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IMPRESSIONS OF A SPECTATOR OF THE LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE.

Looking back over a vista of fifty years I recall some incidents of the great debate between Lincoln and Douglas at Alton, October 15, 1858. A young schoolboy then, I here note the only incidents of the debate that memory brings back to me. The weather was mild and pleasant, a typical Indian summer day, The crowd about the speakers' stand was not, as I remember, very large. Upon the rude platform were seated the speakers and committeemen. There was a table and a pitcher of water upon it. Douglas spoke first, and during the progress of his speech frequently assuaged his thirst from the pitcher aforesaid. My companion, a boy, of my own age whispered to me: "He can't fool us; it's whisky in that pitcher, and not water." It will be remembered that membership in a temperance society was not among the accusations hurled against the "Little Giant" in those days.

I can recall the appearance of Douglas on the platform; his short, sturdy yet stalwart figure, and the impresssion made by his power over his auditors. When Douglas had concluded his first speech a democrat standing by my side shouted, "Now let old long legs come out!" -- and Lincoln came out, though not in response to the impromptu introduction, and made the rejoinder that has since been famous in history as his concluding speech in that series of great debates. I can also recall Lincoln's appearance on the platform, his tall, angular figure and his strong featured, kindly face, alight with the inspiration of a great theme. As the debate proceeded there would be applause from the adherents of one side mingled with shouts of dissent from their opponents, I recall nothing of the arguments.

Was the Preliminary Skirmish.

I was too young to appreciate them, and anyone who read those speeches in his maturity will concede that the debate was beyond the ordinary boy's understanding. This contest for senator was the preliminary skirmish between the same speakers for the president in 1860. No doubt they both realized it with the keen political foresight of the statesman. It was also my good fortune to witness the opening of the memorable campaign of 1860 at the wigwam on Lake Street, Chicago. I was then in school at Lake Forrest. In company with my roommate, I came down to witness the great convention on the last day of its session. We got up at 5:00 o'clock in the morning, went down to the wigwam and planted ourselves against the main doorway. There we waited until the doors were opened at 9:00 o'clock. The rush of the crowd carried us down into the pit, clear to the delegates' platform. Boylike, we climbed upon the edge of the platform, and no one had a better view of the proceedings than ourselves. I remember the roll call of states for the presidential nomination and the responses of the partisans at Lincoln, Seward, Chase, Cameron, Bates, as they were successively placed in nomination. It was at once noticeable, judging from the volume of the applause each candidate's name evoked, that, whatever the preference of the delegates, the spectators were overwhelmingly with Lincoln, with Seward's followers next in strength. Not only was the vast crowd inside the building for Lincoln, but the masses swarming outside were likewise cheering wildly for the man from Illinois. The clamor for Lincoln was not only enthusiastic, but insistent. Doubtless it had its effect on the delegated.

~~Why Seward Lost.~~

Had the convention been held elsewhere than in Chicago, Seward, then the national leader of the new party, would doubtless have been nominated, but the crowd in the convention hall, and the supporters outside who echoed their shouts, were for Lincoln and would not be denied.

Was this the prophetic instinct of "coming events casting their shadows before"? The enthusiasm in the wigwam as the balloting progressed and the successive results were announced is indescribable, but the scene itself is indelibly inscribed on my memory. I have seen many great assemblies since, and various national conventions, but never one like this, when the new party of freedom, in its stalwart youth was choosing its leader with the foresight of those guided by inspiration. Of the speeches I recall but two which impressed me especially. One was that of Norman B.Judd, chairman of the Illinois delegation, in placing Lincoln in nomination. The other was that of William F.Evarts of the New York delegation, who, after what seemed lond delay, and in response to persistent calls of "New York! New York!" rose to accede to the will of the majority as expressed on, the third ballot. It was a bitter pill for Evarts and the entire New York delegation, whose idol had fallen. They were blindly devoted to Stewart, and had moved their hosts to Chicago in full confidence of victory.

I recall Evarts as he rose to speak, tall, straight, and spare of figure, with tears of disappointment coursing down his high bred face. But he was a patriot and a statesman as well as a partisan, and made a wonderful speech in giving in the adhesion of the Empire state to the new leader, who had come out of the west. I do not remember what he said, only the effect and the impression, and that he captured the crowd and the convention.

After the last change of the vote of some state--I think Pennsylvania--on the final ballot had assured the nomination of Lincoln, pandemonium broke loose. The people had had their way. How they shouted and yelled and cheered, again and again, keeping up the din for a half hour! It seemed as if the roof of the building would be lifted up by the volume of cheers and the sides fall out to give them room. Outside a salute was being fired, but the boom of the cannon was drowned in the wild hurrahs of the people. I could see the smoke drift past the windows, but heard no report.

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Closing Scenes of Lincoln's Career.

And it was my lot to witness the closing scene in the career of the great emancipator, when the land was shaken with the sound of sobbing, when the flag he died for flew at half-mast from sea to sea, and crape fluttered from every door; when the greatest funeral pageant of modern times moved onward from the nation's capital, over mountains and prairies, to the old home in Illinois, the home he left an untried man and to which he returned a might conqueror. I recall arriving in Springfield about 4:00 A.M. of the day of the final obsequies, and with the crowd from the train passing on to the state house, where the body of the nation's ruler lay.

I remember the weird, somber aspect of the state house in the early dawning, with fold on fold of crape trailing from cornice to basement, and shrouding the national colors. In the rotunda, also draped in crape and bunting, was the casket, surrounded by a guard of general officers. The crowd filed silently and reverently by for a parting look at the face so dear and famous, in the only rest it had found in four perturbed years. I recall but little of the subsequent funeral service save the impression made by the singing of the hymn "Children of the Heavenly King" by a chorus of some 700 voices. The interment at Oak Ridge I did not witness, the weakness following camp fever precluding a long walk.

These are the reminiscences which my youth associates, with the great chieftain of liberty, his struggles and his victory, but they

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linger with me as something sweet and precious; to have seen and heard him in the full panoply of militant manhood, to have witnessed his triumphant call to his great mission, and to have had the privilege of looking on his pale face, at rest in the peace of God's chosen, his brows crowned with such laurels as never others wore, are memories that will abide with me to the end of life.

By W.T.Norton.

Written in 1908

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Boston Traveler; Mr. Dewey of the New York Evening Post, and various journalists from smaller towns.

Mr. Hitt was Lincoln's official stenographer and had a famous career subsequently in the diplomatic service and in congress. Mr. White won fame as an editor of the Chicago-Tribune, later of the New York Evening Post. He became eminent as a writer and publicist, and is one of the few distinguished men of that era who still survive. He is a resident of New York and last winter delivered a lecture on "Lincoln in 1854", before the State Historical Society.

Among other prominent public men present were: Hon. Lyman Trumbull, of Alton, the coleague of Douglas in the Senate; former U.S.Senator David J.Baker, also of Alton, father of Hon. H.S.Baker; Hon. O.M.Hatch, Secretary of State; Hon. J.A.Miller, State Treasurer; Hon. J.O.Norton, congressman from the Joliet district; ex-Gov. John Reynolds of Belleville; Hon. Jos. Gillespie and Hon. A.W.Metcalf, of Edwardsville; Hon. John M.Palmer, of Carlinville; Hon. Curtis Blakeman, of Marine; ex-Gov. J.A.Matteson and Gen. Curran, of Springfield; Hon. Cyrus Edwards, of Upper Alton, and many others. Hon. L.S.Metcalf was at that time Mayor of Alton and seems to have maintained good order during the day. He was subsequently a Colonel in the Union army and later a member of Congress from a St. Louis district.

The Democratic candidated for the Legislature that year were Col. S.A.Buckmaster, for the Senate; Z.B.Job and J.H.Sloss, for the House. The Republican candidates were Hon. Jos. Gillespie for the Senate; Isaac Cox and Curtis Blakeman for the House. It was for the election of thses legislative candidates, of their respective parties, that Lincoln and Douglas contended in this district. Judging from the result of the ensuing November election Judge Douglas had a little the better of the encounter with Lincoln at Alton as the Democratic Legislative candidates were elected by small majorities, averaging 100 in Alton and 230 in the county. Madison county thus gave three votes to Douglas in the legislature. The electio for U.S.Senator took place Jan. 5th, following, Douglas receiving 54 votes in joint session, and Lincoln 46; majority for Douglas,8. The state had gone Republican by some 7,000 majority on the head of the ticket, but the Democrats secured a small majority in the Legislature.

The last survivor of the eight speakers who addressed public meetings on the evening prior to the debate is Hon. Jos. H.Sloss, now an octogenarian resident of Memphis, Tenn. Mr. Sloss was elected to the Legislature that year, as above noted, his colleague being Hon. Z.B.Job, who died last November in an honored old age. Mr. Sloss was at the time of the debate a resident of Edwardsville. He was a native of Alabama. He was a brother-in-law of Mr. F.S.Rutherford and they were opposing speakers at the meetings mentioned. The opposition of the two went still further. When the war broke out Mr. Sloss went south and entered the Confederate service. Mr. Rutherford entered the Union army and became a Brigadier General, dying in 1864 from exposure in the service. After the war Mr. Sloss became U.S.Senator from Alabama. Of the subsequent careers of various other distinguished men who were present at the debate I have spoken of in previous articles.

And speaking of these gallant soldiers my thought turnsback to the hundreds of volunteers whom Alton sent to the front and especially to the schoolboys of 1858 who were clustered about the speakers' stand on that day of great memories. It is safe to say that nine-tenths of the boys of 13, 14, 15 and older who were cheering that day for Lincoln or Douglas, with boyish enthuiasm, were cheering for the Union in 1861, and later on were carrying muskets or wearing shoulder straps in the Union army. They were with Grant at Donelson, at Shiloh, at

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Vicksburg and Lookout Mountain. With Rosecrans at direful Chicamauga; with Sherman on the march to the sea; with the Army of the Potomac from Bull Run to Appomattox. It was the schoolboy of 1858, the country over, who saved the Union in the dark days from 1861 to 1865, for the records of the war show that the average age of the Union soldiers on enlistment was 19. The school boys of 1858-- our hearts go out to them in memory, alike to those who marched away never to return and to those who came back bronzed and stalwarf to take their place again in the ranks of citizenship. Many of those who went out in the ranks came home wearing the bars of a captain, the leaf of a major, the eagle of a colonel or even the stars of a brigadier. Theirs was a record of patriotism unsurpassed, and much of their inspiration to heroic deeds came from the speeches of Lincoln prior to the war and to Douglas' sublime plea fro the Union in 1861. Lincoln and Douglas were their great leaders-- and never did leaders have a grander following. And these boys of 1858 were just such happy, light-hearted, capable boys as fill our homes and school today-- and the boys of the present generation, will if need be, make as great sacrifices for patriotism as did their fathers--and in them is our country's hope.

It is notable that of the leading figures in Alton on that October day of 1858 four became aspirants for the Presidency. Lincoln and Douglas in 1860; Lyman Trumbull in the Liberal convention of 1872 and Gen. Palmer in 1896. How much of national history clusters about the names of these four Illinois giants. In the chair of State; in the forum, in the camp thay blazed the way for Union and liberty, and the nation followed where they led. Let us make the day we celebrate, next month consecrate to patriotism as well as to the memory of other days when great chieftains walked our streets and held high converse with out people. And then they passed on-- and while we watched they crossed the heights victorious to rest at last "in fame's eternal camping ground".

W.T.Norton.

Written in Sept 1908

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