A Little Dinner for Lincoln

At 12:01 A.M. on July 26, 1947, the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of papers relating to his father, Abraham Lincoln, was opened to the public. This was that moment for which many men had waited years. The faces of those men grouped around the safes which had held the papers were bright with hope or troubled with fears and worries or stilled to conceal emotions. Yet were they all expectant. This was the moment; starting now they would have—or they would not have—answers to questions about Lincoln which puzzled them.

These Lincoln Papers had been sealed at the insistence of the President's son because, he said, they “contain many references of a private nature to the immediate ancestors of persons now living.” At least, that is Robert Lincoln’s formal statement of the reason for closing the Papers for twenty-one years. Some folk say that Robert Lincoln’s real reason was to prevent a certain Lincoln biographer from having access to the Papers.

There is in the Library of Congress a charming room known as the Whittall Pavilion. It is, I believe, part of the Library’s Division of Music. The evening of July twenty-fifth, the room was used to honor Lincoln. The Librarian of Congress had invited a group of Lincoln scholars to be his guests at a dinner preceding the opening of the Robert T. Lincoln Collection. We were welcomed by our host and cooled and relaxed in the Washington manner before we took our places at the single long table. I was seated at the left of Verner W. Clapp (Library of Congress) and on the right of Foreman M. Lebold (Chicago Lincoln collector). F. Lauriston Bullard (collector and author of Abraham Lincoln & The Widow Bixby), who had Mr. Clapp on his left and Jay Monaghan (Lincoln bibliographer and State Historian of Illinois) on his right, sat directly across the table from me. The conversation among the five of us during the dinner was almost exclusively about Lincoln and Lincolnians.

After the table had been cleared, the Librarian of Congress rose and reminded us that we had more than two hours to wait before the Lincoln Papers could be opened. He proposed that we might pass the time pleasantly listening to some of our company tell us what they hoped to find in the collection.

Dr. Evans called first on Carl Sandburg. With a gentle smile on his face, and in the Middle Western voice familiar to all Lincolnians, Mr. Sandburg announced that he would accompany himself on his guitar with songs of the American past. First, there was a Revolutionary War song by Joseph Warren about his hopes for the future of our America and then there was a ballad of Lincoln’s time—about a boy and a girl.

After the strings of his guitar were still, Mr. Sandburg spoke movingly about his belief that when the papers were opened there would be found a clearer understanding of Lincoln, an amplification of the qualities which make him stand out in the history of our country. He hoped most particularly that historians, whom he believed had misinterpreted certain episodes, would find their errors corrected in the papers. Finally, he referred to the next speaker, Major General Ulysses S. Grant III as an old classmate. They had been candidates for cadetships at West Point in 1899; the grandson of President Grant had passed all his examinations and Mr. Sandburg had failed in arithmetic.

General Grant was on the point of escaping from the room, when
the Librarian of Congress urged him to tell us the story of Lincoln's courtesy to his grandfather. "Words were difficult with my grandfather," he said, "and Lincoln knew that fact. Just before he was to be commissioned a lieutenant general, in 1863, my grandfather was called to the White House. There Lincoln told him what was intended and gave him a copy of the public statement he was ready to issue the next day. That gave my grandfather a chance to compose a suitable reply." General Grant also told us that General Sherman advised his grandfather not to accept the appointment and that, according to General Schofield, in accepting the command, his grandfather stipulated that he would have direct access to Lincoln himself at all times instead of through official "channels."

James G. Randall (professor of History at the University of Illinois and author of several books about Lincoln and his era) spoke of his desire to find a fuller picture of Lincoln at work. He wanted drafts of speeches, messages, and letters to show how Lincoln's thoughts developed when he was writing. Dr Bullard then explained that he had not expected to speak, but that he was well supplied with questions for which he thought he might find answers in the Papers. Among the questions he asked were why did Lincoln appoint Pope and Burnside? did Lincoln receive a letter from Victor Hugo? did he suggest Ben Butler for the vice-presidency? what became of the letter from Major Anderson on his desk on March 5, 1863? did Lincoln use the phrase "resign his place" or "resign his plan" at the cabinet meeting of September 2, 1862? As a kind of stinger, when he sat down again, Dr Bullard asked, "Did Lincoln write the Bixby letter?"

Paul M. Angle (director of the Chicago Historical Society and author of The Lincoln Reader) changed the tune of the proceedings by praising the Librarian of Congress and his staff for their many and important courtesies to scholars. It was praise truly meant and well deserved. William H. Townsend (author and Lincoln collector of Lexington, Kentucky) spoke next from his personal knowledge of Robert T. Lincoln and his many letters to his aunt, Emilie Todd Helm, which are now in the Townsend collection. He revealed the President's son as a shy, retiring, generous man whose greatest fear was that he might be accused of trading on his father's tradition. It was his desire to be wholly independent and to win success in life by his own efforts.

David C. Mears (of the Library of Congress) traced the history of the Robert T. Lincoln Collection from the time of its formation, immediately after Lincoln's death, until it was deposited at the Library in 1919 and came formally into the possession of the Library in 1926. In the course of telling the story, Mr Mears refuted one educator's claim of having "saved the papers for posterity." Jay Monaghan said he was looking forward to the opening of the Papers because there ought to be documents in them which would amplify our knowledge of Lincoln's foreign policy. He thought this a logical deduction because the saving of such materials would have appealed to Robert Lincoln.

Louis A. Warren (director of the Lincoln National Life Foundation) reminded the company that Lincoln had wired General Schofield on July 15, 1863, "I care very little for the publication of any letters I have written." Then he read two unpublished sketches by Robert Lincoln, one an autobiographical description and one a biographical sketch of President Lincoln. The next speaker was a Michigan representative in Congress, George A. Dondero of Royal Oak. He corrected the notion that Robert Lincoln was present at three assassinations of presidents. Robert Lincoln told him that President McKinley had invited him to stand in the reception line at Buffalo, but he could not go. President Lincoln had invited his son twice to attend Ford's Theatre, but he did not go. However, he was standing beside President Garfield, when the latter was assassinated.

Ralph G. Newman (Chicago specialist in Lincoln material and co-author of The American Iliad) told us he was most anxious to find drafts of the Emancipation Proclamation and possibly some notes relative to a famous broadside printing in 1864. He also hoped there would be numerous family papers in the collection. Frederick H. Meserve (pioneer collector of Lincoln photographs) expressed the sentiments of every guest when he said the evening of July twenty-fifth, 1947, was a historic event. He told of his efforts, made at Robert Lincoln's request, to prevent a replica of the Barnard statue of Lincoln from being placed in London.

Alfred W. Stern (Chicago collector of Lincolniana) turned our minds far afield, when he expressed his wish that the spirit of Abraham Lincoln's humanity might spread rapidly beyond the borders of our country to the rest of the world. Rufus R. Wilson (publisher and editor of The Uncollected Works of Lincoln) followed Mr Stern's line of reasoning by pointing out that Abraham Lincoln "is the gentlest memory of our world." He felt confident that nothing in the Papers would change our reasons for that memory and nothing would reduce his stature.

John E. Washington (author of They Knew Lincoln) spoke movingly of Lincoln's relations with Negroes and of his own hopes that there would be more facts on that subject in the Papers. Lincoln's place as the emancipator of their race would always bring him honor from Negroes throughout the world. Edgar De Witt Jones (Detroit minister and Lincoln collector) startled (and flattered) the company by stating that he considered the three great events of his life his marriage, the freeing of his
Thomas I. Starr (Detroit author and collector of Lincoliana) echoed Dr Jones' pleasure at being in Washington and then successfully linked Robert Lincoln to Michigan history. At one time, the younger Lincoln was a director of the Michigan Telephone Company, forerunner of the present Michigan Bell Telephone Company. James W. Bollinger (Davenport, Iowa, collector and Lincoln enthusiast) hurled a charge at the company that the table was surrounded by "thirty-one Lincoln nuts." We were all quick to notice that the Judge included himself in the number. More seriously, Judge Bollinger enquired, "If there was nothing in the Papers, why put off opening them to the public?"

I had been worrying for some time about what I would say if Dr Evans took the fantastic notion to call on me. The demand for a statement came suddenly and I found myself on my feet telling the company that while I thought none of them would find all he wanted, each would find something to his pleasure. Harry J. Lytle (Davenport, Iowa, collector of Lincoliana) followed me with wishes that there would be something in the Papers about why Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd were not married on "the fatal first." He echoed Dr Bullard's wish, also, that something new on the Bixby letter would be found.

Solon J. Buck (archivist of the United States) stated that his interests in Lincoln and Lincoliana had been aroused some thirty-five years ago when he was a member of the History department of the University of Illinois and on the staff of the Illinois Historical Survey. Robert L. Kincaid (president of Lincoln Memorial University) told us that he was not much worried about the contents of the Papers. He was confident that they would not change our opinions of Lincoln.

R. Gerald McMurtry (director of the Department of Lincoliana of Lincoln Memorial University) did not tell us what he hoped to find in the Lincoln Papers, but stated that the gathering of the Lincoln scholars for the occasion would long be remembered as one of the outstanding events in the field of Lincoliana. Carl W. Schaefer (trustee of Lincoln Memorial University) described his personal experiences with William Lee Persons, a former slave who had worked in the house in which Lincoln died.

The Librarian of Congress found the time growing short, at this point, and therefore introduced the following guests without requiring them to speak at length: St. George L. Sioussat, chief of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Vernon W. Clapp; C. Percy Powell, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; William Springer, Detroit collector; and Foreman M. Lebold.

The only person at the table who had not yet spoken was Roy P. Basler (executive secretary of the Abraham Lincoln Association). Dr Basler repeated Paul Angle's praise of the Library of Congress and, in behalf of the entire company, thanked the Librarian of Congress for the privilege of being present in Washington. He would not express an opinion about the Papers, but assured us that one piece would not be present—Mrs Lincoln's remarks on her husband's beard.

Though time passed pleasantly all evening, none of us could avoid noticing a rising tension and excitement as midnight came closer. Each of us had personal hopes and fears about the contents of the Papers. Some of us had expressed our feelings openly, others cagily or privately. At last, the moment came when there were only a few minutes of waiting left. Dr Evans told us about the arrangements which had been made for the rest of the night, introduced Mrs Helen Bullock (who had assisted Dr Powell in cataloguing the manuscripts), and then freed us from the Whittal Pavilion.

Like thirty-one schoolboys unexpectedly released from school in spring, we scurried from the room and through the empty halls of the Library to the Annex. There the Papers waited. July twenty-sixth finally came. Now, the Papers are part of the great Lincoln story.

Presidential Papers

Of course, we are concerned with the preservation of papers of public men. For every investigator who wants to do research in our Manuscript Division, we have a dozen visitors who just want to "see" a letter in George Washington's handwriting. Frankly, we are just as much interested in the latter as in the former, because the contemplation of an "original letter" often leads to a deeper appreciation of, and reading in, American history.

Frequently we "put on" an exhibition of letters of Presidents of the United States—and vice-presidents, too. No, we have no collection of presidential papers comparable to the Robert Todd Lincoln Collection of letters of Abraham Lincoln, which was "opened" at the Library of Congress. But we do have some letters by and about Presidents at which we can grin with some satisfaction.

Our Colton Storm was among the thirty-one especially invited American scholars who participated in that dramatic midnight ceremony, at 12:01 A.M. on July 26, when the Robert T. Lincoln Collection was formally made available to the public. Now, don't misunderstand. He was not exactly in a position to grab souvenirs. Nor do we pretend that our Library's representative was in the class with Lincolians like Paul M. Angle of Chicago, James G. Randall of Urbana, nor Jay Monaghan and Roy P. Basler of Springfield. But he had a good time, and if he has to set up an exhibition of his own, Lincoln can be represented at our Library by an autograph letter.
Hughes begging that he call on his neighbor and get an autographed copy of that article. He did, and the following item, addressed and signed by the author may be seen in our Manuscript Division:

... Say, did you read what Rupert Hughes dug up in George Washington's diary? I was so ashamed I sat up all night reading it. This should be a lesson to Presidents to either behave themselves or not keep a diary. Can you imagine 100 years hence some future Rupert Hughes pouncing on Calvin's diary? What would that generation think of us? Calvin, burn them papers. Yours for the suppression of scandal.

Will Rogers*

Calvin is easily identified—he was then (1927) President of the United States. It is unlikely that any library will ever have any "tremendous" collection of "confidential" papers of President Coolidge, not because he followed Will Rogers's advice and burned them, but because he probably never wrote them. The late J. Franklin Jameson, chief of Manuscripts at the Library of Congress, arranged an exhibition of what he considered characteristic presidential letters. He began it with a splendid and serious four-page letter signed "Grover Cleveland" and concluded it with a one-line, one-sentence letter signed "Calvin Coolidge."

Speaking of presidents who achieved their rank first by inheritance, we are reminded of a recent gift to our Theodore Roosevelt Collection. It came to us from the original donor of the collection, Mr. William A. Vawter II. During the campaign of 1904, Roosevelt's Democratic opponent, Judge Alton B. Parker, laid certain charges against George B. Cortelyou, national chairman of the Republican Party. Parker accused the Republican Party of accepting campaign contributions in exchange for future favors. Roosevelt withheld his reply until Judge Parker hinted that the Republican methods were a form of blackmail. Then Roosevelt sailed in with a withering de-