



Jan. 31, 1933

Miss Ida M. Tarbell
120 E. 19th New York

Dear Miss Tarbell:

For some time I have thought of writing, or compiling, some sketches concerning Lincoln's education, and particularly in reference to the books he is known to have read.

Since coming from Springfield to Los Angeles about seven years ago, I have made a special study of Lincoln's reading, and have formed a collection of more than one hundred of such books as he is known to have read, besides which, I have made careful search of many biographies and have found references to 187 such books.

I believe I can write a series of seven articles, of which the enclosed MSS would be the first, each equally interesting. This would not be due to anything original that I might say, but to the interesting things others have said, and which I would gather into groups bearing on a specific subject. The subjects treated would be Memory, School-texts, Hist.& Biog., Theology, Law, Humor, and Poetry.

If what I produce is worth publishing, I would naturally like to be paid something for my work. I thought you might lend a friendly hand to bring this about. If my idea is right but my composition wrong, you might edit each article and share with me what they bring.

Possibly this first MSS will be in time for use on Feb. 12th when all the papers are printing new and old material on Lincoln.

I am 'drawing my bow at a venture' and will be most happy to win your approval.

Sincerely,

H. E. Barker

A SOURCE OF LINCOLN'S POWER.By H. E. Barker.

In seeking for the source of Abraham Lincoln's power, the matter of his extraordinary memory is to be reckoned with as constituting a principal factor.

Memory alone, a natural gift, is not enough. The young student of grammar quickly learns and glibly recites the definition of etymology, - that it "treats of the derivation, classification, and various modifications of words," - but of what use is this parrot-like recital, scoring its mark of 'perfect,' if the words are not understood and applied to the matter in hand?

A natural gift,- God-given, Lincoln's remarkable memory enabled him in early boyhood to repeat to his young companions long passages from the books he had been reading, and also to repeat almost word for word the occasional speech or sermon to which he had listened. Not only would he memorize the words but his keen faculty for observation enabled him to remember and reproduce the odd gestures and intonations of the speaker, to the great delight of those who heard his mimicry.

But to memorize and repeat without understanding was not enough for the boy Lincoln. It irritated him when his elders talked in a way he could not understand. Years later at the White House, he told the artist Carpenter that this was the one thing in life that made him angry. "I don't think I ever got angry at anything else" he said, "but that always disturbed my temper. I can remember going to my bed-room, after hearing the neighbors talk of an evening with my father, and spending no small part of the night walking up and down, and trying to make out what was the exact meaning of their to me, dark sayings. I could not sleep, though I often tried to, when

I got on such a hunt after an idea, until I caught it; and when I thought I had got it, I was not satisfied until I had repeated it over and over, - until I had put it in language plain enough as I thought, for any boy I knew to comprehend. This was a kind of passion with me, and it has stuck by me; for I am never easy now, when I am handling a thought, 'til I have bounded it North, South, East and West." A credible witness has said "I have known him to write a proposition in three different forms in order to state the meaning as clearly and simply as possible, and to spend half a day doing so."

Lincoln's early teachers were men of scarcely any learning, and what he mastered through their assistance consisted only of the simplest rudiments of education. That subsequent training and disciplining of the intellect, that habit of close observation and investigation, that power of intense thought, which enabled him to master every subject he investigated, and that faculty of clear and forcible expression, of logical arrangement, and of overwhelming argument by which he enforced his own well grounded convictions, - all this was the result of his own unaided exertions and of a naturally sound and vigorous understanding.

Although denied the requisite training of the school-room, he was none the less competent to cope with those who had undergone that discipline. No one had a more retentive memory. If he read or heard a good thing it never escaped him.

In mature life he told his friend Speed that he was slow to learn, but equally slow to forget what he had learned. He said, "my mind is like a piece of steel - very hard to scratch anything on it, and almost impossible after you get it there to rub it out."

He read Weems' Life of Washington in early boyhood and when in 1861 he addressed the Senate of New Jersey at Trenton, he recounted scenes from the story read so long before, and told of the impressions made on his boy-

ish mind at that time. His memory held everything tenaciously and in readiness for instant use, like an orderly and well-filled filing-case with its cards cross-filed and indexed to cover every need.

To comprehend Mr. Lincoln fully we must know in substance not only the facts of his origin, but also the manner of his development. The foundation for his education was laid in Indiana and in the little town of New Salem, in Illinois; and in both places he gave evidence of a nature and characteristics that distinguished him from every associate and surrounding he had. He was not peculiar or eccentric, and yet a shrewd observer would have seen that he was decidedly unique and original. Although imbued with a marked dislike for manual^{labor}, it cannot be truthfully said of him that he was indolent. From a mental standpoint he was one of the most energetic young men of his day. He put forth heroic effort to acquire understanding, not counting the cost in time or labor. He dwelt altogether in the land of thought.

As a boy he kept the Bible and Aesop's Fables within easy reach, and read them over and over again. These two volumes furnished him with many figures of speech and parables which he used with such happy effect in his later and public utterances. Herndon tells of Lincoln's habit of reading aloud and says he once asked Lincoln why he did it. This was Lincoln's explanation: "When I read aloud," he said, "two senses catch the idea; first, I see what I read; second, I hear it, and therefore I can remember it better."

He studied Kirkham's English Grammar after he was twenty-three years of age; at twenty-five he mastered enough of geometry, trigonometry and mensuration to enable him to take the field as surveyor; and for a special reason he studied and mastered the first six books of Euclid after he had served a term in Congress, and when he was forty-one years of age, and this amid the pressure of an extensive legal practice. It was with such self-imposed drudgery through uncounted hours of severest application that Lin-

coln acquired the ability to sort out and use a vast store of material gathered and retained by his natural memory. Now these remembered words came back with new meaning and with greater force, to be applied to the larger work for which he was now preparing himself.

Although he mastered most books with astonishing ease and rapidity, he found law books more difficult and he studied them with a sort of passionate determination. Of this he himself said: "In the course of my law-reading I constantly came across the word demonstrate. I thought at first that I understood its meaning, but soon became satisfied that I did not. I said to myself, 'what do I mean when I demonstrate more than when I reason or prove? How does demonstration differ from any other proof?' I consulted Webster's dictionary. That told me of 'certain proof,' 'proof beyond the possibility of doubt;' I could form no idea what sort of proof that was. I thought a great many things were proven beyond a possibility of doubt, without recourse to any such extraordinary process of reasoning as I understood 'demonstration' to be. I consulted all the dictionaries and books of reference I could find, but with no better results. At last I said 'Lincoln, you can never make a lawyer if you do not understand what demonstrate means.'" It was only after his mastery of geometry that he had no further uncertainty on the subject.

Many stories are told of Lincoln's faculty for remembering faces and names, and his retention of verses and even long poems over a period of many years. Dr. Theo. Cuyler had met Lincoln but once; he relates this incident: "I did not see Mr. Lincoln until two years afterwards, when I was in Washington on duty for the Christian Commission. It was one of his public levee nights and as soon as I came up to him, his first words were 'Doctor, I have not seen you since we met in the Tremont House in Chicago.' I mention this as an illustration of his marvelous memory; he never forgot a face or a name, or the slightest incident."

Noah Brooks quotes Lincoln as saying he 'could n't help remembering,' and

comments thus: 'One would suppose that in the midst of the worries and cares of office his mind would become less retentive of matters not immediately related to the duties of the hour. But this was not the fact. Although the memories of long past events, and words long since read or heard, appeared to be impossible of obliteration, more recently acquired impressions remained just as fixed as the older ones. One of my cousins, (continues Mr. Brooks) John Holmes Goodenow, of Alfred, Maine, was appointed minister to Turkey early in the Lincoln administration, and was taken to the White House, before his departure for his post, to be presented to the President. When Lincoln learned that his visitor was a grand-son of John Holmes, one of the first Senators from Maine, and a man of note in his day and generation, he immediately began the recitation of a poetical quotation which must have been more than a hundred lines in length. Mr. Goodenow, never having met the President, was naturally astonished at this outburst; and as the President went on and on with this long recitation, the suspicion crossed his mind that Lincoln had suddenly taken leave of his wits. But when the lines had been finished the President said: 'There! that poem was quoted by your grand-father Holmes in a speech he made in the United States Senate in ----', and he named the date and specified the occasion. As John Holmes's term in the Senate ended in 1833, and Lincoln was probably impressed by reading a copy of the speech rather than by hearing it, this feat of memory appears most remarkable. If he had been by any casualty deprived of his sight, his own memory could have supplied him with an ample library."

An old newspaper clipping, undated, furnishes a pleasant story of Lincoln's memory. "Abraham Lincoln was perhaps the best man in the country in his day to remember men and to place them without hesitation in the environment where he last saw them. He was first of all a politician, and the politician who forgets is lost. When he was comparatively a young man and a candidate for the Illinois legislature he took dinner with a Sanga-

mon county farmer, and after the meal they two stood at the barn yard door, talking and whittling. Lincoln's knife needed sharpening and the Yankee in him prompted him to sharpen it. He walked to a tool-box the farmer had nailed just inside the wagon-shed, and took from it a whetstone and came back to the great gate, where he stood again and began sharpening his knife. One post of the gate was very high, and a rod from the top supported the extended weight of the gate. A man came along the road in a wagon, going in the direction Lincoln wanted to travel, and he bade his host good-bye and clambered into the vehicle, intent, no doubt, on getting another vote.

Years afterward, when he was President, a soldier came to call upon him at the White House, and at the first sight of him, the gaunt chief executive said: 'Yes, I remember you. I took dinner with you one time when I was running for the legislature. You used to live on the Danville road. Recollect we stood together out at the barn-yard gate and I sharpened my knife!'

'Ya-as,' drawled the farmer-soldier, 'and wherever did you put that whetstone? I looked the whole place over a dozen times, but I never could find it after the day you used it. We 'lowed mebbby you took it along with you.'

'No,' said Lincoln, looking serious as if the matter were as important as the recent defeat of Pemberton, 'no, I put it on top of that gate post, --- the high one.'

'Well!' exclaimed the visitor, 'mebbby you did. Couldn't nobody else have put it there, and none of us ever thought to look there for it.'

He went on home, and when he got there one of the first things he did was to climb up on the gate and look for the whetstone. It was there, right where it had lain for fifteen years. The honest fellow, adoring his chief, wrote a letter before his furlough expired, telling the President the whetstone was found and would never be lost again."

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Frank Carpenter declares Lincoln's memory to have been very remarkable. 'With the multitude of visitors whom he saw daily,' says Carpenter, 'I was often amazed at the readiness with which he recalled faces and events and even names. At one of the evening receptions, a stranger shook hands with him, and as he did so, remarked casually, that he was elected to Congress about the time Mr. Lincoln's term as representative expired. 'Yes,' said the President, 'you are from----,' mentioning the State. 'I remember reading of your election in a newspaper one morning on a steamboat going down to Mount Vernon.' At another time a gentleman addressed him, saying, 'I presume Mr. President, that you have forgotten me?' 'No,' was the prompt reply, 'your name is Flood. I saw you last, twelve years ago, at -----,' naming the place and the occasion. 'I am glad to see,' he continued, 'that the Flood flows on.' Subsequent to his reelection (continues Carpenter) a deputation of bankers from various sections were introduced by the Secretary of the Treasury. After a few moments' general conversation, Mr. Lincoln turned to one of them and said: 'Your district did not give me so strong a vote at the last election as it did in 1860.' 'I think, sir, that you must be mistaken,' replied the banker. 'I have the impression that your majority was considerably increased at the last election.' 'No,' rejoined the President, 'you fell off about six hundred votes.' Then taking down from the bookcase the official canvass of 1860 and 1864, he referred to the vote of the district named, and proved to be quite right in his assertion.."

Such incidents, and the many others that might be related, certainly prove the tenacity of Lincoln's memory. When Herndon said of him that 'he read less and thought more' than any other man, he but emphasized the importance of Lincoln's early strivings for complete understanding of the things he heard and read. And having so trained his mind, he could and did draw from the storehouse of his memory examples, comparisons and precedents with which to shape his own high purpose, as may be found expressed in his every word and action.