

WHY LINCOLN LAUGHED

BY PETER STEVENS



**His sharpest tool was his wit,
and yet he never told a joke
for the sake of laughter**

■ IN HIS OWN time, much more than in ours, Abraham Lincoln was widely misunderstood as a humorist and a story-teller. Though he was a man of infinite jest, humor in his hands was a remarkably effective tool rather than a laugh-getting device.

For Abraham Lincoln never told a story except with a purpose. He himself pointed this out often. His anecdotes were the precision tools of a highly skilled and intelligent wit, and they invariably made a point sharper, clearer—and did so with more grace—than any other device Lincoln might have employed. Basically a melancholy man, he was not humor's slave, and could therefore bend it to his own uses and make it a vehicle for thought rather than mere clownishness.

This was misunderstood at the time, and once in the dark days of the war, when Lincoln was reprimanded for his unseemly levity, he turned his gaunt face and tragic eyes toward his critic and replied, "I laugh because I must not cry: That's all—that's all."

Lincoln anecdotes are usually recounted "cold," without context or background, and that is why their real purpose, and the consummate skill behind them, is so rarely appreciated.

Here, we give the setting and background of each anecdote, attempting to set the stage as it was when the actual "performance" took place. In addition, the anecdotes are presented in chronological sequence, so that the reader can see how Lincoln perfected and molded his technique through the years. In these stories, you can trace the bright thread of humor, like a main artery on an anatomist's chart, running through Lincoln's whole life and nourishing and supporting everything he did.

YEAR: 1832**AGE: 23****OCCUPATION: Army Officer**

No ONE was more surprised than the young man himself when Abraham Lincoln was elected captain of a company raised for the Black Hawk War. He was chosen more by force of his personality than because of military experience, and this fact led to a few minor skirmishes with the manual of arms. On one occasion, Lincoln was drilling his troops and wanted to get the company of 20 men marching abreast to turn and file through a narrow gate.

"I could not for the life of me," Lincoln recalled later, "remember the proper word of command for getting my company 'endwise' so that it could get through the gate. So as we came near the gate I shouted,

" 'This company is dismissed for two minutes when it will fall in again on the other side of the gate!' "

The men in his company laughed—and executed the informal "maneuver" expeditiously.

YEAR: 1837**AGE: 28****OCCUPATION: Circuit Lawyer**

FROM THE TIME he was 27 until he was elected to Congress at the age of 38, Lincoln practiced law in Illinois. Some of his best stories were told in the courtroom, always to make a point vividly and clearly. With their help, he piled up a great record of victories with juries.

Once, when Lincoln was defending a client accused of assault, he told the jury that his client was in the same fix as a man who was walking along a highway with his pitchfork over his shoulder. Suddenly he was attacked by a fierce dog that ran out at him from a farmer's yard. In warding off the beast with his pitchfork the man stabbed it with the prongs and killed it.

"What made you kill my dog?" the irate farmer demanded.

"What made him bite me?"

"But why didn't you go after him with the *other* end of the pitchfork?"

"Why didn't he come at me with *his* other end?"

Verdict: acquittal.

YEAR: 1840**AGE: 31****OCCUPATION: Lawyer and Politician**

LINCOLN COULD use humor as an explosive weapon as well as employing it as a constructive force. Once, during the course of his duties as a circuit lawyer, the opposing attorney objected to a juror on the grounds that the juror knew Mr. Lincoln. The judge promptly overruled the objection, commenting that it was an unwarranted reflection upon the honor of a lawyer.

Lincoln's Jokes

Naturally, when Lincoln seemed to be following the bad example of his adversary and, in his examination of several of the jurymen, went out of his way to show that they knew his legal opponent, the judge interfered again. "Now, Mr. Lincoln," the judge said severely, "I have just ruled that the mere fact that a juror knows your opponent does not disqualify him."

"No, Your Honor," Lincoln answered drily, "I was afraid some of the gentlemen may *not* know him, and that would place me at a disadvantage."

SPEAKING of a lawyer whose name is unknown, Lincoln once said, "He can compress the most words into the smallest ideas of any man I ever met."

YEAR: 1842

AGE: 33

OCCUPATION: Lawyer and Politician

AND THEN THERE were Lincoln's letters, written with a pen as sharp as his tongue. While he was still practicing law, a New York firm wrote to him for information regarding the financial standing of one of his neighbors.

Lincoln let them have it:

"Yours of the 10th received. First of all he has a wife and baby; together they ought to be worth \$500,000 to any man. Secondly, he has an office in which there is a table worth \$1.50 and three chairs worth, say, \$1. Last of all, there is in one corner a large rat-hole, which will bear looking into.

Respectfully,

A. Lincoln"

YEAR: 1843

AGE: 34

OCCUPATION: Lawyer and Politician

WHEN LINCOLN was a circuit lawyer in his '30s he occasionally walked from one county seat to another. One day, while walking along a dusty road, Lincoln saw a strange farmer heading for the same town in his wagon. Lincoln hailed the man and asked if he would have the goodness to take his overcoat into town for him.

The man said he'd be glad to. "But how and where will you get it again?"

Lincoln grinned. "Very readily," he answered as he swung a long leg up into the wagon, "I intend to remain in it."

YEAR: 1858

AGE: 49

OCCUPATION: Candidate for U. S. Senate

WHEN LINCOLN was a candidate for U. S. Senator from Illinois, he and Stephen Douglas stumped the state together. Their famous debates had their light moments, thanks to Lincoln's unfailing wit.

On one occasion, Douglas had said in his speech that when he first knew Mr. Lincoln he had

Lincoln's Jokes

been a grocery keeper and sold whiskey and cigars. Hoping further to discredit Lincoln, Douglas added, "Mr. L. was a very good bartender." The crowd laughed. But the last laugh was yet to come.

Lincoln rose to his great height, his eyes twinkling. "What Mr. Douglas has said, gentlemen," he replied, "is true enough. I did keep a grocery, and I did sell cotton, candles and cigars—and sometimes whiskey. And I remember in those days Mr. Douglas was one of my best customers. Many a time have I stood on one side of the counter and sold whiskey to Mr. Douglas on the other side. But the difference between us now is this: I have left my side of the counter, but Mr. Douglas still sticks to his as tenaciously as ever."

YEAR: 1860

AGE: 51

OCCUPATION: President

FORTUNATELY, the American people in 1860 had enough common sense themselves to put such a man as Lincoln in the White House. There he continued in his simple rough-hewn ways. Once when Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts—a particularly stuffy statesman—made an early morning call at the White House, the Senator was somewhat confounded to find the President downstairs polishing his boots.

"Why, Mr. President, do you black your own boots?" Senator Sumner asked in a shocked voice.

The man from the prairies continued to brush vigorously as he replied, "Whose boots did you think I blacked?"

YEAR: 1861

AGE: 52

OCCUPATION: President

AFTER LINCOLN had been in the White House for a year or so, he evolved a system for getting rid of windy petitioners without hurting their feelings. There was always an element of quaint humor involved, but no one was any the worse for it.

There was a Philadelphia man who had a great many time-consuming appointments with the President. One day, with several important delegations waiting their turn in the ante-room, this man droned on and on, nor could Lincoln terminate the interview without being brusque. Suddenly, Lincoln reached into a wardrobe in the corner of his room and took a bottle from its shelf.

Looking at his visitor's bald head with gentle concern, he asked, "Did you ever try this stuff for your hair?"

"No sir, I never did," answered the bewildered Philadelphian.

"Well," said Lincoln paternally, "I advise you to try it, and I'll give you this bottle. If at first you don't succeed try, try again. They say it will grow hair on a pumpkin."

Lincoln's Jokes

Then, propelling his guest to the door with a firm but kindly hand, he pressed the bottle upon him.

"Now take it, and come back in 8 or 10 months and tell me how it works," he said.

YEAR: 1862

AGE: 53

OCCUPATION: President

AFTER A discouraging period of inactivity on the Union front, Lincoln finally got word of firing at Knoxville, Tennessee. He remarked simply that he was glad of it. Since General Burnside was then in a dangerous position in Tennessee, the people with Lincoln were surprised at his off-hand reaction.

"You see," the President explained, "it reminds me of Mistress Sally Ward, an Illinois neighbor of mine who had a very large family. Occasionally one of her numerous progeny would be heard crying in some out-of-the-way place, upon which Mrs. Ward would exclaim, 'There's one of my children not dead yet!'"

AT THIS TIME Lincoln was getting a good deal of gratuitous advice on what officers to place where. One friend urged him to give General Fremont a big command. Not wanting to offend the well-meaning friend, Lincoln said he didn't really know where to place General Fremont without displacing someone else, and it reminded him of the old man who advised his son to take a wife. To which the young man answered, "Whose wife shall I take?"

YEAR: 1865

AGE: 56

OCCUPATION: Second Term President

ALL THROUGH the war Lincoln had made frequent trips to the front. But early in 1865, when it seemed certain the Confederacy would fall soon, he wanted to be on hand and ready for the great event. So he headquartered on a boat in the James River near Grant's headquarters.

The captain of the boat wanted Lincoln to take his bed, but Lincoln insisted on using a smaller stateroom whose berth was four inches shorter than he was.

Next day, while Lincoln was on shore with Grant, his host had carpenters lengthen and widen the berth without the President's knowledge.

The following morning Lincoln greeted the captain with a straight face and said,

"A miracle happened last night; I shrank six inches in length and a foot sideways!"

IN THE EARLY months of Lincoln's second term as President, Lee surrendered at Appomattox. That night, Lincoln was serenaded by many friends and happy Yankees. He made a kindly and conciliatory speech, and warmly in-

Lincoln's Jokes

vited the erring states to come back into the fold.

The serenading band played patriotic airs like *Columbia, Gem of the Ocean*, *The Star-Spangled Banner* and other Union songs.

Finally Abe Lincoln smiled at the bandmaster and suggested, "You can play *Dixie* now. It's ours." ■ ■

PAGEANT

December, 1954 * p. 136

OldMagazineArticles.com

