

# RADIOGRAMS OF MINNESOTA HISTORY

## LINCOLN AND MINNESOTA <sup>1</sup>

Although Abraham Lincoln never visited Minnesota, he did play a direct part in her history on one important occasion, and throughout the years of his prominence in the national life he was of course an outstanding figure in the eyes of the people of Minnesota. It may be interesting, therefore, on Lincoln's birthday, to trace the points of contact between the great president and our state.

Up to 1859 the Democratic party was dominant in this state and Lincoln's great rival, Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, was something of a hero here. As chairman of the committee on territories in the United States Senate he had played a part in the organization of Minnesota Territory in 1849; and nine years later he had engineered through the Senate the bill admitting Minnesota to the Union. Thus the people of the state were grateful to the "Little Giant" for his efforts on their behalf.

In 1857 and 1858 the Republicans were growing stronger in Minnesota. As the question of extending slavery to the territories became crucial and as it grew evident that on this issue the Democratic party was tied to the chariot wheels of the South, many men who had previously been Democrats began to weaken in their allegiance. In Minnesota the new Republican party drew in some of these disaffected Democrats, most of the old Whigs, and practically all the immigrants from Germany and the Scandinavian countries.

Nothing increases political interest like a close contest; and as the political situation in Minnesota became less one-sided the people began to take a keener interest in national affairs. The Lincoln-Douglas debates in the Illinois campaign of 1858

<sup>1</sup> A radio talk given on February 12, 1925, from the Twin City broadcasting station WCCO.

attracted considerable attention here. The Democratic newspapers of course favored Douglas and spoke slightly of "Mr. Abe Lincoln." The *Saint Paul Daily Times*, on the other hand, a Republican newspaper, declared, "It is quite evident to our own mind, that the masses are with Lincoln and that Douglas will be sent to the shades of private life."

In 1859 the Republican party carried Minnesota. Alexander Ramsey was elected governor, both of the Congressmen chosen were Republicans, and the Republican state legislature sent to the national Senate a Republican — Morton S. Wilkinson. The presidential nominations of 1860 awakened great interest in the state. The Republican convention met in Chicago, and the Minnesota delegation went there hoping to nominate William H. Seward of New York for president. On May 18, however, the choice of the convention fell on Abraham Lincoln. On May 19, before the reports of the convention had reached St. Paul, the *Daily Minnesotian and Times* expressed the opinion that Lincoln's chance for the nomination for president was very slim but that he stood a good chance of getting the nomination for the vice presidency. The same paper for May 22 has an article from which the following is quoted: "The Republicans of Minnesota looked to Wm. H. Seward, as the man who should bear the first Republican flag of victory into the White House at Washington," but "'Honest Old Abe,' the more than match for the author of the Nebraska bill, a pure man and a noble statesman, was chosen to lead the great Republican army of this Union to complete and certain victory." The last paragraph of the article says eloquently: "Minnesota will do *her* duty towards placing him in the Presidential chair, despite the money of a corrupt Administration or the fawning sycophancy of political brawlers. Let us then girt on our armors for the coming fight. Let us marshal our forces and when we strike, let it be for a gallant champion of Freedom, for Free Land, Free Men, and a Glorious Cause."

The *Daily Pioneer and Democrat*, politically opposed to Lincoln, was naturally not laudatory, as the following extract shows: "The ticket, we regard, as a very weak one, especially in the great central States, where the Republicans most need strength. The candidates will create little enthusiasm in the north, and if the Baltimore convention acts judiciously, will not stand a ghost of a chance of an election." Another extract from the same paper is still more pointed: "In St. Paul, where Seward has hosts of friends, curses both loud and deep were hurled at the Convention, for cowardly rejecting the great apostle of Republicanism, for a man whose political record consists in his defeat by Douglas for U. S. Senator."

Whatever may have been the disappointment of Minnesota Republicans at Lincoln's nomination, they swallowed it bravely and made an active campaign for him. One of its chief features was an address delivered from the steps of the state Capitol by William H. Seward, who had come into the state to urge his Minnesota friends to support Lincoln.

In this campaign, slavery was the outstanding issue. On the slavery question, the attitude of most of the Republicans of Minnesota was identical with that of Lincoln. They were opposed to the further extension of slavery, but did not dream of interfering with it in the states where it already existed. It took secession and civil war to bring them to approve the abolition of slavery.

When secession actually came Minnesota opinion was at first divided. Many citizens sympathized with Henry M. Rice, the able Democratic senator from Minnesota, when he counseled that the southern states be allowed to secede. "We are a family of brothers," he said, "and if we cannot live together in peace, in the name of God, let us agree as brothers to separate in peace." Representative of a larger section of Minnesota opinion was the Republican Senator Wilkinson's statement that secession implied revolution and civil war. Governor Ramsey happened to be in Washington when Fort

Sumter was taken and he promptly offered President Lincoln a regiment of men from Minnesota, thereby gaining for the state the distinction of being the first to volunteer troops for the Civil War. When war did come, Rice and his followers fell in line and worked loyally for the Union cause. In all 22,000 men from Minnesota served in the Civil War — not a bad record from a state only two years old and with a population of less than 170,000 whites.

Sixteen months after the Civil War began Minnesota was confronted with the Sioux Outbreak. This is not the time to trace the events of that most thrilling episode in the history of our state — we are interested only in Lincoln's connection with it. After the outbreak was put down a military commission appointed by General Sibley tried the Indian prisoners and sentenced about three hundred of them to be hanged. According to the army regulations, courtmartial sentences imposing capital punishment had to be approved by the commander in chief — that is, the president. When it became known that Lincoln was considering the cases he was subjected to a bombardment of petitions and resolutions. A few begged for clemency, but most of those from Minnesota urged swift and drastic punishment of the Indians and contained veiled threats that if the Indians were not legally hanged they would be lynched.

The newspapers with one accord lifted up their voices and cried for blood. Here is a paragraph from the *Mankato Independent*:

The final disposition to be made of the condemned Indians, is understood to depend upon the policy of the General Government, which, judging from repeated Washington telegrams, is averse to a wholesale execution. That they will be finally executed, however — either by order of the President, or by *the will of the People*, who make Presidents — we do not harbor a doubt. Their guilt has been fully established upon careful and conscientious investigation by a competent court, and pay the penalty of their atrocious crimes they must

and shall. The People have sworn it. They have the power, and will never sanction or permit the exercise of a mistaken clemency by the Government, which will allow these rascals, whose hands are reddened with the blood of hundreds of our defenceless population, to escape the extreme penalty adjudged against them.

The *Saint Paul Pioneer* of November 22, 1862, quotes this paragraph and comments as follows: "We have hopes that the Government will yet consent that capital punishment shall be meted out to all the condemned by the proper authorities; but, should another course be adopted, we feel very confident that the people will take the matter into their own hands, and do substantial justice."

Almost the only voice in Minnesota opposed to wholesale execution was that of Bishop Henry Whipple. He had seen enough of the mistreatment of the Indians by government officials and others to feel that the outbreak was largely the fault of the white men. In the fall of 1862 he was in Washington and with his relative, General Halleck, he called on Lincoln. The president said of the interview not long after, "He came here the other day and talked with me about the rascality of this Indian business until I felt it down to my boots."

Lincoln had the evidence of the Indian trials examined with considerable care. The commission had sentenced to death all the Indians who had killed white men or who had showed their intent to kill by participating in battles against the whites. The president felt that those who had merely fought in battles were prisoners of war and should not be executed. Of the condemned, there were forty who were proved to have killed defenseless and unarmed settlers. These forty Lincoln considered guilty of murder and deserving of the death sentence. On the recommendation of the military commission the sentence of one of them was commuted to ten years' imprisonment.

In the library of the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul, there is a valuable manuscript in Lincoln's own hand-

writing. It is dated Washington, December 6, 1862, and reads as follows:

BRIGADIER GENERAL H. H. SIBLEY  
St. Paul, Minnesota.

Ordered that of the Indians and Half-breeds sentenced to be hanged by the Military Commission, composed of Colonel Crooks, L<sup>t</sup> Colonel Marshall, Captain Grant, Captain Bailey, and Lieutenant Olin, and lately sitting in Minnesota, you cause to be executed on Friday the nineteenth day of December, instant, the following named, to wit [ *there follows a list of 39 names* ].

The other condemned prisoners you will hold subject to further orders, taking care that they neither escape nor are subjected to any unlawful violence.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN,  
President of the United States.

The people of Minnesota were not pleased at this example of clemency, but they did not take the law into their own hands nor did they bear any grudge against the president for his action. In 1864 they registered their choice for Lincoln for president by a majority of about eight thousand in a total vote of forty-two thousand. The *Saint Paul Press* headlines for November 9 and 10, 1864, — “God Be Praised” and “Rejoice Oh! Earth” — indicate the enthusiasm with which Minnesota Republicans greeted Lincoln’s reëlection. The same paper for November 10 said, “In all future time last Tuesday will be marked as the most critical moment of American history, the *experimentum crucis* of free government and of popular rights; not for this nation only, but for all the world. It was then the American people escaped the greatest of all calamities . . . National Death — the suicide of free Government.”

In 1865 Minnesota joined with the rest of the nation in mourning Lincoln’s untimely death. The *Saint Paul Pioneer*, which seven years before had belittled “Mr. Abe Lincoln,” now wrote:

“ President Lincoln *is dead, and a nation weeps*. His voice is forever hushed, but the lamentations of thirty millions of sorrowing people, are heard. Seldom has the grief of a people for the death of their ruler been more sincere; never, probably, more universal.

Whatever differences of opinions may have obtained as to the policy pursued by Mr. Lincoln; whatever errors may have characterized his administration of the government; all must have recognized, now in this hour of our triumph and of the overthrow of the embattled hosts of the rebellion, his peculiar fitness and qualifications for the final work of the *pacification* of our distracted and bleeding country.

Minnesotans in every walk of life joined with the *Pioneer* in feeling that “ Without doubt, in all this broad land, there lives not the man who, all things considered, can, in the estimation and confidence of the great body of the American people, fill to-day the place of Abraham Lincoln.”

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