LINCOLN LORE

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"HE COULD TAKE IT"

The portrayal of Abraham Lincoln as a constant and miserable failure until "destiny with one magnificent stroke" swept him into the Presidency may sound a note of encouragement to a man who has never made any progress in life, but such a presentation of the Emancipator has no value as a historical treatise. Arno B. Reincke, author of the monograph, "He Could Take It", states that his argument is "based on fact," and in so affirming invites criticism of his sources.

This Lincoln failure story appeared as the leading article in the January issue of the *Readers' Digest*, and because of the wide circulation of the magazine through educational institutions just previous to Lincoln's birthday, it was widely used just at a time when it would have its greatest appeal.

The legendary aspect of the story which deals with "unseen forces" and "magnificent strokes of destiny" is supplemented by a strange philosophy that a long and continued series of failures culminates in success. Most students in a democratic country are invited to work out their own destiny, and the urge to excel when properly directed does not usually pay off in failures.

Those who have given some attention to the study of Lincoln's life, immediately upon reading the Reincke story, began to take exceptions to his characterization of the Emancipator. Through both correspondence and personal interviews the editor of *Lincoln Lore* has been urged to make some written comment upon the eight specific statements around which the discussion evolves.

Limited space will make it necessary, first, to greatly abbreviate Mr. Reincke's eight specific statements about Mr. Lincoln, and second, to exclude from the comments by the editor of *Lincoln Lore* the many sources of proof which might be submitted. Sufficient to say that each comment has either a duly authorized record to sustain it or a preponderance of evidence to support it.

1. "A young man of twenty-two, a partner in a store . . . . sheriff sign on the door . . . . lost every penny of seven years savings."

Lincoln at twenty-two had no partnership interest in any store, and he had no seven years' savings to lose as all earnings up to the time he was twenty-one rightfully belonged to his father. He was serving as a clerk in Offut's store. He saw no sheriff's sign on the door, and while still employed by Offut he enlisted as a soldier in a Black Hawk war and was immediately elected captain of his company.

2. "Second partnership after two years . . . . failed again within two years . . . . after years of miserable penury . . . . on his thirty-ninth birthday (February 12, 1848) paid last dollar."

William Berry was Lincoln's first and only partner in the store business and this relationship was formed five months after Lincoln served as clerk for Offut. The partnership lasted but seven months and Lincoln sold his interest to Berry in April 1833. Berry ran the store as sole proprietor until August, four months after he had bought out Lincoln. Certain notes signed by Lincoln and Berry caused Lincoln to become involved financially, and when Berry died Lincoln assumed Berry's obligations. Three years later, however, Lincoln bought two house lots in Springfield and, before he was thirty-nine years of age, he purchased a farm for his parents and a house of his own in Springfield. He also made a successful race for congress.

3. "Offer of job as surveyor . . . But he never took the job . . . Destiny seemed to have singled him out for failure."

Lincoln served as deputy-surveyor for Sangamon County from the fall of 1833 until about the time he left New Salem in the spring of 1837. As late as January 6, 1849 Lincoln, upon request of a surveyor's convention at Chicago, presented a written expert opinion on a technical surveying question.

4. "Most crushing blow of his career . . . . First and only enduring love (Ann Rutlege) suddenly died . . . . Said his heart followed her to the grave . . . . went down to verge of insanity . . . . said he never dared to carry pocket-knife . . . . removed to parent's home where he was nursed back to mental health."

The Ann Rutlege story has been ignored by historians as mostly fiction. There is no truth whatever about the grave stories, his insanity at this time, the pocket-knife story or his visit to his parents. About a year after Ann's death he proposed marriage to Mary Owen, who was visiting in the same community where Ann had lived.

5. "Believing that this 'failure' might succeed in politics . . . . friends secured his selection to Congress . . . . again he failed . . . . constituents refused to return him to Washington."

Before running for Congress on his own initiative in 1846, he had served eight years in the Illinois legislature and was the leading Whig in the state. It was agreed before he was elected that he would serve but one term. His constituency endorsed him in 1854 by again electing him to the Illinois legislature.

6. "Friends . . . . forced political situation which placed him in direct line for nomination to U. S. senate . . . . Forced to step aside and yield office."

Lincoln did lose the senatorship but he stepped aside voluntarily for the sake of the party to bring about a unity of divided factions. His party won.

7. "Series of debates . . . . (Douglas) gave no quarter to this misfit and failure . . . . overwhelmingly defeated."

The popular vote for the candidates to the legislature favoring Lincoln was five thousand in excess of the vote poled by the candidates favoring Douglas. Lincoln by the popular vote won the debates. The legislature voted fifty-four to forty-six in favor of Douglas, not an overwhelming defeat for Lincoln.

8. "He had been unable to achieve one single personal victory in thirty years of constant effort."

It is difficult to account for such a statement as the above. He was elected to Illinois legislature at twenty-five years of age and to the same office at each biennial election for eight years, or as long as he chose to run. At twenty-seven years of age he was floor leader in the legislature, at twenty-nine years he was potential leader of the Whig party in Illinois. At thirty-one he was presidential elector for Harrison, at thirty-five elector at large for Clay, at thirty-nine the lone Whig congressman elected from the state of Illinois. In 1849 he declined a tentative appointment as Secretary of Oregon. In 1854 he was again elected to the legislature and in 1856 with no effort whatever on his part he received one hundred and ten votes in the first national republican convention as a nominee for the Vice-Presidency.