

Lincoln at Burlington

October 9, 1858, eighty-five years ago, was a memorable day in the history of Burlington, although then and perhaps for many years thereafter, it was not so recognized. On that day the city was host to Abraham Lincoln — one of the few occasions when he visited Iowa. There, in the evening, he spoke before a large gathering in Grimes Hall. The episode is particularly interesting because it occurred in the midst of his series of debates with Stephen A. Douglas, which rank among the most famous in the political life of the nation. Those were critical times when momentous issues were at stake and public opinion upon questions involving the very life of the Union was rapidly crystallizing.

On July 24, 1858, Lincoln, acting upon the advice of his party leaders, challenged Douglas to appear with him in a series of joint debates, to be held at various places throughout Illinois, in their campaign for election to the United States Senate. He proposed particularly to argue the slavery question, which had recently been aggravated by the Dred Scott decision of the United States Supreme Court.

Douglas, known throughout the land as the "Little Giant", readily accepted the challenge and suggested that they should meet at the towns of Ottawa, Freeport, Jonesboro, Charleston, Galesburg, Quincy, and Alton. To this Lincoln immediately acceded and the first two debates were held in August, on the 21st and 27th, the second two in September on the 15th and 18th, and the last three in October, at Galesburg on the 7th, at Quincy on the 13th, and at Alton on the 15th. It was between the Galesburg and the Quincy debates that Lincoln crossed the river to meet his friends in Burlington.

It has been said that probably no more strenuous political campaign was ever waged for election to the United States Senate than that made by Lincoln and Douglas during the summer and early autumn of 1858. Lincoln himself made more than one hundred and fifty speeches, often speaking two and sometimes three times in a single day. Taking into consideration the slow and cumbersome mode of travel necessary in those days, one marvels at the physical endurance of the men who were able to withstand the terrific strain involved.

In this respect, Lincoln fared better than Douglas. Being of a cool, jovial disposition, with a keen sense of humor, he fretted little over the many inconveniences of frontier travel, and

laughed at situations which annoyed a person of Douglas's nervous temperament. Between debates each man went his own way, stopping at various places en route to rest and visit or to speak wherever and whenever the occasion permitted. Both, therefore, made other important speeches, separately, in towns in northwestern Illinois, close to the Iowa border, all of which attracted considerable attention across the river. Among other places, Douglas spoke at Galena and Rock Island, Illinois, and at Burlington, Iowa; while Lincoln spoke at Augusta, Toulon, Oquawka, Monmouth, and Carthage.

It was a part of Lincoln's strategy to follow Douglas and speak in the same town, in order to "drive some nails in his coffin". Consequently, after Douglas appeared in Burlington, it was not difficult to get Lincoln to accept an invitation to speak there also. For a long time the political leaders of the early capital and political center of Iowa had wanted Lincoln to visit the city. As early as 1844, the Whigs, in arranging for a party rally to be held on July 13th of that year, issued a printed "dodger" on July 1st, urging "the attendance of the Whigs of the Territory generally." James W. Grimes, one of the promoters of the gathering, wrote to David E. Blair of Yellow Springs in Des Moines County, inclosing a circu-

lar. On the inner page he wrote a note earnestly requesting him to arouse and bring the voters of his "whole township" to the meeting and adding, evidently as an inducement to insure their attendance, "Baker and Lincoln of Illinois and some Missouri men — besides Lowe, Woodward, and Reid, are expected." Lincoln, however, it seems, was unable to attend, and so those who had come with the expectation of hearing him speak must have been disappointed.

Again during the campaign of 1856, Governor Grimes wrote Lincoln a cordial letter inviting him to "come over the river and give his aid and influence to the Republicans to increase their chances of carrying Iowa for Fremont and Dayton." Lincoln, however, sent his regrets, saying he had not the time; and also, that he feared the psychological effects of importing a speaker from outside the State. It might do the Republican cause more harm than good — citing several instances in contemporary political history when such endeavors had brought disastrous results.

Two years later, then, knowing that Lincoln was to be in the vicinity, for his scheduled debates with Douglas at Galesburg and Quincy, the Burlington Republicans invited him to address the citizens of Iowa, this time with better luck. Attorney Charles Darwin, chairman of the Republican

county committee, issued the invitation and made all the local arrangements.

Evidently a number of Burlingtonians had journeyed to Galesburg to hear the debate on October 7th, for in the Burlington *Hawk-Eye's* brief announcement of Lincoln's coming visit, published on the morning of the eighth, Editor Clark Dunham referred to it. "Those who attended the debate at Galesburg yesterday returned last night. They say it was an immense gathering of people, some twelve thousand persons being present. Those we conversed with think Mr. Lincoln the ablest and most popular speaker they ever heard, — say he had altogether the advantage of Douglas in the argument, even Douglas' friends acknowledging it.

"Mr. Lincoln speaks at Oquawka Saturday. All who desire to hear him can go up and return on the Rock Island packet. After he has finished speaking he will come down on the boat to this city, and speak on the street if the weather will permit, if not in Grimes' Hall. He says he has got so used to speaking that it don't hurt him a bit and he will talk as long as we want to hear him! HUZZA FOR LINCOLN!"

The *Hawk-Eye* carried only three brief notices advertising the event, scattered in large type under the heading, "Local Affairs".

"Abe Lincoln speaks in Burlington Saturday evening".

"Mr. Lincoln has consented to speak in this city Saturday evening next".

"There will be a Grand Concert at the Peoples's Garden this evening immediately after Mr. Lincoln's speech".

This was, apparently, the only newspaper publicity Lincoln's visit received.

After his fifth joint debate with Douglas at Galesburg on October 7th, Lincoln made the best of his opportunities to widen his acquaintance locally, for on the afternoon of the eighth, he spoke at the nearby town of Toulon. He arrived at Oquawka, a thriving river town above Burlington, on the morning of the ninth, where he again spoke for "several hours" in the afternoon.

As usual his speech was well received. "On Saturday last," according to the *Oquawka Spectator*, of Thursday, October 14th, "Mr. Lincoln spoke in Oquawka. The day, although rather cool, opened clear and bright, and the streets were thronged with people from all parts of the county at an early hour. Mr. Lincoln was met near the junction by the Brass Band, a procession was formed, and he was escorted to town. The procession was an imposing one and was about three-quarters of a mile long. At one o'clock a

procession was formed which escorted Mr. Lincoln from the residence of Mr. S. S. Phelps, whose guest he was, to the stand prepared for the occasion, which had been erected in front of Jamison and Moir's Block. J. H. Stewart, Esq., briefly introduced Mr. Lincoln, who proceeded to address his auditory for several hours. The crowd in attendance is variously estimated; we should set the number at between 1200 and 1500 people, but it may be that it is too low an estimate."

Directly thereafter Lincoln departed for Burlington, some twenty miles down the river, where he was to speak in the evening. While in Burlington, according to a statement made by the contemporary Iowa historian, William Salter, he was the guest of William F. Coolbaugh, being entertained at the Barrett House, where he remained over Sunday.

Many years later, W. W. Baldwin related, in a letter written to F. I. Herriott, an incident characteristic of the extreme simplicity of Lincoln's traveling habits. When Lincoln arrived at the old Barrett House, according to an eyewitness, "he had in his hand a small package, wrapped in a newspaper. Handing it to the clerk at the desk he asked him to, 'Please take good care of that. It is my boiled shirt. I will need it this afternoon.' It was his only 'baggage'."

Refreshed by the steamboat ride and attired in his "boiled" shirt, Lincoln faced the expectant crowd with friendly confidence. Unfortunately, the Monday *Hawk-Eye* reported the speech very briefly. "Grimes' Hall", wrote Editor Dunham, "was filled to its full capacity by citizens of Burlington and vicinity for the purpose of listening to a speech from Mr. Lincoln the man who all Republicans desire and a great many are very certain will succeed Judge Douglas as Senator from the State of Illinois. So great is the sympathy felt here in the spirited canvass in Illinois, and so high is the opinion entertained of the ability of Mr. Lincoln as a speaker that a very short notice brought together from twelve to fifteen hundred ladies and gentlemen.

"High, however, as was the public expectation, and much as was anticipated, he, in his address of two hours, fully came up to the standard that had been erected. It was a logical discourse, replete with sound argument, clear, concise and vigorous, earnest, impassioned and eloquent. Those who heard recognized in him a man fully able to cope with the Little Giant anywhere, and altogether worthy to succeed him.

"We regret exceedingly that it is not in our power to report his speech in full this morning. We know that we could have rendered no more

acceptable service to our readers. But it is not in our power.

"Mr. Lincoln appeared Saturday evening fresh and vigorous, there was nothing in his voice, manner or appearance to show the arduous labors of the last two months — nothing to show that immense labors of the canvass had worn upon him in the least. In this respect he had altogether the advantage of Douglas, whose voice is cracked and husky, temper soured and general appearance denoting exhaustion."

Nowhere in print has any direct quotation from Lincoln's Burlington speech been found. Probably he spoke without notes or manuscript, and no one seems to have preserved any of his words on that occasion. This is truly an unfortunate circumstance. How interesting it would now be to know what he actually said there! Judging by his debates with Douglas, however, it seems very probable that he spoke on the slavery question and the other great political problems of the times, with all the force and energy at his command. Doubtless he did not spare his opponent, but subjected his policies and logic to shrewd and penetrating analysis.

"I heard both speakers," wrote William Salter in *Sixty Years*, "one for the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and for 'squatter sovereignty,' the

other against. It was in the midst of their joint debate involving the issue as to which of them should be elected United States senator from Illinois for the six years from 1859 to 1865. The result was that Mr. Douglas was elected; had it been otherwise, the history of the country would have been different. Had Mr. Lincoln been elected senator, in all probability he would never have become President.

"I was deeply interested in Mr. Lincoln's speech in Burlington, and impressed by his calm and clear statement of the issues before the country."

BEN HUR WILSON