

PATHFINDER

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Lincoln's Invention

A MYTH never stops growing. It feeds upon itself. This is true of the Lincoln legend. Hundreds of books have been written about Lincoln; but still they can't contain it all.

Last week, as President Roosevelt laid a wreath at the Lincoln Memorial, and as Republican orators brushed up the fact that after all, Lincoln *was* a Republican, another piece of Lincolniana popped up. This time it was in the United States Patent Office.

There, to a coterie of Lincoln addicts on Abe's 131st birthday, U. S. Patent Commissioner Conway P. Coe—whose own office celebrates its 150th anniversary next April—displayed a model of a device Lincoln patented in 1849, when he was still an unknown Congressman from Illinois. Proudly, Commissioner Coe read the patent application, in Lincoln's own handwriting, for a gadget to float flatboats in shallow water.

A reminder of the days when the gangling youth was himself a flatboat hand, the contraption consists of two expansible chambers running along both sides of the boat. Lincoln's idea was that these chambers, filled with air and forced down into the water, would give a boat added buoyancy to lift it clear of dangerous shoals. "With this invention I could float a flatboat in a heavy dew," the optimistic inventor is supposed to have exclaimed.

Nothing ever came of Patent No. 6489. But, though it served no flatboat men of that day, somehow it does serve to lighten our own heart as we skim, buoyantly, over the dangerous shoals of life.

We can see the 40-year-old Representative, a failure in his own sight but yet unhaunted by his sense of tragic destiny, carefully whittling out his wooden model for the Patent Office. "This time I've really got something," he says to himself. "No more dreary circuit-riding for me. No more nagging from Mary. This is going to make me rich." So he dreamed—even as you and I; even as you and I.

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