

END OF THE LINE FOR ABE

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At the outset, I will tell you - or perhaps warn you - that my paper concerns Abraham Lincoln. In the 152 years of our Club's existence, it's possible that there have been at least that many papers concerning

some aspect of his life and presidency. Before your eyes glaze over and the heavy breathing begins, however, let me say that my subject is not really concerned so much with our 16th president as with his descendants. Specifically, my emphasis will be on his eldest son, Robert, an interesting, but third-rate, historical character in his own right, and the impact on Robert's life and - indirectly, the lives of his progeny - caused by a famous and near god-like father.

So great is Abraham Lincoln's stature that we tend to overlook the fact that he had a family which he loved and in which he took great pride. It began with his marriage in 1841 to Mary Todd, the coquettish and high-spirited daughter of a Lexington, Kentucky banker. The young couple's first home was a combination rooming house/tavern in the burgeoning town of Springfield, Illinois where Lincoln had a law practice with one William Herndon. Their first child, born the following year, was named Robert Todd Lincoln. He was followed in 1846 by Edward, who lived only four years; by Willie who died in 1862 at the age of 11; and by Thomas or "Tad" who died of typhoid in 1871 at the age of 18.

Both the Lincoln parents were affectionate and unusually permissive for the times. They may not have gotten along all the time and Lincoln's prolonged absences from home in both his law practice and in political campaigning undoubtedly caused certain domestic tension, but the Lincolns were determined to raise their boys "free and happy and unrestrained by parental tyranny," to quote the president's own words. Lincoln's notorious indulgence with his sons was possibly a reaction to the harsh treatment he had suffered at the hands of his father. As a victim of that "parental tyranny," Lincoln, according to at least one psychobiographer, evidently promised himself that he would not repeat his father's mistakes. In line with this philosophy, Lincoln was later to say about Robert, "we never controlled him much."

As a matter of fact, there seems to have been little control of any of the three Lincoln brothers. Herndon, Lincoln's law partner, wrote that Robert and his two younger brothers ran wild, even at the law office. "Many a time," Herndon confessed in his biography of Lincoln, "I wanted to wring their little necks." In a less-guarded moment, he complained that Lincoln was so blinded to his children's faults "that if they shit in his hat and rubbed it on his boots, he would have laughed and thought it smart . . . He worshiped his children and what they worshiped . . . disliked what they hated which was everything that did not bend to their whims." I must interject the thought that there is a strong possibility that Mary and Abraham Lincoln were the dotting parents of spoiled children.

And yet, the parents themselves were startlingly different in their temperament and behavior. The Todd family members were, in all candor, aristocratic pretenders of the frontier society which existed in Lexington. They were certain of their standing in the society of that city, so much so, in fact, that some family members insisted that Mary had married below her station - even after her husband had been elected to the presidency! The president himself once noted, with some humor - but probably not originally - that "while God made do with one "D" in His name, the Todds demanded two."

Mary was not in her early years the shrew she seemed to be in her later life. She was, however, in the words of a latter-day critic, "high-strung, demanding, selfish, suspicious and temperamental." While I do not intend to dwell on the tempestuous relationship between Abe and Mary Lincoln, it could perhaps be best characterized in Albert J. Beveridge's assessment that: "Few couples have been more unsuited in temperament, manners, taste, and everything else." Regrettably, though he bore the Lincoln surname, Robert was much his mother's son as his father's - perhaps

more so - and if Robert was more like one parent than the other, it was his mother he most resembled.

To give him the educational advantages he himself had not had, Lincoln enrolled Robert in the Springfield public schools and later in a small prep school in Springfield which was the forerunner of Concordia College. He was sent off to Harvard College in the Fall of 1859. With him, he carried a letter of introduction to the Dean from Stephan A. Douglas - Lincoln's opponent in the famous debates - which characterized the young applicant as "the son of a friend with whom I have lately been canvassing the State of Illinois." Unfortunately, Robert's preparatory education was insufficient and he could not pass the Harvard entrance exams. This was remedied by a year at Phillips Exeter Academy and he was admitted to Harvard in the fall of 1860, which is where he was when the Lincoln family moved into the White House in 1861. His father was proud of Robert's educational attainments, as witness a comment he made in a letter to a political friend that "I have a son at school, who, if report be true, already knows more than his father."

Much has been written about Lincoln's closeness to his two younger sons, Willie and Tad, during his years at the White House. Even though the pressures of the presidency drastically cut down the time he could spend with them, the President found great joy in their company. The death of his beloved Willie in 1862 at the age of 11 was a tragic blow to Lincoln and caused him to lapse into a depression lasting several weeks. Mary's grief was even more severe and her biographers speculate it marked the beginning of a mental descent that was to plague her in later years. In the midst of her mourning, she sought to communicate with her dead child through spiritualists, causing Lincoln finally to lead her to a window at the White House, point to the mental hospital, and say: "Mother, do you see that large white building on the hill yonder? Try and control your grief, or it will drive you mad and we may

have to send you there." This shock therapy seemed to work and Mary returned to her duties as mistress of the White House.

Some writers have concluded, probably unfairly, that Lincoln had no closeness with Robert comparable to that with the two younger boys. This conclusion was based, in part, on the fact that most of the rare episodes of disharmony with his boys involved Robert, the eldest son. It was Robert, 17 years old at the time, who was angrily rebuked by his father on their first trip to Washington for misplacing the only copies of the new president's inaugural address. It was Robert - to his father's disappointment - who avoided public appearances on the President's behalf, protesting that "I will be expected to make a speech." As an aside, Robert was nicknamed by the press "The Prince of Rails," a double allusion based on this father's title "The railsplitter of the West" and the recently-concluded American tour of the Prince of Wales, later to become Edward VII. Robert resented the nickname, largely, it would appear, because of the expectations it implied about his own future.

Most tragically of all, it was poor Robert who declined to accompany his parents to Ford's Theater on the night of his father's assassination. This was something he would regret to his dying day, even though there is nothing to suggest that his presence would have caused a different outcome. He was there during his father's final hours, standing at the head of the bed on which the president lay. It was reported that he controlled himself manfully, breaking down only twice and sobbing on Senator Charles Sumner's shoulder.

While his contemporaries were going into the Union Army, Robert was kept in school at Harvard because, as his father wrote in a letter to a friend: "General Grant did not wish to put him in the ranks." During his time at Harvard, Robert earned another rebuke from his father when, at the request of some classmates, he indirectly lent his support to a candidate for the

postmastership at Cambridge. President Lincoln got wind of this and wrote rather tartly to Robert that: "If you do not attend to your studies and let matters such as this alone, I will take you away from college."

Robert graduated from Harvard in 1864 and entered Harvard Law School where he spent four months before being given an appointment to General Grant's staff. This appointment, in all likelihood, was prompted by a letter written by President Lincoln to General Grant on January 18, 1865, reading as follows:

"Please read and answer this letter as though I was not President, but only a friend. My son, now in his twenty-second year, having graduated at Harvard, wishes to see something of the war before it ends. I do not wish to put him in the ranks, nor yet to give him a commission, to which those who have already served long are better entitled and better qualified to hold. Could he, without embarrassment to you, or detriment to the service, go into your military family with some nominal rank, I, not the public, furnishing his necessary means? If no, say so without the least hesitation, because I am as anxious and as deeply interested that you shall not be encumbered as you can be yourself."

It's hard to think of such a letter being written in this day of investigative journalism, but in a time when men could avoid being drafted by hiring a substitute, I support it's nothing too startling.

At any rate, Robert finished the war as a captain on Grant's staff. While he probably did not hear many shots fired in anger, nothing in his record would indicate anything other than dutiful and honorable service in the Union Army. After his father's assassination at the end of the war and the outpouring of national grief that accompanied it, Robert attempted to build a "normal" life, away from the public spotlight and the inevitable unfavorable comparisons with his now-sainted father. He moved to Chicago where

he studied law and looked after his mother and the family estate. He was admitted to the bar in 1867 and the next year married Mary Harlan, the daughter of Iowa Senator James Harlan.

Time does not permit any detailed summary of his career in Chicago, but two items are perhaps worth noting: First, he started a new law partnership in Chicago in 1872, which ultimately became Isham, Lincoln and Beall. This venerable and highly-respected firm existed for many years. Second, and probably of more interest to this group, he joined the Chicago Literary Club in 1876 (just two years after its founding) and remained a member for many years, although there is no record that he ever "came with a paper." On the whole, the Chicago years were good ones for Robert and his family and both his professional and social lives placed him in the upper echelons of Chicago society.

When Tad Lincoln died in 1871 at the age of 18, Robert became the only surviving male Lincoln. This event seemed to trigger in him a new sense of responsibility - some have called it a "fierce, protective spirit" - regarding the family's name and reputation. Perhaps this was a heritage from the Todd family and their concerns about maintaining an aristocratic aura. Whatever the reason, Robert seemed to regard his mother's increasing mental instability almost as an insult. When she was discovered trying to sell some of her old clothes in New York, Robert apparently let embarrassment over the family's reputation override sympathy for an old and ailing mother. This incident reached a climax in 1875, when Robert had his mother haled into court on an insanity hearing and actually testified in detail about her condition. Mary Todd Lincoln was declared incompetent and briefly placed in an institution. As you might suspect, this caused the estrangement of mother and son, which lasted until shortly before Mary Todd Lincoln's death.

By this time, I've possibly generated to you some preliminary - and unintended - negative feelings about Robert Todd Lincoln. Maybe you'll have them when I'm through, but I don't want you to judge the man too quickly. Actually, he did some things worth noting. For example, he had a brief, but not inconsequential, career in public service. He served as Secretary of War under President James Garfield and worked very hard - and successfully - to help hold the country together when Garfield lay dying from an assassin's bullet. He continued these efforts during the early months of new president Chester A. Arthur's administration. I can't help but think that his father's assassination and that of President Garfield did much to influence his decision about further government service. For when friends urged him to consider running for President himself, he declined adamantly, saying in a letter to a friend: "I positively refuse to consider being President of the United States. I, of all people, know what a killing job it is (was this some kind of dark humor?) and, anyhow, it would interfere with my golf." Context suggests that this latter flippancy was nothing more than an off-hand quip to a good friend.

Robert also served as ambassador to Great Britain from 1889-1893, during the administration of President Benjamin Harrison, but nothing of particular moment occurred during his tenure - at least as regarded relations between the two nations. He did not succumb to the blandishments of British society, leading President Theodore Roosevelt later to comment that "all of our ministers to England have been pro-British except Bob Lincoln."

From this point on Robert Todd Lincoln seemed to dedicate his life to business and pleasure. The man who had once been called "The Prince of Rails" became a railroad baron. He started his career as legal counsel to the Pullman Company and, following the death of founder George Pullman in 1897, he became, first, acting executive and then president of the company. He had been forced, as legal counsel, to seek a court

injunction against striking Pullman workers in 1894. This earned him the hatred of some who contrasted his actions with the more humanitarian persona of his father. (One wonders if that hatred should not have been more appropriately directed to Mr. Pullman.) Robert eventually amassed a fortune of some \$20 million and owned substantial homes in Chicago and Washington, D.C. He also built a summer house in Manchester, Vermont, which he named "Hildene," at a cost of \$63,000 - a fortune at the time.

If he had a passion, it was golf. Robert tried to get out on the course the year around - even to the extent of using colored balls when there was a light dusting of snow on the ground. He also involved his close friends in his love of the game. The story is told that he and his best friend, Marshall Field (he of department store fame) went out on the course one very cold winter day and, although they made it through the round, poor Field became ill and ultimately died. This tragedy so affected Robert that he suffered a complete mental breakdown from which he did not recover for 18 months. Even though he recovered, he was more aloof and withdrawn than he had been before. There is no indication, however, that he stopped playing golf.

Robert continued, also, as the self-appointed custodian of the Lincoln name and image. The bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln, just a few yards across the street from here, figured in one of these episodes. The statue was done by George Grey Barnard on a commission from Charles Phelps Taft. When it was unveiled in 1917, it caused an artistic furor. Robert Todd Lincoln found it "uncouth" and thought it did his father "a great injustice." The furor was so great that two replicas of the statue, originally destined for London and Paris, ended up in Louisville, Kentucky and Manchester, England instead.

John Clubbe, author of "Cincinnati Observed: Architecture and History" has written about the statue: "No other representation of Lincoln I know renders his

roughhewn honesty, his troubled grandeur of soul, so uncompromisingly. He stands before us, gaunt, unsmiling, weary, hair tousled, unbearded, tie askew, vest ill-fitting, big-handed, big-footed, the reflective eyes fixed on eternity. Barnard did indeed, as Charles Phelps Taft had hoped he would, produce a great work of art." Robert Todd Lincoln's disagreement with this conclusion - while regrettable - was perhaps indicative of his own vision of a mythical father rather than an objective historical appraisal of a very human president.

In spite of his jealous guardianship of his father's legacy, Robert all but became invisible as the identifiable only living son of the late president. He no longer attended, for example, Lincoln birthday events unless he could be assured that he would not be called upon to speak or even be introduced. He took special care to guard his father's personal papers, which he had taken control of shortly after the assassination, and denoted eight trunks of President Lincoln's letters to the Library of Congress in 1919, but with the proviso that they be sealed for 21 years after his own death. When the trunks were finally opened in 1947, they turned out to be unremarkable, containing no revelations about the public or private Abraham Lincoln.

Robert Todd Lincoln died in 1926 in the bedroom of the home he had built in Manchester, Vermont. He was almost 83 years old. He had come a long way from the combination tavern/rooming house in Springfield, Illinois, where he had been born. The London TIMES wrote a particularly critical obituary, saying among other things: "Seldom do sons of the great achieve the glory and distinction of their fathers. Fortune, perhaps, had flowered Robert Lincoln too highly, and nature had not endowed him with the rugged grandeur and the human sympathy that the father had earned in the hard school of life." Personally, I think these comments are unfair. In his way Robert Todd Lincoln served his country well in more than one position of

responsibility and at the end of his life had won the respect and esteem of all who knew him.

Robert had indicated before his death that he intended to be buried in the Lincoln family tomb in Springfield, Illinois. Instead he was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Some historians construe that as evidence of some latent bad feeling towards his parents, but others - probably more correctly - believe that the interment decision was dictated by Robert's widow.

By this time, I don't know what you think of Robert Todd Lincoln. From a personal standpoint, I think an eldest son named Robert, who became a lawyer, served honorably in the army, did his fair share as a public servant, liked to play golf, belonged to a literary club, and lived a respectable life as husband and father is not all bad. Others feel that Robert had duties and responsibilities to his country and his lineage which transcended the things he accomplished in his life - and I suppose that's not unreasonable either.

At any rate, it was through Robert - Abe Lincoln's only surviving son that the 16th president's name and lineage were to be preserved, if only briefly. Robert and Mary Harlan Lincoln had 3 children - a boy and two girls. The boy, named Abraham Lincoln II, but nicknamed "Jack", revealed real promise as a youngster, but died at the age of 17 during his father's tenure as Ambassador to England. About the only thing young Jack is remembered for today was his ability to forge his grandfather's signature. Several examples of this can be seen in the fly leaves of some of the books in Robert's library at Hildene.

Jack's death frustrated the continuance of the Lincoln surname, but his sisters were able to continue the family line, although in a very tenuous fashion. His older sister, named Mary also after her mother, married one Charles Isham and had a son - Lincoln Isham

- about whom practically nothing is known except that he lived on a farm in Dorset, Vermont, not far from Hildene, until 1971. Lincoln Isham married but he and his wife were childless, thereby closing off this branch of the Lincoln family line. Mary Isham, Lincoln Isham's mother, is principally remembered today for her efforts to redecorate Hildene. This consisted of altering several of the house's downstairs rooms to resemble hotel rooms. Fortunately, she died before she could do further damage to the house.

This left only Jack's younger sister Jessie to perpetuate the family line. Sad to report, she wasn't up to it either. In 1897, Jessie married - against her parents' wishes - a football player named Warren Beckwith. They had two children who became the last of the Lincolns. By all accounts, they were also the most peculiar of the Lincolns and the wealthiest - owning a plantation in Virginia, houses in Washington, D.C. and Charleston, South Carolina and, of course, the ancestral home, Hildene, in Vermont.

The elder of the two Beckwith children was named Mary Lincoln Beckwith, but was called Peggy. She became the mistress of Hildene in 1948, after the death of Robert's widow (1937) and her own mother, Jessie. Peggy is, to me, like some of the outlandish female characters out of the Old West. She had many interests, but few talents. She could milk a cow, fly a plane, write and play music - but none of it exceptionally. She filled the rooms at Hildene with the residue of her hobbies and passions - painting, photography, aviation and nature study, but was so dedicated to plain living that she permitted Hildene to decline into near ruin. Like her grandfather Robert, Peggy was considered "outspoken, but shy" and she avoided public appearances as a representative of the Lincoln family. One notable exception to this was her appearance at the 1960 launch of the nuclear submarine, "Abraham Lincoln," which she christened.

Peggy never married and died at the age of 77 in 1975. In her will, she bequeathed the now dilapidated Hildene and its surrounding 412 acres to the Christian Science Church. Happily, the estate was reclaimed by local and national "friends" who raised money to buy the property in 1978 and restored it to something resembling its former grandeur. In this, they were aided by donations of heirlooms and furniture by Peggy's younger brother, Robert Todd Lincoln Beckwith, the last of the Lincoln blood line.

A historian at the Illinois State Historical Library in Springfield, who knew Robert Beckwith, called him "extremely proper, more like a Todd than a Lincoln, but with Lincoln-like qualities such as a sense of humor, occasional bouts of depression and a penchant for staying up late and starting slowing in the morning, traits which both Abraham and Robert Todd Lincoln exhibited."

Beckwith died at the age of 81 on Christmas Eve in 1985 at his home in Hartfield, Virginia, near Washington, D.C. He was a short man who sported a neat gray beard and he looked much as his grandfather Robert had. He was something of a gourmet, played the ukulele and liked fast cars and boats. Most of all, he apparently liked women. He was married 3 times, the last time just four years before his death. One of the few times his name ever surfaced in the press was in regard to a paternity suit filed by a much younger European woman. Beckwith's defense was that he had had a vasectomy several years before his alleged encounter and therefore could not have been the father. The people at the Illinois State Historical Library tell me that he undoubtedly would have prevailed on this defense, but he elected to buy the young woman off for a million dollars to stop any future publicity.

Beckwith had no children by his marriages. He never claimed to be anyone he was not, and he was, in essence, a playboy who liked to travel and was generous with his money to numerous charitable enterprises. His

distinguished ancestor and great-grandfather, Abraham Lincoln, was rather remote to him, and he made almost no public appearances in his capacity as a descendant of that great man.

With the death of Robert Todd Lincoln Beckwith in 1985, there were left behind no heirs to a bloodline which appeared at one time to have such potential for greatness. And, if the grave could speak, I suspect that Abraham Lincoln might regard his progeny and conclude: "It's just as well!"
