

CHAPTER XIX

LOOKING OVER THE COUNTRY

My chief consolation in what I looked on as the manhandling of Democratic ideals and processes in all ranks of society, public and private, was Abraham Lincoln. In spite of his obvious limitations and mistakes he had won the biggest battle for freedom we have yet had to fight. He had done it by taking time to figure things out, by sticking to the conclusions he had reached so long and no longer than they seemed to him sound, by squaring his conduct always with what he conceived to be just, moral principles. The more I knew of him the better I liked him, the more strongly I felt we ought as a people to know about how he did things, not ask how he would solve a problem tormenting us, but how he would go to work to solve it.

Feeling as I did and do about him I have kept him always on my work bench. There has never been a time since the War that I have not had a long or short piece of Lincoln work on hand. The result has been five books, big and little, and a continuous stream of articles, long and short.

The only fresh water in this Lincolnian stream was in a book I called "In the Footsteps of the Lincolns." Beginning with the first of the family in this country - Samuel who came in 1637 - I traced them mile by mile from Hingham, Massachusetts, where Samuel started, down through Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, the Shenandoah Valley, the wilderness of Kentucky, southwestern Indiana, into Illinois, to the final resting place. I ran down the records that had been left behind, copied the inscriptions on gravestones, went over houses in which they had lived, looked up the families into which they had married, the friends they had made. When I finished my journey I felt that I had quite definitely and finally rescued the Lincolns from the ranks of poor white trash where political enemies had so loved to place them.

I have the satisfaction of knowing that this seven-generation pilgrimage of the Lincoln family has been added to the itineraries which enthusiastic students include in the cult of Lincoln now growing so strong in this country. I have never had an honor which pleased me more than a certificate from this group naming me Lincoln Pilgrim Number One.

My conviction that we needed in all our difficulties to familiarize ourselves with good models, sound

laboratory practices led me to publish in 1932 a life of Owen D. Young. Mr. Young had impressed me as being just what I called him, "A New Type of Industrial Leader." And how we needed one! I had first heard of him in connection with what was called the President's Second Industrial Conference. After what I regarded as the cowardly retreat of the members of the President's first conference Mr. Wilson had called a second with the same objective, a distinguished body of men, among them Owen D. Young.

The sessions of this conference were all secret - a contrast to the noisy publicity which had surrounded the first gathering and which had been partly responsible for its failure, the political-minded conferees being able in this way to speak to the country when they made speeches to their fellows - a privilege they valued more than trying to understand and co-operate with their fellows.

It was not long before I began to hear rumors of the satisfactory way the ^{second} Conference was going and to hear the name of Owen D. Young as the man who as much as anybody else was leading to a broad, fair, program of recommendations. His fairness based on his experience in industrial relations came as a surprise to not a few of the members of the Conference for Mr. Young represented the General Electric.

Secretary Wilson who was then at the head of the Federal Labor Department declared that Mr. Young had no fear and no prejudice as a conferee, that he worked with an open mind. Attorney-General Gregory said of him that there was no man on the Conference who was so progressive in his philosophy of industrial relations. These opinions from the inside of the Conference followed by the admirable report it published and with which I learned Mr. Young had had much to do, set me to following his work in labor matters so far as it reached the public.

I was deeply impressed by the showing he made as a negotiator on the Dawes and Young committees called to settle the thorny problem of what reparations Germany should make to the allies, the first held in 1924; the second in 1929 - Mr. Young being the chairman of the latter.

He proved himself a negotiator of unusual quality. He knew the facts. He kept his head under all circumstances. He had the warmest kind of human sympathies as well as what one of his colleagues called, "a superior emotional sensitiveness", which made him steer clear of danger points before anybody else realized that they were near.

Such were the qualities, I told myself, needed in a leader to handle the infinitely difficult tangle in labor relations more and more disturbing industry.

All I could do was to say so in print, and that I tried to do in a book which came out in 1932 and had the misfortune to collide that year with a Presidential boom for Mr. Young which mis-guided friends were cooking up contrary to his wishes. It was the last thing that he wanted. He had the good sense to see that there were vastly important things for the good of the public to be done inside his industry. He wanted to go on with them. He was doing a good job and should have been left with it, I felt. But numbers of admirers and interested politicians continued to cry for him for President until finally Mr. Young came out flat-footed to say that under no circumstances would he accept a nomination.

But here was my book coming out while this outcry was going on, and naturally enough political-minded reviewers took it as intended for a campaign biography. The point I had been trying to make that here was somebody with rare ability to lead in the labor struggle, was entirely lost. I still believe that if we could have had him active in these past years so disheartening for peaceful industrial relations, the years which have set back so far the hope of genuine understanding co-operation in^{side} industry, we would have been saved the peck of trouble that we now are in.

It was out of the stuff gathered in these various undertakings that I was depending for security. But the return from ^{the} books and articles of a free lance is more or less uncertain, particularly when they come in so sober a form as mine and are always shaped to fit a self-made pattern.

I saw that I must have an annual ^{if modest} sure/money crop, and I found it from 1924 on in Lyceum work. My two seasons on the Chautauqua platform had encouraged the Lecture Bureau to add me to its list of "talent", and it was arranged that I go out from four to six weeks a year beginning around Lincoln's birthday when dinners and celebrations called for speakers, and running on into March - usually five engagements a week, the local committees choosing the subject from the half dozen I offered.

These bookings covered the country from North to South from East to West, long and erratic journeys. Frequently I occupied two different beds a night, and now and then three. It was brutal, exhaustive business, but I learned to climb into an upper berth without a fuss, to sleep ^{on a bench}

540

if there was no berth, to rejoice over a cup of hot coffee at an all night workman's lunch counter, to warm my feet by walking a platform while waiting for a train. By the end of the first season I had developed a stoical acceptance of whatever came. This, I argued, saved nervous wear and tear. I think now a certain amount of indignant protest, useless as it would have been, might have put more zest into my travel, as well as my talking.

It was not only hard but it was lonesome business. From the day I started out I felt myself a detached wanderer, one who had laid aside personality and become a cog in in the mechanism called a Lecture Bureau. My one ambition was to fill the specifications of the schedule and have it over with. It was not until I said goodbye to the last committee and ~~X~~ was headed home that I felt the joyful rush of reviving personality.

This is putting an unfair face on my experiences. These long railroad journeys, these nights waiting in dreary stations were not without their rewards. I carry no more beautiful pictures in my mind than those flashed on me riding across this country;- glittering snow mountains with stars hanging over them as big as a moon - miles of blossoming red buds rising from the mist along an Oklahoma stream - the lovely rounded forms of the Ozark Mountains stretched as in sleep across Missouri - amethyst deserts - endless rolling prairies yellow with wheat or white with snow. These journeys took me at one time or another into every state in ^{the} the Union ~~excepting two~~, and there is no one of them in which some bit of remembered beauty does not

546
take the curse off the almost universal disorder, even squalor of their towns and cities as I saw them going in and out by rail.

These long rides, these night waits, brought unforgettable looks into human lives. Strange how travellers will confide their ambitions, unload their secrets, show their scars to strangers. Never have I been more convinced of the supreme wisdom of the confessional of the Catholic Church than from the confidences poured into my ears made in these brief and accidental meetings. Memorable and poignant as these experiences of the country's beauty as well as its human tragedy and comedy, they were little more than a blur. The rapid and crowded succession of events left no time to follow up, digest, get at the meaning of the solution. This was particularly tantalizing when it came to the actual filling of the engagement for here you were for a time in close contact with a few people, your committee, and you had an hour or more facing an audience representative of a community.

The committee represented authority. It was my business to follow its instructions, please it if I could. Its chairman was the first person I sought on arrival, that is the first after checking up on how and when I was to get away from the place at which ~~you~~^I had just arrived. To be sure I had careful routing, but was the train by which I was ordered to leave still running? Had there been a flood or blizzard or accident to make a detour necessary? Sometimes it was an exciting detour. More than once I had to go fifty or a hundred miles by car over flooded or snow bound roads which the pessimistic declared

5424

impassable and which only an adventurous youth for a good round sum would undertake to negotiate. In one of these hold ups I travelled two hundred miles in a freight car behind an engine, the first to go over the snowbound road in a week. More than once on these exciting detours I felt that probably I should not come out alive, but I always did and always found however ^{my arrival} late my audience was waiting me. As a matter of fact those little adventures were highly stimulating after hours and hours of the benumbing comfort of the trains.

When I knew how I was to get away I looked up the committee. So far as I was concerned the point at which I most frequently found a serious conflict in a committee was the subject on which I was to talk. That was supposed to have been settled - I had their letter for it. But not everybody wanted me to talk on so and so. Usually I found it was because somebody feared I might be too radical. They didn't want anything said on their platform which would antagonize the well-to-do conservative sponsors of the course or encourage the town's social and economic rebellion.

I remember times when after an exciting discussion behind the scenes I stood in the wings waiting for the signal to come on to the platform while behind me the discussion went on. Only at the last moment did the chairman say begrudgingly, "Well, talk on so and so." But the chief objector

meeting me after the lecture said, "I would so much have preferred to have heard you on so and so."

But the indecision of the committee was not the only trying experience before I was actually on my feet and at my job. There was the introduction. You never knew exactly what was to happen. As a matter of fact the introduction should and frequently/^{does} give opportunity for repartee - for anecdote - an easy way for putting yourself at once on terms of friendliness with your audience. But I was never happy at that kind of thing. On the Chautauqua Circuit the fashion has been for the speaker to go out as soon as the music was over, take his stand and begin,

5-444

Nobody said, "This is so and so who will speak on so and so."
Nobody told them anything about you - you stood up and said your
piece.

The ritual on the Lyceum platform was different. There they made the most of me as a rule. It sometimes seemed to me that each successive committee had a different way of presenting me. Sometimes I marched out with the master of ceremonies, a man or woman, and was placed in an arm chair while the chairman made remarks about me which were often bewildering. I have been introduced as the author of George Kennan's "Siberia" of Edna Ferber's "McChesney's Stories." I have heard a long explanation of why I never married. Once I was called a notorious woman by the speaker, he evidently thinking that the word was flattering. Often I had a body guard made up of important women of the committee - a tribute to my sex.

One of the most peculiar fashions, as well as the most trying was having a scene arranged behind the drop curtain. The stage was turned into a pleasant sitting room and a half dozen of the leading women of the town in their best gowns were seated about - informal fashion. When we were all ready the curtain went up. There would be music and then the Chairman would tell them who I was and why I was supposed to be worth their attention. While this was going on the audience was locating the different persons of importance on the stage and criticizing the setting and the costumes.

545

If one goes to even the most remote parts of the country supporting a lecture course thinking that he is going to be a treat he will if he has any sensibility soon discover that, far from that, he usually has a critical audience. ~~of experience~~ interested in what he has to say, treats him with courtesy and respect, but it has also had enough experience with lecturers to compare his matter and his manner with scores of those it had been hearing in past years. I have been in towns in the Middle West particularly where they had heard Thackeray and Dickens read, had listened to Emerson and Alcott Bronson, and who had been hearing every popular lecture in all the years since their day.

It is

~~Moreover, these people are informed. Every where I found them reading a first class newspaper, as well as The Atlantic Monthly. Many of these towns had been reading it since it was founded.~~

Your real opportunity to judge of the intelligence and alertness of ^{the} community came while you were speaking. Look for an hour or more into the faces of a group of men and women who, whatever they may think of you, are courteous enough to give you their attention, and you know soon what certain individuals think of what you are saying. Always I found myself speaking to someone who I knew heartily disagreed with me, someone I felt I would like to convince. Always I knew that there was a man waiting to challenge me. Usually these challenges came from ~~two sources~~ - a socialists or single

5 4/6

taxers. If an opportunity was given to ask questions after my talk, something which I always encouraged, they ~~was~~ were the first on their feet. The community knew them and knew what their questions would be and frequently laughed at them. But a really good audience enjoys seeing a speaker heckled a bit and the speaker if he is really interested in his business is glad to take the heckling. I know nothing better for a lecturer who is going over the same arguments night after night than to know that there will probably be somebody in his audience who will seize the first opportunity to pick on a weak point, challenge his generalization, his facts. If that happens you always go away from your lecture better equipped than you came to it.

In the twelve years in which I regularly made an annual lecture trip - I gave up the work in 1932 finding it too much for my strength - in all those twelve years I everywhere found the liveliest absorption in national undertakings. People told you how they felt about it, how it was working out in their particular community - important for here you had the test of the pudding in its eating. It was what I saw of the workings of prohibition in the 1920's that drove me to do one of the most unpopular things I ever did, and that was to tell bluntly how I saw it working in hotels from one end of the land to the other, disheartening evidences of its effect on the young, the unexpected dangers it brought to a woman travelling alone at night, both in stations and trains. I set down what I had seen

547
over a wide range of territory, what I had heard from the mouths of men and women who had been ardent prohibitionists and who were appalled by the things that were happening, particularly to youth in their own communities.

I had never been a prohibitionist in principle. My whole theory for the improvement of society is based on a belief in the discipline and the education of the individual to self-control and right doing, for the sake of right doing. I have never seen fundamental improvements imposed from the top by ordinances and laws. I believed that the country was gradually learning temperance. But if they could make prohibition work I was willing it should be tried. But what I saw in these years had led me by 1928 to feel that something unexpected and very disastrous was going on and that it must be faced, not hidden. It was the most important observation that my crowded lecture days yielded, but as I say it brought me bitter criticism and now and then an intimation from some indignant woman of power and parts that I had sold myself to the liquor interests. One ^{lady} even intimated that if she had known that my pen was for sale she would have bid for it. This kind of criticism, however, is one of the things that one who says what he thinks must be prepared to meet. It is very difficult to believe that those who disagree with you are ^{as} convinced of the right of their point of view as you are,

5248
that they are not being bribed or unduly influenced, have no selfish purpose as you are sure you have not

Two generalizations stopping all others which came out of this going up and down the land in the years between 1920 and 1932. / ^{The first is} the ambition of our ~~these~~ people to live and think according to what they conceive to be national standards. They adopt them whether they suit their locality or not and often in adopting them destroy a something with individuality and charm. For the traveller it begins with the hotel, spick and span, and as like as two peas to the one in A-ville - B-ville - and so on. Over the way is a sturdy stone building dating from the days of the coach and four. You may sigh for its great rooms and for a sight of the old lithographs sure to be on the wall; but you know it is run down. The town cannot support two and it prefers the smart and comfortable commonplace to modernizing its fine old inn.

Look out your hotel window and you will see opposite a smart little dress shop, a duplicate of one you have been seeing everywhere you have halted, a duplicate of many a one you have seen on New York Avenues. Next door is a standardized beauty parlor and the pretty girl who waits on you at the table, the daughter probably of some solid and self-respecting townsman. She has the latest coiffure and blood red nails. She is struggling to look as she supposes girls do in Chicago or New York.

549

When the committee takes you out to drive it is to show their one high building, a high building on a prairie with limitless land to occupy, or a country club as fine as the one in the nearest city. The pride is in looking like something else, not themselves. The growth of this progress in imitation can be traced in the change that has come over the local postal card. All my life I have been a buyer of postal cards, largely on account of my mother to whom I always sent pictures of the localities through which I was passing. Mother died in 1917 but up to this day I rarely go through a station that I do not say to myself, "I must find a card for Mother" and turn away with a pang. In the years between 1920 and 1932 the postal card grew steadily less interesting. Once there were pictures of a nearby Fort - the earliest house - a local celebrity - a rare view - but now it is all of high buildings and new blocks. They gave of course the pictures of the Zoo and the parks and even there the Zoo and parks pride themselves, like the country club, on being like those of the nearest large city.

The growing evidence that nationalization is blotting out local individuality, destroying the pungent personality of sections, states, communities, struck me with new force after the months I spent in Italy in 1926. In Italy I found that however deeply unionism might be written in the hearts of some men you were a Roman, a Perugian, a Venetian,

5070

a Neopolitan, before you were an Italian. The long arm of Fascism was reaching into the provinces and the towns but it did ^{not as yet} disturb their ~~as~~ ways of life. Mussolini had shown up to that date, ~~at least~~, rare knowledge of his Italians. He had left them their ways of life. Sure of that they did not worry so much about the change in government. Most of them could see about them the proofs of two thousand years of change; they could show you records and scars of a long succession of Emperors, Kings, Consuls, dictators. It did not seem to make a vast difference to them what the government was if they could go on being themselves.

Perhaps our national ambition to standardize ourselves has behind it the notion that democracy means standardization. But standardization is the surest way to destroy the initiative, to benumb the creative impulse above all else essential to the vitality and growth of democratic ideals.

The second of my two generalizations was slower in its making. It came when I began to scratch below the surface of the imitative life ~~which was~~ so conspicuous. Then I found a stabile foundation of people who stayed at home and went about their business in their own way and without much talking. These were people who in spite of droughts and

357

dust storms stuck to their farms, making the most of good years, saving enough to carry them through the evil ones, adding a little year by year to their possessions in town and country, supporting ^{schools,} churches, and incidentally lecture courses. They were people who believed in freedom to work out their own salvation and asked from the state nothing more than protection in this freedom. It was the business of government, as they saw it, to keep off the plunderers and let them alone.

Democracy to them was not something which insured them a stable livelihood. It was something which protected them while they earned a livelihood. If they failed it was their failure. If the government did not protect them from transportation plunderers, manipulations of money, stock gambling in goods which they raised to feed the world, it was the government's failure. Then they had the right to change the government, hold it up to its duty. That was their political business.

This was about what I found the country over, ~~in this stable mass.~~ When once I had learned to look beyond the restless imitative crowd, to hunt out people who were going about their business steadily, and for the most part serenely, I began to breathe ^{more} freely and to say, "Well, perhaps after all

552

the men and women of this country as a whole do know what they are about. They do know what democracy means, and in the best way that they can under many hampering circumstances they are trying to live it."

Some such conclusion I always brought back with me from my annual swings around the country, my dozens of nights in dozens of different places - the high spot^{of} which always was the hour of searching the faces of the men and women who came to listen to what I had to say, and who I knew sized me up for just about what I was worth. I might be fooling myself but not them.