

Oral History Interview with Basil Moore on Abraham Lincoln
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This interview took place at Burnside's Nursing Home in Marshall. The three boys composed the list of questions and Basil's daughter, Mary Ann Stepp, presented the questions to her father.

MAS: The first question is, "When did you become interested in Abraham Lincoln?"

BM: When I was (about) high school.

MAS: How did you become interested in Lincoln?

BM: Because of his unusual ability to express himself, whether by letter or by speaking.

MAS: Their next question is, "Did Lincoln ever visit Marshall?"

BM: Yeah.

MAS: OK.

BM: It was back in the 1830's sometime.

MAS: Do you know...

BM: He'd been hired to (represent) a man from Cole's County that had been indicted up there on a manslaughter charge. The trial was held in Marshall.

MAS: Do you know how long Lincoln was in Marshall at that time?

BM: Two days.

MAS: OK. Was he well known then?

BM: No.

MAS: Did he visit Marshall on more than one occasion that you know of?

BM: I'm not for sure.

MAS: Can you tell your favorite Lincoln story?

BM: Oh, yeah. (Laughter)

MAS: OK.

BM: He (A man) sat on Mr. Lincoln's hat. He (Lincoln) said, "I could have told you it wouldn't fit before you tried it on."

(Conversation and a pause to check equipment.)

MAS: Now what else was it you wanted to say about how you were interested in Lincoln? Go ahead, it's recording.

BM: Uh, I attempted to analyze his method of speaking and writing. I found four common characteristics: clarity, brevity, logic, and humor.

MAS: Then in your opinion, what were some of Lincoln's best qualities?

BM: Honesty.

MAS: Do you want to elaborate on that?

BM: No.

MAS: OK. What is your favorite thing about Abe?

BM: Favorite what?

MAS: Your favorite thing about him. Your...his favorite...your favorite characteristic.

BM: His unusual ability to express himself found in the Gettysburg Address and in his personal letters and various speeches that he made.

MAS: OK.

BM: One of the very, very best was the speech he made in Springfield when he was boarding a train to go to Washington to be inaugurated president.

MAS: Do you want to say it? It's not very long.

BM: No it's (really) too long.

MAS: OK. Do you have any of Abe's old belongings?

BM: No.

MAS: What were some of Lincoln's favorite recreational activities?

BM: Wrestling.

MAS: OK. Did he do it himself, you mean? Did he...?

BM: Yeah.

MAS: OK. Have you ever visited the Lincoln Memorial?

BM: Yes. The one in Washington and the one in Springfield.

(Hard to hear question by one of the boys.)

BM: I don't go overboard for that.

MAS: OK. Do you want to tell any more about the memorial?

BM: The first time I saw it was at night when it was raining, and we had driven all day, and I was tired, but I wanted to see that memorial in Washington...Right Now! When I got out of the car and went up there by myself to see it. Went back the next day when there were a bunch of tourists there and it didn't mean near as much.

MAS: Have you ever been to Lincoln's gravesite? That would be Springfield, right?

BM: Yeah.

MAS: Do you want to tell any more about that?

BM: I got to know the caretaker up there real well, and he lived in a house next to the Lincoln burial place. And he invited me to come to their house any time I was in Springfield and they'd have an extra bed for me. So I went one time, and I called in advance. I don't like surprises. I called in advance and when - Mr. Cashman was the man's name - when he answered the phone he was down in his office, down underneath the burial place, and when he answered that phone, he said, "Lincoln Tomb." (Laughter)

MAS: (Laughter) OK. (To boys, "What else was it?" Unheard answer.) Do you want to tell us something about Harrogate University?

BM: Oh yeah. It's known that when Lincoln was with some of his dignitaries, one of the men had a map handy. He pointed to a spot on the map where he thought it would be a good location for a college or a university of higher education. And that's where they built the one at Harrogate, Tennessee.

MAS: OK. (To the boys, "Do you guys want....?")

BM: I've been there.

A boy: You've been there?

BM: Uh huh. One of the nice things about that is this Colonel Sanders, you know, the king of fried chicken....

MAS: Uh huh.

BM: He gave, he gave them a few billion dollars to build a new library there. And I went down to the dedication of it, and Mary Ann's husband, Terry Stepp, went with me. We got to meet the Fried Chicken King. (Laughter)

MAS: (Can you guys think of anything else?)

A boy: No, not really.

MAS: OK. Is there anything else? That's all their questions. Is there anything else of interest that you want to mention? Daddy, We've been through the questions.

BM: What was that last one?

MAS: Have you ever been to Lincoln's gravesite?

BM: Yeah. There's something there that captures my attention. At the gravesite in the cemetery there, there's statues of Mr. Lincoln. Some are made of bronze and some are not. But right at the corner where you go around this - another statue there, they have about rubbed the finish off of the foot of it. The people that go by there reach out and pat him on the foot. And it's just about worn it out. That's a tendency of American people I don't understand. See, I'm awfully interested in Will Rogers, and I went up to Rogers' memorial, and friends knew that I was coming, and they arranged it so they took me into the library at the Will Rogers' Memorial. And somebody went with me. Do you know why?

A boy: Why?

BM: They had so much bad luck with people taking stuff away - stealing it. And here's something else along that line. The Lincoln cases that he heard here in the Marshall court house he entered the record in the clerk's office, and somebody came along and cut those places out and stole them.

MAS: Hum.

(Unheard question.)

BM: This is something about the American people I don't understand. And they ought to be ashamed of it. Now what would you do with those ... those stolen records? I wouldn't give them a dime for them. I don't know anybody that would. I expect there is somebody if they'd advertise it.

MAS: To the boys, "Can you guys think of anything else?"

A Boy: No, not that I can think of.

MAS: OK. Is there anything else you want to say?

BM: Yeah. About the trial in Marshall - the governor at that time was named Matteson. (Basil spells Matteson.) When he retired, he built a house in Marshall. That's where Frank Pearce lives now.

MAS: Hum. (Unheard question)

BM: The time Lincoln came to Marshall was to defend a man from Coles County by the name of Davis. He was tried on a manslaughter charge and was sent to prison for six years. Lincoln apparently felt that that fellow got too...too stiff a sentence and so after a time he wrote to the governor and tried to get him a pardon. I a... That letter is in my book. A copy of the letter that he wrote to Governor Matteson. He (gave it) back down on the case in the first line or two that he had assisted in this man's defense, and - uh- then he wrote, "I thought his conviction was right, but that the sentence imposed was too long under the circumstances. He has now served five-sixth of his sentence. His family is in want. He lost one of his arms in the Mexican War. I have the word of the warden that he behaved himself well in prison as he promised. In view of the above, I request that he be released from further confinement. And the governor didn't even answer the letter. And that man had to serve the full term.

MAS: Hum.

BM: But here's where I think it's interesting. Let's just go a little farther. That ex-governor became president, became a politician, and he wanted to run for the Senate. Lincoln openly opposed him, and he didn't even get the nomination. Then a few years later, this ex-governor turned up as the president of a railroad. One of his first official acts was to hire Lincoln as a lawyer for the railroad. So they made up somewhere along the line. Now this is so typical of Mr. Lincoln. He turned an enemy into a friend. And I know one excellent example. A friend said to Mr. Lincoln one day, "I don't understand why you treat Mr. So-and-so with kindness. You know he is your enemy. I should think you'd want to destroy him." And Mr. Lincoln said, "If I can make a friend of him, have I not destroyed an enemy?" This is very true.

(Ending conversation)

