

'Lincoln at 100' on display

By DAROLD LEIGH HENSON

I am pleased to announce the addition of a major, 30-page chapter titled "Lincoln at 100 at Lincoln" to my award-winning community history Web site of Lincoln, Ill.

This particular Lincoln Centennial Celebration is especially interesting to compare to those of the present Lincoln Bicentennial Celebrations.

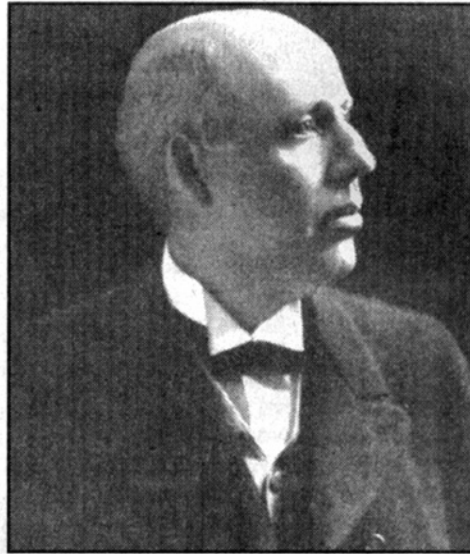
Late last fall, Richard Sumrall and Joyce Sutz of the Lincoln Public Library helped me obtain printouts from microfilm of several Lincoln, Ill., newspaper articles describing that city's celebration of the 100th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth. Using that information, I researched the planners, honorees, other special guests and speakers at this local celebration. The new chapter discusses those people and that event, providing insight into the social structure and culture of this small Midwestern town in the early 20th century.

The celebration in Lincoln was held in the Broadway Theatre, later named the Grand Theatre, on Feb. 10, 1909. (The Grand Theatre burned in 1960, and this location was later the site of Gossett's Cleaners). This namesake town celebration was among countless corresponding events throughout the nation and the world. The celebration in Springfield consisted of a large banquet, which excluded blacks and required women to sit separately in the balcony. There, the ladies watched the men below as some of them imbibed too much wine.

No such problem of overindulgence apparently marred (or enlivened) the first Lincoln namesake town celebration, which consisted of a program of patriotic music, a recitation of the Gettysburg Address and speeches. My new chapter includes a photo of the Broadway Theatre and biographical sketches and photos of several of the planners, honorees, other special guests, and the two speakers.

The General Committee that organized this namesake town celebration had more than a dozen members, and they came from the business community and almost all of the major professions: education, engineering, government, journalism, the law, medicine and the ministry. Two of the General Committee members had been officers in the Union Army, and they had taken ex-slaves to Lincoln after the war. All General Committee members were active in community service; several were deeply committed to the Chautauqua of Lincoln — the largest in the state. At least two people involved in the celebration had known Abraham Lincoln.

The honorees and other special guests included other Civil War veterans and prominent citizens. The listing of these elite citizens in the newspapers reveals a social hierarchy in which judges ranked at the top and were followed by clergymen, distinguished educators

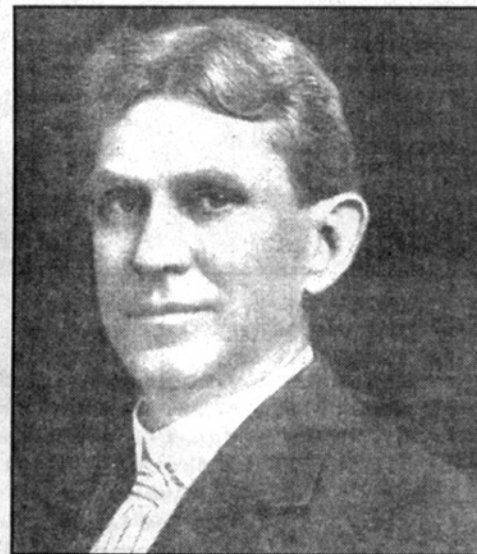


Euclid B. Rogers

and leading businessmen, respectively. No women were on the General Committee or among the named special guests, but the most prominent female civic leader, Mrs. John A. Lutz — probably the most highly educated woman in town — was allowed on the Decorations Committee. My new chapter has a biographical sketch and photos of her. The chairman of the General Committee and master of ceremonies was Judge Lawrence B. Stringer, who gave a short speech about Abraham Lincoln before introducing the main speaker, Euclid B. Rogers, D.D.

The Lincoln Daily Courier said Stringer's speech told a story that was "new in this city and of more than ordinary interest. That is one of the reasons why Mr. Stringer's short talk was unusually enjoyable." Stringer's speech featured a detail about the naming of Lincoln, Illinois, in 1853 that the townspeople in 1909 apparently had not heard. Stringer said that the town's founders offered to name it for Abraham Lincoln if he could obtain an advantageous town charter. According to the newspaper, Stringer said that Abraham Lincoln took this job and "secured the charter as the promoters wanted it."

The "reward for charter" theme of Stringer's 1909 speech has mostly been forgotten, and Stringer's History of Logan County, Illinois, 1911, does not say that the town's founders were rewarding their attorney for that particular success only. Rather, the book explains the town was named by the founders in gratitude for the collective legal services that Lincoln provided in helping to establish the town. Stringer's book also says that the founders sought to compliment Lincoln in general for his fame in central Illinois as a popular personality, well-known lawyer, and public servant. Stringer emphasizes that the future president did not gain national fame until later (in fact, not till the Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858).



Lawrence B. Stringer

Euclid B. Rogers, the main speaker, was pastor of the Central Baptist Church of Springfield. He was well known throughout the Midwest for his lively oratory in the pulpit and on the stages of the Chautauqua circuit.

Years earlier, Rogers, while a pastor in Pennsylvania, had been accused of sexual impropriety and mental cruelty to his wife. That controversy had divided the congregation of a church in Burlington, Iowa, where Rogers had become the pastor, and these matters were notorious enough to be reported in The New York Times. Despite these problems, Rogers was a pastor in Springfield for many years, where he was an outspoken social critic following the 1908 race riots. Rogers, noted for his speeches about Abraham Lincoln, was known in Lincoln prior to his Lincoln Centennial address because he had spoken at the Chautauqua there.

No copy of Rogers's speech in Lincoln has been found, but I did obtain a short speech Rogers gave on Abraham Lincoln in Springfield in 1922. My new chapter includes the full text of that speech as well as analysis of Rogers's celebrated rhetoric. I have sent bound copies of this chapter to the Lincoln Public Library, the Lincoln Heritage Museum at Lincoln College, the Logan County Genealogical & Historical Society and Main Street Lincoln.

Those interested may access a link to a PDF of "Lincoln at 100 at Lincoln" at <http://www.geocities.com/findinglincolnillinois/abes200th-lincolnil.html#lincolnfest1909>.

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