



FOR THE PEOPLE

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MEMORIES OF MY FATHER, BENJAMIN P. THOMAS

By Sarah H. Thomas

In memorializing my father, it's hard to compete with the likes of Earl Miers, Paul Angle and Carl Sandburg. For a complete biography of my dad, I would refer you either to Paul Angle's tribute, which is encapsulated in his book, *On a Variety of Subjects*, or to Michael Burlingame's introduction to *Lincoln's Humor and Other Essays* by Benjamin P. Thomas. What I can do is write from a daughter's perspective.

Those of you who remember my father as a Lincoln author and historian, might be surprised to learn his primary passion was baseball. I learned more about baseball from him than I ever learned about Abraham Lincoln. At Johns Hopkins University he was the president of his senior class and one of only two in his class to earn Phi Beta Kappa keys. But being captain of the baseball team was perhaps his proudest achievement.

"I played second base," he would say. "I think I might have made it to the pros if my little finger weren't so short. You see, to play second base, you have to be able to grasp the ball tightly and then throw in a hurry to first. My small little finger prevented me from getting a good grip on the ball."

My brother, George, sister, Martha, and I would listen and believe probably because he was not prone to hyperbole or boasting. In his more

modest moments he would admit to being "all field-no hit."

My dad did play semipro ball in the summers while he was in college. Because he was paid, it would have made him ineligible to play college ball, but he changed his name to Tom Benus during the summer baseball season ... an act of deception very out of character for him. I am sure he would only have done it for baseball.

When I was growing up, we spent many nights at Lanphier Ball Park watching the Springfield Browns, a farm team of the St. Louis Browns. Other nights were spent playing ball in our front yard. The neighborhood children congregated at our house for pick up games with Daddy as umpire. Three elm trees in our front yard were



Benjamin P. Thomas was very proud of this deer that he decorated and put in his front yard every Christmas.

perfectly positioned for first, second and third base.

In addition to those games, there were often softball games at Iles Park, which is a small park at Sixth and Ash Streets in Springfield. When we went out for dinner, Daddy would always seem to pass that park on the way home. If there was a game being played, we had to stop and watch. He particularly liked to watch the girls' teams.

Something my dad could not do was anything mechanical. He was totally helpless around the house. One day he heard Arthur Godfrey, either on television or the radio, praising his Abraham Lincoln book. Daddy decided he should send Mr. Godfrey an autographed copy of the book. "You should have seen him," my mother told me. "Paper, tape, and string were everywhere. The string wound all the way down the stairs. He took all morning to wrap that book." Earl Miers, a fellow historian and good friend, noticed the same ineptitude. He wrote, "To watch Ben mix a drink was an experience: the ice flew in one direction, the whiskey in the other, while the glass rolled in the sink."

It must have been because of that too small little finger.

Another lesser known facet of my dad was his career as a farmer. He was

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IN MEMORIAM

OLIVER J. KELLER, JR.

1923 - 2008



Oliver James Keller, Jr. died on February 12, 2008, the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, the great man he so admired. He was a longtime member of The Abraham Lincoln Association. His father was President of the Association from 1963 to 1967, and the Logan Hay Medal was awarded to him posthumously in 1968.

O. J. was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on April 21, 1923, and grew up in Pittsburgh. He was educated at Greenfields Academy, Phillips Exeter Academy and Williams College. He earned his M.A. in sociology from Northern Illinois University and was a research fellow at the University of Chicago's Center for Studies in Criminal Justice.

During World War II and the Korean War, he was a navigator on an LST carrier in the Pacific. He married Joan Williams Dixon of Springfield and was a radio broadcaster for WTAX there. He was fondly known as O. J. the D. J. He founded Boys Farm near Springfield, where troubled youths could live rather than going to a state correction facility. He was chairman of the Illinois Youth Commission. After moving to Florida in 1967, he served as director of youth services and secretary of health and rehabilitative services. He taught criminal justice at the University of Florida until his appointment to the United States Parole Commission. He was president of the American Correctional Association in 1975 and a founding member of the Associated Marine Institute. He was president of Congregations for Affordable Housing and a founder of Georgia Wilderness Institute.

His deep interest in the Civil War began with a visit to Gettysburg as a young man. He was a founding member of the Civil War Round Table in Springfield. While living in Atlanta, he was a member of the Atlanta Civil War Round Table, served on the Georgia Civil War Commission and was a founder of the Georgia Battlefields Association.

His great loves were his family, jazz piano, sailing in the Caribbean, Abraham Lincoln and Wednesday lunches with his friends. He is survived by his wife, Joan; daughters, Alison Townsend and Louisa Paige; son-in-law, Charlie Townsend; grandchildren, Charles, Claire and Peter Townsend and Sarah, Samuel and Georgia Paige.

IN MEMORIAM

CHARLES CHRISTOPHER PATTON

1916 - 2008



Charles Christopher Patton, 92, of Springfield died on February 15, 2008, at St. John's Hospice. He was born on January 6, 1916, in Springfield, the son of Charles Lanphier Patton, M.D., and Alice Agee Jess Patton.

Mr. Patton was a graduate of Springfield High School and of the University of Michigan with a Bachelor of Arts in electrical engineering. He served in the U.S. Navy from 1942 to 1946, where he was involved in convoy duty and anti-submarine warfare. He retired from Sangamo Electric Co., where he was an electrical engineer.

He was a member of First Presbyterian Church of Springfield and served on the Boards of the Sangamon County Historical Society and the Abraham Lincoln Association. He was a board member and longest standing member of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation. He was an ardent sailor at Island Bay Yacht Club in Springfield, where he raced and served on the race committee. He was national champion crew on Rebel Class Sailboats many times. He was the compiler of the five-volume manuscript of his grandfather Charles H. Lanphier's letters titled, *Glory to God and the Sucker Democracy*.

He is survived by nephews, James W. Patton III, Thomas D. Patton, Jeffrey N. Patton and Stephen L. Patton, all of Springfield, and Charles L. Patton of Phoenix; nieces, Penelope P. Gordon of Suttons Bay, Michigan, and Ann P. Meyers of McMurray, Pennsylvania; and several great-nieces and -nephews and great-great-nieces and -nephews.

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an Eastern city boy if there ever was one ... born in New Jersey and raised in Baltimore, Maryland. But authors need a side line, and my mother's farm, which she inherited, proved to be the perfect thing. It was a neglected farm, but my dad resurrected it and, in addition to raising crops, he raised hogs and cattle. He, of course, didn't live on the farm and had a tenant farmer who did the work, but he learned the business and bred champion Polled Herefords and Duroc hogs. He traveled to county fairs and cattle shows around Illinois and delighted in the local color he encountered. He was a great mimic and returned from cattle shows with many colorful stories. His mimicry was never done in a malicious way. He was mingling with types of people he had never encountered before and drew great pleasure in the richness of their speech and expressions. After recounting one of his many colorful tales of his experiences at the cattle shows, he would chuckle and say, "I'll bet I was the only Ph.D. sleeping in the barn with the livestock."

Perhaps his love of storytelling was what made him such a good writer. His books have literary as well as historical merit. I look back and remember him writing on a manual typewriter with two fingers and am amazed at the amount of material he produced. My mother and siblings spent our summers in Michigan and he would come up for part of the time. He would ensconce himself in what was originally an ice house and peck away at that typewriter. He had a great work ethic, but always seemed to have time for fun with us and with his many friends.

My dad was a fun and funny man. He was a well known figure around town. One day he was downtown in a building that was about to be torn down. The building had a niche about four stories up and in that niche was a metal reclining deer. "We don't know what to do with that deer," one of the building's owners said. "I'll take it," Daddy said. He didn't think much more about it until one day a truck pulled up to our house. Two men got out, pulled the deer out of the truck bed, plunked it down on our yard, and drove away. My mother was horrified. My dad was ecstatic. He painted the deer brown with a red nose. (I was away at school, so I wasn't there to observe what must have been a scene reminiscent of Jackson Pollack. I never in my life saw him paint anything). He was very proud of that deer and put it in the front yard every Christmas. The finishing touch was Christmas tree lights strung in the deer's antlers. If there was snow on the ground, he delighted in counting the children's footprints around the deer.

When he began to receive nationwide attention and praise, the accolades didn't go to his head or change him. That doesn't mean he wasn't proud of his accomplishments. When he was riding high on the success of *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography*, he was invited to many events and honored by many schools and organizations. We were traveling through the South after he was honored by a group from New Orleans and we stopped at a small motel in a small southern town. Daddy signed the register and then stood back, smiling. I could read his thoughts. "The desk clerk is going to recognize my name." His face visibly fell when the clerk, a young pim-

ply-faced southern boy, handed him the key and told him the room number without any sign of recognition. I had to refrain from giggling

Young southern boys aren't going to put books about Lincoln on the top of their reading list. The next day was a Sunday and we stopped at a store to pick up the *New York Times* to see where he was on the best seller list. When he came out the door, my mother said to us, "The book is off the list." She was right. She could see it in his face. He was always very transparent.

He wasn't a strict father but our love of him and our knowledge that he was totally fair led us to not rebel. He always had our respect. Once, on our way home from eating out, he unexpectedly stopped the car. After a few seconds, he turned the car around and headed back to the restaurant. "I think the waitress undercharged me," he said. He went back inside, found the waitress and reviewed the bill. She, in fact, had undercharged him. Her relief and gratitude were evident. "I would have had to make up the difference myself," she said. When my Dad returned to the car, he obviously felt good and we all learned a valuable lesson.

He taught us other valuable lessons, sometimes by his words and sometimes by his deeds. A proud and happy day for me was when he spoke at my high school graduation. He gave a wonderful speech in which he stated some of his most cherished ideals: hatred of intolerance; love of mankind; passion for learning; equal opportunities for all.

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MOLLY BECKER PRESENTED LOGAN HAY MEDAL



The Logan Hay Medal is the highest honor given by The Abraham Lincoln Association. The award was established in 1967 by the Association and descendants of Logan Hay to honor Logan Hay, a most important leader in the formative years of the Association. The Medal is awarded to individuals in recognition of their noteworthy contributions to the mission of The Abraham Lincoln Association.

At the Association's Lincoln Banquet on February 12th, the Logan Hay Medal was presented to Molly M. Becker. Molly has faithfully served the Association in many ALA leadership positions, including member of the Board of Directors, Vice-President, Chairman of the Membership and Nominating Committees and Co-Chairman of the ALA committee that raised the funds to purchase the furniture for the restored Old State Capitol. Molly's intense interest in Lincoln was sparked by her service in the Junior League of Springfield where she led in the formation of the Springfield Historic Sites Commission, gave tours at New Salem, and spearheaded the first steps in the restoration and preservation of the area that now is the Lincoln Home National Historic Site. Her efforts resulted in the closing of Eighth Street and the moving and preservation of the Corneau House. Molly was Chairman, a Board Member and docent of the Illinois State Museum Society, first manager of the historic Great Western Railway Depot, and Chairman of Sound and Light at the Old State Capital. For over 30 years, she served as a Regent of the Abraham Lincoln Academy. Molly has made noteworthy contributions to the mission of The Abraham Lincoln Association and is a most worthy recipient of the Logan Hay Medal. We thank her for her service.



Brooks Davis presenting the Logan Hay Medal to Molly Becker at the Association's Annual Lincoln Banquet.

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As I said in the beginning of this essay, I cannot compete with the likes of the authors and historians who have eulogized my father, so I will close with some of their eloquent words.

Earl Miers wrote, "There was a simple goodness in Ben, the same simple goodness that was in his hero, and it brought to his *Abraham Lincoln* a success such as few books enjoy."

Carl Sandburg wrote: "Ben Thomas was a great companion. In his talk, in his dealings with man, in his reach of compassion

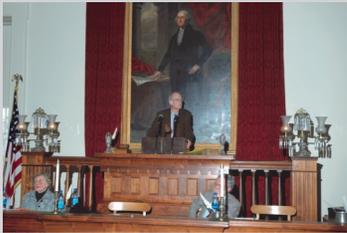
for the less lucky of the Family of Man, he was rare. Now that he is gone, it comes more vividly to some of us how rare indeed he was. Good it is that he wrote great books, and those of us who loved him can see his books moving on for the use of generations to come. They will find Ben Thomas, as we found him, a great companion, a rare teacher, and a lover of mankind."

Paul Angle concluded his memorial essay with: "He had friends everywhere. Everyone liked him – businessmen, cattlemen, historians, writers, publishers. He made no effort to impress or to be ingratiate

ing; he was simply himself--kindly, gentle, humorous, interesting. It was a happy coincidence that on the afternoon we lowered his body into the grave the grass should still be green, the sun warm and golden. The day fitted his nature as the tomb of Lincoln, not far away, stood for his life achievement."

There was much more to this man than I was ever mature enough to appreciate. He died on my 21st birthday. I am proudly aware that he is part of me – both in my DNA and my heart and soul. Sometimes God's greatest gifts are given only briefly, perhaps to make us appreciate more fully what we once had.

2008 ALA SYMPOSIUM



FEBRUARY 12, 2008 ALA BOARD MEETINGS



FEBRUARY 11, 2008 ALA BOARD RECEPTION



Our thanks to Ron Schramm for these photographs of the Association's 2008 Symposium, Board Meetings and Reception. For more pictures, visit our website at www.abrahamlincolnassociation.org.

2008 ALA CENTENNIAL LINCOLN DAY BANQUET



Our thanks to David Blanchette for these photographs of the Association's 2008 Centennial Banquet.

New Members

We welcome our new members.

- Martha H. Boice,
Dayton, Ohio
- Rod Bosley,
Terre Haute, Indiana
- Daniel R. Buck,
Springfield, Illinois
- Edward Carroll,
Normal, Illinois
- Newell L. Chester,
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*DAY BY DAY**CALENDAR OF COMING ALA EVENTS*

| | | |
|---------------------|-----------|--|
| Various Dates, 2008 | | <i>Lincoln Press Conference</i> , Various Locations George Buss, Lincoln impersonator, will field questions from the press. |
| October 10, 2008 | 3:30 | ALA Board of Directors Meeting, Galesburg |
| October 11, 2008 | | <i>Abraham Lincoln Colloquium</i> Knox College, Galesburg |
| February 11, 2009 | 1:00-4:00 | <i>Symposium: Meet the Authors</i> Hall of Representatives, Old State Capitol, Springfield |
| | 7:00 | Entertainment to be announced, Springfield (ALPM Atrium) |
| February 12, 2009 | 10:00 | ALA Board of Directors Meeting Old State Capitol, Springfield |
| | 1:00-4:00 | <i>Symposium: Meet the Authors</i> Hall of Representatives, Old State Capitol, Springfield |
| | 6:00 | <i>Lincoln Day Banquet</i> , 200th Anniversary of Lincoln's Birth Crowne Plaza Hotel, Springfield |

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