

President Lincoln and His Stories

By Lewis E. Lehrman

February 12, 2013

Greenwich Time

"Senator, that reminds me of a story."

Ohio Senator Benjamin F. Wade, nicknamed "Bluff Ben," reacted in exasperation. "It is with you, sir, all story, story! You are the father of every military blunder that has been made during the war. You are on your road to hell, sir, with this government, by your obstinacy, and you are not a mile off this minute."

President Lincoln recalled that he, "good-naturedly said to him, `Senator, that is just about from here to the Capitol, is it not?" Lincoln recalled that Wade became, "very angry, grabbed up his hat and cane, and went away."

What made Wade angry, pleased most folks and proved to be a useful social and political device for Lincoln. Illinois Congressman Isaac N. Arnold recalled that Lincoln, "always had a story ready, and, if not, he could improvise one, just fitted for the occasion."

Alexander H. Stephens, who became vice president of the Confederacy, met Lincoln in Congress in December 1847. Stephens recalled that Lincoln, "abounded in anecdotes; he illustrated everything that he was talking or speaking about by an anecdote; his anecdotes were always exceedingly apt and pointed, and socially he always kept his company in a roar of laughter."

Chicago Evening Journal reporter Andrew Shuman remembered that as Mr. Lincoln, his political friends and journalists traveled around the state in the summer and fall of 1858, "Mr. Lincoln was always the leading spirit in conversation. He would tell stories himself, and draw out stories from others; and his laugh, though not the loudest, was always the heartiest. Then he would pass to soberer themes, and discuss them with a tinge of that melancholy, which, however he might be surrounded, never seemed far distant from him. At night, stopping at the country tavern or at some friend's house, the evenings would be spent in discussion and story-telling, or perhaps in a humorous review of the events of the day; and after retiring, Mr. Lincoln would entertain his companion, often far into the night, discoursing on a great variety of subjects, politics, literature, views of human life and character, or the prominent men and measures then before the country."

Lincoln friend William McNeely wrote of Lincoln and Senator Stephen A. Douglas: "At one of their public discussions -- I believe it was at Havana -- after the discussion had been somewhat prolonged and it was thought that Mr. Douglas had exhausted his argument, Mr. Lincoln came forward and told a story. He said: There were large poplar trees in Kentucky, and he knew a man who had a very large one, and nothing near to pile upon it, so as to burn it, and it was so large that it could not be hauled away, and he then

asked if any one could tell what they did about it? No one answering, he told them: `They went around it. Just so,' said Mr. Lincoln, `Mr Douglas will have to do with his Kansas-Nebraska bill, just go around it.'"

Mr. Lincoln could use the same tactic and would tell a similar story as president after he mollified an indignant governor angry about his quota for army recruits. General James B. Fry, who watched the governor depart, asked Lincoln: "I suppose you had to make large concessions to him, as he returns from you entirely satisfied?"

"Oh, no," responded President Lincoln. "I did not concede anything."

He added: "You know how that Illinois farmer managed the big log that lay in the middle of his field? To the inquiries of his neighbors, he announced he had gotten rid of it.

"The neighbors responded: `How did you do it? It was too big to haul away, too knotty to split, too wet and soggy to bum. Whatever did you do?' The farmer replied: `Well, now, boys, if you won't tell the secret, I'll tell you how. I just plowed `round it!'"

The President concluded: "Now, Fry, don't tell anybody, but I just plowed around the governor!"

Lewis E. Lehrman, of Greenwich, is co-founder of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History and author of "Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point" (Stackpole Books, 2008).