From History of Madison County, Ill. by W. J. Norton

"AFFAIRS OF HONOR"

The celebrated "Lincoln-Shield duel" of 1842, o f which much has been written and which caused great excitement at the time in Alt on and in which two of her citizens bore the part of peace makers, deserves mention in the annals of Madison County. In the summer of 1842, at about the worst period of the hard times when the state banking system had collapsed and the people were unable to pay their taxes, the collectors being instructed by the state officials to receive nothing but specie in payment of taxes and the citizens having nothing where with to pay except the depreciated script of the banks, were in much distress. Thereupon the officers of the state suspended the collection of taxes of 1842, which action was held to be beyond their province.

Cause, "The Rebecca Article".

James Shields was then auditor of the state, and his ruling in the first ordering the collection of taxes in specie and then suspending the collection altogether was severely criticised by Mr. Lincoln in an article dated "Lost Twonship," signed "Rebecca," and published in the SANGAMON JOURNAL of September 2, 1842. It was written in jesting style but gave Shields great offense, as it held him up to ridicule. The mercurial blood of the Milesian gentleman rose to the top of the tube. He demanded of the editor of the JOURNAL the name of the author of the "Rebecca letter" and was given that of Mr. Lincoln. That gentleman was then at Tremont in Tazewell county, and thither Shields repaired accompanied by his friend, Gen. John B.Whiteside. Arriving at Tremont he immediately sent a note to Mr. Lincoln demanding an apology. Mr. Lincoln replied to the note, refusing to make any explanation on account of the menacing character of Shields' demand. Other correspondence followed, culminating in a note from Shields naming General Whiteside as his friend, to which Mr. Lincoln replied, naming a Dr. E.H.Merriman as his friend. These two "friends" now secretely pledged their honor to each other to agree upon some amicable terms of settlement and compel their principals to accept them, and to procrastinate the matter adjourned further proceedings to Springfield.

Arriving at Springfield, Monday night, September 19th, Lincoln left early the next morning for Jacksonville, to escape arrest, dueling being against the state law. He was accompanied by William Butler, leaving instructions with his second, Dr. Merriman, in which he avowed the authorship of the "Lost Township" letter; said it was written for political effect and was not intended to reflect on Shields' private character as a man or a gentleman, and concluded by saying that if the explanation was not satisfactory "the preliminaries of the fight are to be:

"First--Weapons: Cavalry broadswords of the largest size such as are now used by the cavalry company at Jacksonville.

"Second--Position: A plank ten feet long and from nine to twelve inches broad, to be firmly fixed on edge on the ground, as the time betwixt us which neither is to pass on forfeit of his life. Next a line drawn on the ground on either side of said plank and parallel with it, each at a distance of the whole length of the sword and three feet additional from the plank; and the passing of his own such line by either party during the fight shall be deemed a surrender of the contest.

"Third--Time: On Thursday evening at five o'clock, if you can get it so; but in no case to be at a greater distance of time than Friday evening at five o'clock.

"Fourth-- Place: Within three miles of Alton on the opposite side of the river, the particular spot to be agreed on by you."

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The position prescribed for the combatants on the field looks like the cropping out of one of Lincoln's jokes, as each would be, seemingly, out of harm's way, but the advantage would certainly have been with Lincoln owing to his great height and length of arm.

These instructions were read to General Whiteside by Dr. Merriman who declined to agree on terms of settlement until they should meet in Missouri. To have accepted them in the state would have violated the oaths of office of both Shields and Whiteside, who were state officers. All parties now left for the field of combat: Lincoln and his party by way of Jacksonville where they were joined by Dr. Bledsoe; and Shields and Whiteside by way of Hillsboro, where they were joined by General Ewing. Arrived at Alton, they were further joined by Dr. T.M.Hope. The Lincoln party had also been joined at Jacksonville by Dr. R.W.English, later postmaster at Alton. In the meantime Gen. John J.Hardin of Jacksonville and Dr. R.W.English of Carrollton, later postmaster at Alton, had also arrived and, as mutual friends of both parties, presented the following proposition, on the arrival of both parties in Missouri:

Alton, Sept. 22, 1842.

Messrs. Whiteside and Merriman: "As the mutual personal friends of both Messrs. Shields and Lincoln, but without authority from either, we earnestly desire a reconciliation of the misunderstanding existing between them. Such difficulties should always be settled amicably, if it is possible to do so with honor to both parties. Believing ourselves that such an arrangement can possibly be effected, we respectfully but earnestly submit the following proposition for your consideration: Let the whole difficulty be submitted to four or more gentlemen to be selected by yourselves, who shall consider the affair and report thereon for your consideration.

John J.Hardin,
R.W.English.

This proposition was submitted to both principals and accepted on the ground by them with slight modifications. Then followed correspondence between the referees of both parties who were John D.Whiteside, William Lee, D.Ewing and T.M.Hope for Shields; and E.H.Merriman, A.T. Bledsoe and William Butler for Lincoln. In the first note exchanged the Shields referees asked the Lincoln referees to "explain the offensive matter" in the article in controversy. The Lincoln referees, in reply stated that Mr. Lincoln in the "Lost township" article had written for political effect and with no intention of reflection on the character and standing of Mr. Shields as a man and a gentleman. Thus the controversy was settled and no blood shed. The referees on both sides united in a saying that the interference of Messrs. Hardin and English "was of the most courteous and gentlemanly character".

Dr. English, in his later years after the war and when a resident of Alton, took great pleasure in relating to his friends the incidents of this prospective duel in which he acted as mediator. "All parties," he said, "returned to Alton on the ferry boat. There was a great crowd on the levee awaiting their arrival. Some wag on the boat, in order to have a joke on the crowd, took a log of wood, covered it with a sheet, so as to resemble a human figure, and as the boat approached the landing bent over the figure and engaged industriously in wielding a fan, giving the impression that he was attending a wounded man." Thus ended the great fiasco.

Two Other Duels "Fall Through".

Two other challenges to duels resulted from this occurence.

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The first was a challence from Shields to William Butler, one of Lincoln's seconds. Shields took offense at a report of the fiasco which Butler sent to the SANGAMON JOURNAL and challenged him to fight a duel. Butler promptly accepted and, as the challenged party, named the place and weapons. Shields' seconds refused to accept the terms, as the place named was within the state and their principal could not accept without violating his oath of office. Thus the affair ended.

Out of this last affair grew another challenge, this between Merriman, Lincoln's second, and Whiteside, Shields' second, originating from the character of the notes exchanged between Whiteside and Merriman in the Shields-Butler controversy. Whiteside was the challenger and Shields acted as his friend, while Lincoln figured as Merriman's second. This duel fell through on account of disagreement as to time and place.

Of special interest in the Lincoln-Shields duel is the comment made thereon by the ALTON TELEGRAPH and DEMOCRATIC REVIEW then edited by Judge Bailhache. It is vitriolic in its criticism of the future president and of the man who was to be thereafter a general in the Mexican and Civil wars and a senator from three states. In his issue of October 1st, the editor says: "Our city was the threatr of an unusual scene of excitement during the last week from the visit of two distinguished gentlemen from Springfield, who, it was understood, had come here with a view of crossing the river to answer the requisitions of'the code of honor' by brutally attempting to assassinate each other in cold blood. We refer to this matter with paid and the deepest regret. Both of them are, and have been for a long time, our personal friends. Both we have esteemed in all the private relations of life, and consequently we regret that what seems a duty we owe the public compels us to allude to the disgraceful occurance at all. We consider, however, that both of these gentlemen have violated the laws of the country and insist that neither their influence, their respectability nor their private worth should save them from being amenable to those laws they have violated. Both of them are lawyers; both have been legislators of this state and have aided in the construction of laws for the government of society; both of them exercise no small influence in the community--all of which, in our estimation, aggravates instead of mitigates their offense. Why they should be permitted to escape punishment, while a freindless, penniless and obscure person, for a much less offense, is hurried to the county jail, forced through a trial with scarcely the forms of law, and finally immured within the walls of a penitentiary we are at a loss to conjecture. It is a partial and disreputable administration of justice, which, though in accordance with the spirit of the age, we must protest against. . . .

"We call upon Attorney General Lamborn to exercise a little of the zeal which he is continually putting in requisition against less favored but less guilty offenders, and bring all who have been concerned in the late attempt at assassination to justice. Unless he does this he will prove himself unworthy of the high trust that has been reposed in him.

"How the affair finally terminated, not having taken the trouble to inquire, we are unable to say. The friends of Mr. Shields and those of Mr. Lincoln claim it to have been settled on terms 'honorable' to both--notwithstanding the hundreds of rumors--many of which border on the ridiculous--that are incciculation. We are rejoiced that both are enabled to return to the bosom of their frineds, and trust that they will now consider, if they did not before, that rushing unprepared on the untried scenes of Eternity is a step too fearful in its consequences to be taken without preparation.

"We are astonished to hear that large numbers of our citizens crossed the river to witness a cold-blooded assassination between two of their fellow beings. It was no less disgraceful than the conduct of

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those who were to be actors in the drama. Hereafter, we hope the citizens of Springfield will select some other point to make public their intention of crossing the river to take each others' lives, than Alton. Such visits cannot but be attended with regret, and with unwelcome feelings, and the fewer we have of them the better. We should have alluded to this matter last week but for our absence at court."

Another County Affair of Honor.

Another "affair of honor" in which a resident, or former resident of Madison county, was a principal occured in 1841. The gentleman was Hon. Theophilus W.Smith, of Edwardsville, then a judge of the supreme court. It seems that the election of Harrison in 1840 to the presidency had caused a bitter partisan feeling throughout Illinois, which had gone Democratic, and culminated in an act of the legislature adding five Democratic judges to the sppreme court in order to overcome the influence of the Whig members, then in the majority, and who, it was feared, would decide a certain alien case in a way inimical to the Democrats. The contest over the matter at issue was bitter and many controversies arose which threatened serious consequences. Judge Smith, it was charged, had given currency to certain reports in regard to the intentions of his associates on the bench. These reports were the basis of a bitter speech made by Hon. John A.McClernand in the legislature assailing the Whig members of the court.Judge Smith denied circulating the reports, but when the fact was brought home to him he was stung into sending a note to McClernand, by the hands of his friend Dr. Merriman (subsequently General Shields' second), couched in such language that it might or might not be construed into a challenge. McClernand promptly accepted it as a challenge, named the place of meeting, which was to be in Missouri, the weapons rifles, and distance forty paces. The fact of the challenge and acceptance becoming known and Attorney General Lamborn lodged a complaint before a justice of the peace in Springfield, where upon Smith was arrested and placed under bonds to keep the peace. The affair being thus squelched, the belligerent judge left town to enter upon his judicial dutées.

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