

# MR. LINCOLN'S BEARD

## BY ANN CUTLER

When an eleven-year-old girl advised Abraham Lincoln to grow some whiskers, the great man humbly took her suggestion to heart

**I**F IT had not been for an eleven-year-old girl, Abraham Lincoln might never have grown his famous beard. She advised him to do so after she saw a picture of him clean-shaven.

The picture was a lithograph copy of a portrait in oils, painted for campaign purposes just after Lincoln's nomination to the Presidency and dated June 14, 1860. The painting is reproduced above. The story of its origin, and of its influence on Lincoln's physiognomy, is not well known.

When news of Lincoln's nomination reached New York, Publisher W. Schaus commissioned a painter named Thomas Hicks to go to Springfield, Illinois, and make the portrait. It was the first oil portrait of Lincoln ever painted. Until then the only photograph of the young lawyer had been a crude wood-cut of an old daguerreotype.

Lithograph copies of Hicks' painting were widely distributed during the campaign. Feeling over the election grew so tense that even children took sides.

Eleven-year-old Grace Bedell listened with interest when her father and four brothers argued the merits of candidates, but she made up her own mind and settled on Mr. Lincoln. She studied his campaign picture carefully and decided that his chances for winning would be improved if he "grew some whiskers." She promptly wrote him a letter to that effect, pointing out with feminine wisdom, "you would look better because your face is so thin."

The letter arrived in the fall when Mr. Lincoln was actively campaigning, planning his strategy and trying to arrive at some solution that would keep the country from splitting. It was very different from the many self-seeking and threatening letters that came in his mail. Grace Bedell wrote:

Westfield, Chatauqua Co., N. Y.  
Oct. 15, 1860

Hon. A. B. Lincoln,  
Dear Sir:

My father has just come from the fair and brought home your picture and Mr. Hamlin's. I am a little girl only eleven years old, but want you should be President of the United States very much so I hope you won't think me very bold to write to such a great man as you are.

Have you any little girls about as large as I am if so give them my love and tell her to write to me if you cannot answer this letter. I have got 4 brothers and part of them will vote for you any way and if you will let your whiskers grow I will try and get the rest of them to vote for you; you would look a great deal better for your face is so thin. All the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husbands to vote for you and then you would be President. My father is going to vote for you to and if I was a man I would vote for you to but I will try and get everyone to vote for you that I can I think that rail fence around your picture makes it look very pretty I have got a little baby sister she is nine weeks old and is just as cunning as can be. When you direct your letter direct it to Grace Bedell, Westfield Chatauqua County New York. I must not write any more answer this letter right off. Good bye.

Grace Bedell

Beards and mustaches were worn by many men in the fifties and early sixties, but most men of fashion were clean-shaven in this era. Abe Lincoln, like his father, Robert Lincoln, had never worn a beard or mustache.

Grace Bedell's letter made him think seriously for the first time of "raising whiskers." He was also touched by the little girl's concern, as is shown in his answering letter:

Springfield, Illinois  
October 19, 1860

Miss Grace Bedell:

My dear little Miss: Your very agreeable letter of the 15th is received. I regret the necessity of saying I have no daughter. I have three sons—one seventeen, one nine, and one seven years of age.

### MR. LINCOLN'S BEARD

They, with their mother, constitute my whole family. As to the whiskers, having never worn any, do you not think people would call it a piece of silly affectation if I were to begin it now!

Your very sincere well-wisher,

A. Lincoln

Apparently Lincoln decided to brave the criticism, for very shortly thereafter he began to sprout whiskers. An item in the Evansville Daily Journal appearing on December 27, 1860, comments on the subject as follows:

"They say that Old Abe is raising a pair of whiskers. Some individual of the cockney persuasion remarked that he was aputtin' on (h) airs."

A caption under a picture appearing in the New York Herald referred to "his new whiskers looking as if not yet naturalized." On January 26, 1861, a photograph of Lincoln taken by C. S. Germon, a Springfield photographer, shows a much heavier beard. A later photograph taken by the same photographer indicated that by the time he left Springfield for Washington he had quite a full beard

### The Little Girl in the Crowd

Lincoln did not forget the little girl. In February, 1861, when he made his famous trip from Springfield to Washington for the inauguration, his special train moved into Westfield. A large crowd awaited him, as it did at every stop. Her fair hair freshly braided, wearing her best pinafore and clutching a bunch of flowers, Grace had been at the station since early that morning. As the crowd grew larger she had been pushed farther and farther back. She heard Lincoln speak, but there were too many grownups in front for her to see whether her hero was wearing whiskers.

As Lincoln finished his greetings he called out in the informal manner that endeared him to the masses, "I have a correspondent here and if she is present I would like to see her."

No one came forward.

"Who is it? Give us her name!" came from the crowd.

"Her name is Grace Bedell. She wrote to me that she thought I would be better-looking if I wore whiskers."

Amid laughter Grace was led and carried toward the platform. The President stepped off the platform and shook the small girl's hand. Then he kissed her. "You see," he said, indicating his beard, "I let these whiskers grow for you, Grace."

Grace Bedell, who later became Mrs. George N. Billings of Delphos, Kansas, remembered all her life how surprised and embarrassed she had been by the President's unexpected conduct.

"I ran home as fast as I could, dodging in and out of horses and buggies and once crawling under a wagon," she recalled later. "Such was my confusion that I completely forgot the bouquet of roses that I was going to give the great man to whom I had offered such rare advice. And when I arrived home I had the stems, all that remained of the bouquet, still tightly clutched in my hand."

The press made much of the incident. The New York Tribune headlined, "Old Abe Kissed by Pretty Girl" and the St. Louis Republican declared jokingly, "If kissing pretty girls is a Presidential privilege, Mrs. Lincoln, who knows her rights and knowing dares maintain them, ought to insist on a veto power for herself." There were no flash bulbs in those days to preserve the kiss for posterity.

The historic portrait showing Lincoln beardless is little known to the public. The painting was bought from the artist's studio in 1861 by Edson Bradley, Sr. Few collectors knew of its existence and it was thought lost.

## MR. LINCOLN'S BEARD

In 1936 it was exhibited for the first time, by Mrs. Herbert Shipman, Mr. Bradley's granddaughter, at the Life and Time of Abraham Lincoln exhibition in New York.

Put up for auction in 1940, the painting was purchased for \$11,000, the highest price ever paid for a Lincoln portrait. It will eventually go to the Metropolitan Museum.

Accompanying the portrait is a manuscript letter written by the artist, January 23, 1879, in which Mr. Hicks gives an account of the sittings:

### Artist Describes the Sittings

"When I stood in the presence of a tall, gaunt man, with a pleasant expression on his well-marked features and had a genial, hearty handshake from his long, swinging arm, I saw that in my subject there was plenty of character with which to make a desirable likeness. . . . He asked me if I wanted a particular kind of light for my work. There was a very suitable light in his office and it was quickly arranged that I should do my work there. In an hour I had the easel up and had commenced the first sitting. Mr. Lincoln was already taking an interest in the work; and, at the conclusion of the sitting during which I had made the usual charcoal sketch, looking at it he said, 'I see the likeness, sir.'

"I found that Mr. Lincoln's temper was even, his voice mild and persuasive, and that the habit of his mind was to advise, rather than to rebuke. Mr. Lincoln was often silent and thoughtful, but he never

wore a frown, and I loved him from my first day with him."

Mr. Hicks recalled that Lincoln, who had given up his practice that he might be free to campaign, had many visitors daily, most of them from the Northern and Western states. Lincoln, said Hicks, cracked jokes and told stories with a hundred men during the week he was there.

"Many of them were strangers who came to pay their respects to him and others came to re-establish old friendships or to strengthen new ones; but all were delighted to listen to his quaint remarks and humorous stories.

"The Democratic State Convention was in session the week I was in Springfield. After the daily adjournments the delegates used to come in squads of ten or twenty to pay their respects to Mr. Lincoln, and the odd thing about these calls was that, in shaking hands with him, they invariably addressed him as Mr. President."

The portrait was finished on June 13th. Mr. Lincoln was pleased with the result. He remarked with customary candor: "It will give the people of the East a correct idea how I look at home, and in fact, how I look in my office. I think the picture has a somewhat pleasanter expression than I usually have, but that, perhaps, is not an objection."

Mrs. Lincoln did not agree that the picture flattered in any way. She was to come to the office to see the finished work, but on the day appointed it rained. Mr. Hicks took the portrait to her house. Describing the scene, Mr. Hicks said: "The portrait was carried to the drawing room where I put it in a proper light to be seen and placed a chair for Mrs. Lincoln. Sitting down before it she said, 'Yes, that is Mr. Lincoln. It is exactly like him, and his friends in New York will see him as he looks here at home. How I wish I could keep it, or have a copy of it!'"

The next time the artist saw President Lincoln was three years later. The War between the States was being bitterly fought and the President was weighted down with many burdens. Mr. Hicks, writing of the great changes that had taken place in the appearance of Mr. Lincoln, said:

"When I saw him in Washington the elements which I had studied in our intercourse at Springfield, and others, newly developed, were so broadened and sharp-

**MR. LINCOLN'S BEARD**

ened by the great events of the time, both of success and disaster, that he seemed almost transfigured by the change."

**THE END**



The first oil portrait ever made of Abraham Lincoln. Artist Thomas Hicks painted this in 1860. Note that Lincoln is clean-shaven