looked up some of them. They all told me that when Lincoln finally ended his speech they found themselves standing on, instead of sitting by their writing tables—and without a note!

Still I could not believe but that somebody must not remember something about the speech—enough at least to give an idea of the argument. Perhaps, I said to myself, I may pick up some of the phrases—get some real notion of it.

So I went prowling about asking questions and finally learned that down in the State of Massachusetts was a man who was said to have taken notes—a cool-headed man—a lawyer not a reporter.

His name was H. C. Whitney. He knew Lincoln well, had travelled the same circuit with him and had published a Life of Lincoln with which I was familiar.

Of course there was nothing to do but look up Mr. Whitney and that I did. And to my great satisfaction I found that it was true as I had been told, that he had notes made at the time. He had always intended to write them up but when he came to attempt the result seemed so inadequate to him that he was afraid to go on. And it took me some time to persuade him that he should not die without making an attempt to work out the speech which
had made such a deep impression and which had been so important, too, in Lincoln's life for it really was the speech which tied him up to a new and much ridiculed party — the Republican party. In 1856 a man who joined the Republican party was looked on much as we look on a man who joins the Communists today.

After much persuasion Mr. Whitney did get out a version of the speech. When he turned it over to me I went about among the men in Illinois with whom I had talked showing the copy and asking them what they thought of it. There were those who said, "It's impossible to write out that Speech." But there were some — and they were able men — who said, "Yes, Whitney has caught something of the spirit and he has the argument and he even has many of the phrases as of course he should have if he made notes at the time."

The most emphatic and enthusiastic statement that I got came from a man of importance — Joseph Medill who then was the editor of The Chicago Tribune. Mr. Medill was a reporter when Mr. Lincoln was at Bloomington in 1856 — one of the reporters who found himself at the end on top of the table without a note. He thought Mr. Whitney's version was close to the reality. Indeed, he wrote for me a long and interesting letter giving his recollections of the Convention. In this letter he said,
"Mr. Whitney has reproduced with remarkable accuracy what Mr. Lincoln said, largely in his identical language and probably in synonymous terms. The report is close enough in fact and work to recall the wonderful speech delivered forty years ago with vivid freshness."

Well, that seemed to me reason enough for publishing Mr. Whitney's report along with the story of how I had found it, what the people who heard the speech in the first place said about it, both for and against. And that I did.

But out in Illinois there were a number of people that did not want to give up the tradition. The Lost Speech was the greater to them because it was lost. As long as it was lost you could make it as big as you wanted in your imagination - bigger than any speech any man ever made and nobody could contradict you. And so you will find those who claim that the Lost Speech is still lost. Nevertheless, Mr. Whitney's version is worth all the energy it took to run it down - get it into print. And of course you can take it or you can leave it just as people always take or leave whatever is discovered or invented.

But you see this is exciting - this discovering anew thinking you have discovered. Nothing like going on a fresh trail, hunting down new things, having something that keeps your curiosity alive - your interest fresh and vivid.