

The Closing Scene

To pay a final tribute to Abraham Lincoln, Iowa sent many representative citizens to Chicago on May 1 and 2, 1865. Peter Melendy was chosen to represent the municipality of Cedar Falls. Less than a year before, in company with other delegates from Iowa to the National Union Convention in Baltimore, he had delivered the news of Lincoln's second nomination to the President in the White House.

On this particular memorial occasion, George D. and H. A. Perkins had exacted special correspondence from Melendy for the *Gazette*. They asked for letters which would both describe and interpret the final rites paid to Abraham Lincoln in Chicago. To this request, Melendy responded with two journalistic epistles, one dated May 1st and the other May 2nd. It is doubtful if the editors could have found a better reporter in Cedar Falls to present the solemnities of this memorial event. As long as he lived, Peter Melendy displayed a youthful interest in unusual happenings and at the same time a very profound respect for dignity of form and ceremony.

During the hours that the presidential cortège

remained in Chicago, Melendy did not miss a single detail that it was possible for him to observe. To a generation which has lived through the disillusioning interim between two world wars, the diction in some passages seems fulsome and the emotional tone overstressed. Melendy, however, was writing for *Gazette* patrons, who listened ecstatically to "Curfew shall not Ring Tonight" and who wept with Dickens over the death beds of Little Nell and Paul Dombey.

On May Day, 1865, the funeral train reached Chicago, and for a day and a night the body of "America's noble chieftain" lay in state upon a raised marble catafalque in the rotunda of Chicago's crepe-draped City Hall. Although the funeral train from Indianapolis was not scheduled to arrive until 11 A. M., Melendy reported that every available inch of space on the processional line had been occupied since nine o'clock.

For readers of the *Gazette*, the special correspondent furnished picturesque details. The funeral train, he wrote, consisted of "ten passenger cars, all beautifully draped in mourning — among them the beautiful car built expressly for Mr. Lincoln. This beautiful car had never been used until this time. It was magnificently draped in habiliments of woe". As the train slowed down, the reporter from Iowa noted that the Light Guard

Band played a plaintive dirge and, while the casket was being transferred "to a beautiful catafalque" erected under an exquisite triple arch, the band continued to play softly "the Lincoln Requiem, composed by Vaas".

Just as the cortège neared Lake Michigan the sun broke through dull clouds, and to the artist in Peter Melendy, nourished on romantic nature poetry, inanimate things seemed to be participating in the general mourning. "The placid deep chants the dirge in the low-beating ripple. A strange sadness touches all that behold the beautiful scene — something whispered in silvery tones and seemed to say, 'Passing away! passing away!' The tolling bell, the sad and mournful salute of the minute gun, all tell of the wonderful and sublime occasion."

While the long procession made its slow five-hour way to the City Hall, an estimated forty thousand joined in the parade of mourners. Many of these were citizens of Chicago; some were foreign born; and others had come from Iowa, Wisconsin, and neighboring States. Silent crowds on the sidewalks, in windows, and on roof tops watched the procession pass down the full length of Park Row into Michigan Avenue and up to the City Hall. They "stood reverently with uncovered heads", Melendy reported. "As

the car passed slowly by, all uncovered their heads, and death-like silence prevailed. And as the eye of the watcher caught the simple word in letters of silver on the side and beneath the coffin, of LINCOLN, the tear would start and audible sobs could be heard in any direction. The old and young, stout men, unused to tears, would give way to deep grief."

The whole scene, according to Melendy, defied his powers of description, yet he strove to register his pictorial and emotional impressions for Iowa readers of the *Gazette*. Many details, he claimed, were so deeply etched on his mind as to be unforgettable. As the solemn cortège marched slowly through the streets with steady tread, the melancholy music of the dirge, the tolling bells, the rustling crepe, the boom of the minute gun, the flags at half mast, the festoons of evergreen and roses and black and white muslin draped from every building contributed to the sublimity of the occasion.

Constantly reminded of the time he had been admitted to the presence of Lincoln and had shaken the now inert hand, Peter Melendy determined to wait his turn in the long lines that silently passed Lincoln's bier in the rotunda of the City Hall. As he stood there, many details entered the fringe of his consciousness — the black

velvet and white satin of the canopy's lining, at each corner of the catafalque a great vase of rare flowers emitting exotic perfume, the placing of reflectors so that a mellow radiance was cast on the body beneath the starry roof of the catafalque. He noted a "placid, calm countenance," and that a "life-like appearance rested upon the face of Mr. Lincoln."

More than the trappings of woe, the democracy of the occasion affected Melendy. In a tribute of silent devotion, rich and poor, white and black, grandsire and stripling filed past the bier of Lincoln, "walking side by side, all on the same level. A nation loved him."

At seven-thirty the next evening the coffin was closed and the casket carried to a waiting hearse about which a band of three hundred torch bearers and a chorus, chanting "a solemn farewell dirge", formed a great circle. To the correspondent from Iowa the closing musical number of these obsequies seemed especially fitting, for as the funeral train pulled out of the station, the band played an old coronach, "Farewell! Farewell! noble chieftain, farewell!"

In closing his letter to the *Gazette*, Melendy very simply expressed his own belief and that of the majority of contemporary witnesses. "Probably never did the death of any one man come to

the hearts of so many as a personal bereavement. He had enshrined himself in the confidence of the people, — and their hearts will long be draped in sorrow and gloom because of his death."

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