

Lincoln Sesquicentennial In Iowa

On September 2, 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved a Joint Resolution of Congress establishing the Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission. The Commission consisted of five members appointed by the President of the Senate, five appointed by the Speaker of the House, and twelve appointed by the President of the United States, each of the three in turn serving as members of the Commission. An Executive Committee of eight was formed from the above appointees with Conrad L. Wirth, Director of the National Park Service, who was a statutory member of the Commission, acting as their secretary. Professor William E. Baringer was named the Executive Director of the Executive Staff.

In its *Handbook of Information* the Commission outlined incontrovertible reasons for celebrating the life of Lincoln:

He was truly a great man. He influenced the course of history. His wisdom and innate faith in his countrymen enabled him, as President of the United States, to lead the nation safely through the horrors of a civil war. "In his character," wrote the historian George Bancroft, "Lincoln was through and through an American." In the Commemoration Ode read at Harvard College on July 21, 1865, James Russell Lowell called him "the first American."

As a frontier boy and youth, as an Illinois politician and lawyer, and as the leader of a nation, Abraham Lincoln practiced the cardinal virtues of humility, steadfastness, faith in righteousness, and the forgiving spirit. Then too, his humor, his earthiness, and his utter lack of pretension made him one with common humanity. Herein too is his greatness. Stephen A. Douglas, who argued, disputed, and debated with Lincoln throughout the State of Illinois, admitted that "Lincoln is the honestest man I ever knew." And when General Grant was asked his opinion of Lincoln, he replied: "He was incontestably the greatest man I ever knew."

The Commission outlined a threefold purpose in its *Handbook*:

In the first place, to make available for ready reference the text of H. J. Res. 351 under which the Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission operates, together with a complete roster of its membership; in the second place, to suggest certain aids to those who prepare programs in honor of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Lincoln; and, in the third, to encourage and invite groups of citizens to institute Lincoln programs during the sesquicentennial year.

The Commission felt that its limited materials would at least be helpful to those planning programs:

The life and career of President Lincoln were sufficiently varied and noble to contain elements of interest to almost every group — patriotic, civic, legal, educational, and service — as well as to churches, schools, and libraries and to media such as the press, radio, and television. The programs may take the form of panel discussions, ad-

dresses, plays, debates, sermons, dramatic readings, music, pageants, or exhibits.

Iowans were not slow to participate in the Lincoln Sesquicentennial. Congressman Fred Schwengel named the Superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa as chairman of a committee to advise with his Washington group and



First Sesquicentennial Dinner at Iowa Wesleyan

Seated, left to right: Congressman Fred Schwengel, Mrs. William J. Petersen, President J. Raymond Chadwick of Iowa Wesleyan College, Dr. William E. Baringer, Executive Director of the Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission, and Superintendent William J. Petersen of the State Historical Society of Iowa.

coordinate activities in Iowa. Although loosely knit this Committee was responsible for many Lincoln observances in Iowa.

The first program arranged was a Lincoln dinner held on the Iowa Wesleyan campus on Saturday, December 13, 1958. It was sponsored jointly by the State Historical Society of Iowa and Iowa Wesleyan College with the avowed purpose of bringing together of all Iowans interested in Abraham Lincoln and Lincoln lore. Dr. William J. Petersen presided over the program, Reverend Russell Jay gave the invocation, and Dr. J. Raymond Chadwick, President of Iowa Wesleyan College, gave a penetrating talk on the Harlan-Lincoln Tradition at Iowa Wesleyan. College Players of Iowa Wesleyan then presented "The Lonesome Train," a dramatic presentation of the reactions of the people as the Lincoln funeral train bore his body westward from Washington to Springfield a thousand miles through seven states. Congressman Fred Schwengel introduced the speaker of the evening, Professor William E. Baringer, Executive Director of the Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission.

In addition to furnishing over five hundred Iowa newspapers with press releases on Lincoln and Iowa, the Superintendent of the Society arranged the annual Lincoln Day program for the 58th General Assembly. President J. Raymond Chadwick spoke on "Abraham Lincoln and His Friends," Representative William E. Darrington spoke on "Abraham Lincoln: Is This Your Life?," and the Iowa Wesleyan College Players pre-

sented "The Lonesome Train." Eyewitnesses observed that many a legislator's vision was tear-dimmed at the conclusion of this program.

Meanwhile, hundreds of Iowa communities observed the Sesquicentennial of Lincoln's birth in school, in service and study clubs, from the pulpit, by means of radio and television programs, and through feature articles in the press. No Lincoln's Birthday since 1909 has been more widely commemorated or fervently observed.

A project that attracted nation-wide participation was the \$2,000 Lincoln essay contest conducted by Broadcast Music, Inc., and the American Association for State and Local History, in association with *This Week Magazine*. The subject of the 1,500-word essays was to be on the theme "Reflections While Standing Before the Lincoln Memorial." State historical societies from all over the United States served as judges of the essays contributed by citizens of their own state. Almost one hundred essays were submitted by Iowans writing in the two categories — professional and non-professional. The American Association for State and Local History then narrowed the field of winners picked from the two submitted from each state. Finally, a committee composed of such leading Lincoln authorities as Paul M. Angle, Ralph Bunche, Bruce Catton, Allan Nevins, Mark Van Doren, Ralph G. Newman, and Kenneth D. Wells, made the final selection of

winners. Helen Marie Newell of Boise, Idaho, won the \$500 prize in the professional writer group, and Nancy A. Potter, a native of Connecticut but a literature teacher at the University of Rhode Island since 1947, won in the non-professional category.

While the General Assembly was still in session Governor Herschel Loveless appointed ten Iowans to serve on Friends of Lincoln, Inc., a group whose purpose, in addition to stimulating the proper observance of the birth of Lincoln, was especially interested in promoting a bronze monument of Abraham Lincoln and his son by the distinguished sculptor — Fred Torre. The members of this committee were Reinhold Carlson, Rev. John D. Clinton, Representative William E. Darrington, Judge Luther T. Glanton, Jr., Major Charles Iles of Des Moines, Robert Lappan, Harriet Macy, Representative A. L. Mensing, Senator George O'Malley, and Superintendent William J. Petersen of the State Historical Society of Iowa. John D. Clinton, who had spear-headed the drive, was named Executive Secretary, and Luther T. Glanton, Jr., and A. L. Mensing were elected co-chairmen. The Committee held several meetings during 1959 deliberating over the proper location of the statue and the best methods of raising funds. The first annual banquet of the Friends of Lincoln was held at the Des Moines Y.M.C.A. on February 12, 1960.

As a final tribute to the Great Emancipator, the State Historical Society of Iowa is devoting this commemorative issue of *THE PALIMPSEST* to Abraham Lincoln — America's martyr president who not only "belongs to the ages" but to all humanity.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN