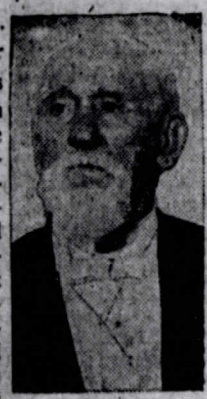
Cole, Cornelius M.

Ex-Senator Cole, Oldest Friend of Lincoln,

"When I came to Washington, Senator, I determined that I wouldn't be dying all the time. One man's life is as dear as another's. I have thought of assassination—but I do not believe it is my fate to die that way."

These were the last words of President Lincoln to former Senator Cornelius M. Cole of California, who is the oldest alumni of Wesleyan University in Connecticut, and who was the close friend and adviser of Lincoln.

Senator Cole, now 101 years old, tells Sunday Post readers new and intimate stories of Lincoln's noble, kindly life and tragic death.



Senator Cole

Cornelius M. Cole, former United States Senator from California in the Fortieth, Forty-first and Forty-seventh Congresses, political pal, friend, adviser and confidant of President Lincoln, now a citizen of Hollywood and in his 101st year, is by far the most competent eye-witness living, for he was 43 years old when Lincoln died, and, as his faculties are still alert at 100, the venerable Senator's testimony is most valuable.

In nothing short of a good-sized volume could Senator Cole's Lincoln commentaries be written, but it is wonderful to sit at the feet of this statesman of Civil war times and hear at first hand his running fire of comment upon Lincoln, his events and the great drama of the times, concerning all of which Senator Cole can testify at first hand, for he speaks as though the events happened yesterday and he were in the very midst of them.

"The last time I saw President Lincoln," said the Senator, "was the day of his assassination. I was bidding good-by to my Washington friends preparatory to departing the next morning with my family for California.

"In those days we sailed to Panama and crossed the isthmus by rail, and, as I had made all preparations for the long trip, we went the next morning, notwithstanding the President's assassination, for I could do no good in Washington.

The Last Good-by

"I called at the White House in the afternoon with Schuyler Colfax not only to say good-by, but to protest to the President against a certain act of General Weitzel, military governor of Richmond, of which we disapproved.

"When the President saw us coming he came to meet us and before we could say a word he called out: 'Good morning, gentlemen, I just took care of that Weitzel matter,' his almost uncanny prescience taking us quite off our feet. In truth one of the characteristics of Lincoln, never mentioned so far as I know, was his ability to know things in advance.

"After a pleasant chat Colfax and I retired and we remarked that we had never seen the President so cheerful and so fit.

"I have been asked many times what impressed me most about Lincoln and I have always answered—his constant growth. Always big, he seemed to grow and wax greater with his responsibilities, and I must add that never did I see him angry or 'rattled' as the pioneers used to say. In every sense of the word he was a gentleman. He looked like a gentleman and he acted and talked like one. There must have been some mighty good blood in Abraham Lincoln, for he would have been the outstanding figure in any company. The ladies adored him—and they know.

A Man of Grace and Charm

"Mrs. Cole was a great favorite with both him and Mrs. Lincoln, and she spoke often of his grace and charm. I recall on one occasion we attended a State reception in the East Room of the White House. Mrs. Cole lost one of her gloves and happened to mention it in the hearing of President Lincoln. Quickly he turned to her and said:

" 'Never mind, Mrs. Cole. You cannot find your glove in this confusion, but I will have the servants look for it after the guests are gone, and if they find it I will keep it for a souvenir.' This graceful speech delighted all who heard it, and it illustrates Lincoln's happy way with the ladies. He loved music and the drama, but I do not recall his attitude toward flowers. I fancy, though, being a lover of the wildwood, that he must naturally have loved flowers.

"I sat on the platform at Gettysburg when President Lincoln made his immortal speech, and my experience was the same as nearly all of us there assembled. We were all surprised at the brevity of the President's speech, and I do not think any of us, except Edward Everett, orator of the day, fully realized the greatness of Lincoln's speech at the time.

"Though of Southern birth, Lincoln sounded the letter 'r' as plainly as anybody, and did not talk like a Southerner at all.

"One day my friends, William Higbee and Thomas Shannon of the House, called with me to see the President on a mission he could not satisfy, and to illustrate the point of his refusal he told this story:

One of Lincoln's Stories

" 'In Springfield, when I was practicing law there, early in the 40's, there were three preachers, Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian. All went well until one day a Universalist preacher moved in. He was very unwelcome, and the three local brothers were much disturbed. After a conference it was decided to "preach him down," and the Methodist brother took the first shot. At one point in his sermon the good old preached exclaimed: 'Why, this impertinent fellow declares that ALL shall be saved, but, my dear brethren, let us hope for better things!' "

"As to his religion, I am not, at first hand, able to state, but if religion be expressed by the word goodness, Abraham Lincoln was the most religious man I ever knew. The expression 'Honest Abe' fits him like a glove, for he was honest with God, his country, his people and himself. In my last interview with him his great elation at victory lay entirely in the deep sense that he had fulfilled his oath as President of the United States. Not for a minute did he rejoice over the fallen. He did not know the meaning of hatred.

"During the war I was chairman of the appropriations committee of the Senate and James A. Garfield was chairman of the same committee of the House. We always met in conference. These were the most important committees of Congress in our time and it was in my capacity as chairman as well as our close personal attachment that gave me exceptional opportunities to see and study our great President.

"The most exciting time in Washington during the war, with the sole exception of the first battle of Bull Run, was when General Jubal A. Early was detached by General Lee to make a demonstration against Washington in the hope that he might distract Grant's attention from the siege of Petersburg and Richmond.

South Would Have Captured Capital

"Early's march was fast and triumphant and if he had only been a bit more aggressive he could have captured the city. He defeated General Lew Wallace at the Monocacy and stopped only in rifle shot of Fort Stevens, just a few miles from the capitol and in sight of it.

"I was the only member of Congress in Washington at the time, having just come back from a visit to Grant at City Point. Grant wasn't at all concerned about Early, but after Monocacy he sent two divisions under General Wright to reinforce the garrisons north of the city."

"But before the arrival of these troops there was great consternation in the city and every man capable of bearing arms was requested to be ready at call. Troops were hurrying about and there was a panic among the resident Negroes to add to the excitement. We could hear the firing plainly and the best of us were apprehensive. As I have already said Early could have taken the city if he had only known the true state of affairs, but with his small army he could not have held it 48 hours. He would simply have found himself in a trap, but the moral effect of such a contingency would have greatly encouraged the Confederacy and depressed the North."

"Washington was always a hot bed of traitors and it was from these that I feared most. President Lincoln never would have a guard about him and I was apprehensive that he might be harmed. He came and went like any ordinary business man and laughed at the fears of his friends. When Early came so near, however, I determined to change things so I called at the White House and as usual walked in and upstairs to the President's office unchallenged. I asked the President why he didn't have a sentry at the door and he replied that a sentry was not needed and when I found he would not take action I went to Secretary Stanton and laid the matter before him. Stanton agreed with my view and that day the order went out for a guard at the White House and an escort for the President when he went about town."

Did Not Expect to Be Shot

"I had previously talked with Lincoln of his habit of going about unprotected, and I asked him if he ever had any fear of assassination. This was his reply: 'When I came here, Senator, I determined that I wouldn't be dying all the time. One man's life is as dear as another's, and if a man take my life, he may be reasonably sure that he will lose his own. I have thought of assassination, yes, but I do not believe that it is my fate to die that way.'

"I am aware that this is in contradiction of some of his biographers, but this is what Lincoln said to me, and he was not a man to say what he did not believe.

"As to Mrs. Lincoln, I can only say that the President seemed to be greatly devoted to her, and my wife loved her very dearly. As first lady of the land, Mrs. Lincoln presided at the White House with grace and dignity. She was an ideal hostess and her wit and accomplishments made her more than a match for the brilliant statesmen and members of the diplomatic corps who frequented the White House. Mrs. Cole and I felt quite sure that the terrible shock of the President's assassination was responsible for any peculiarities that might have developed in her later life, and the death of three of her four boys did not serve to lighten her load of care.