

Old Letter Recalls Civil War Fervor

A century old letter written by Ahira R. Hinkley (first settler of the town of Eagle, Wisconsin) and now in the possession of his grand-daughter -in - law, Mrs. Aurel Baker Pardee, of the same place makes the highly emotional and fervidly political atmosphere of April, 1865 come to life.

Hinkley was not a college trained man, but the tone of this letter gives evidence that his basic schooling had been well made. Naturally, after 102 years the ink is faded, but enough is left to disclose a very legible penmanship and a cultured literacy of a person who, knowing a three-syllabled word, had no compunction against using it.

The letter opens with his pleasure at receiving a letter from his son Leonard Hinkley (grand-father of Leonard V. Hinkley, 4366N. 28th St. Milwaukee) then stationed with the Union Army near Nashville, Tenn. Then follows the wild excitement of the people over Lee's surrender only to be plunged into the deep grief at the assassination of President Lincoln. The letter follows:

Eagle, Wis., April 30th, 1865.

My dear Son,

I rec'd your very welcome letter of the 24th inst. last eve and of course was very glad that no accident you

on your way to Nashville . When I last wrote you, the whole people almost were wild with joy at the fall of Richmond & the surrender of Lee's army .

"How very little we knew what was in store for us. Language would fail me to describe the woe depicted on the countenance of every intelligent man and woman through the land and the anguish that rent every loyal heart when the lightning flashed the dreadful news that President Lincoln had fallen at the hands of an assassin . Had the Arch Angel's last trump have sounded to call the nations to judgment , the consternation could hardly have been greater. A deadly pallor rested upon every face. Strong men met, embraced each other , and wept like children, and even many of those who have traduced and villified him and wished him dead a thousand times joined in the sad lament. Now that he has fallen by the foul spirit that has drenched our once happy country in blood, even his enemies are beginning to discover that he was no ordinary man.

" I will attempt no eulogy upon him but this much I will say that I fully believe that he was raised up by God to deliver this land from the curse of human slavery as Moses was to deliver the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage. It seems to me that the visible hand of God can be traced all in this terrible conflict as well in defeat as in final success."

The letter continues:

" Who can tell why General Sherman should make the terrible blunder he has unless it were to show the American people that a man

~~Man~~ may be a very great military general and be entirely unfit for a civil ruler. General Sherman's fame had become very great, so much so that he had already been talked of for the next President but his negotiation with Johnson (Johnston) will forever bar him from the White House, but Noble Grant has set that matter all right and last night we got the glad news that Johnson (Johnston) had surrendered all the rebels east of the Mississippi. So the war is ended, thank the Lord."

This part of the letter piques the present day reader's curiosity. What was Sherman's "terrible blunder"?

Investigation shows that Sherman made no blunder. Previous to the surrender, Lincoln and Sherman met on the River Queen to talk about conditions the Union leaders would submit to the defeated foe. In this conference Lincoln showed his true nature, that of mercifulness and true magnanimity, and when Sherman met Johnston, he gave to him the conditions which his Commander-in-Chief had designated. In the short time which followed this conference, Lincoln had heard the talk of the Radicals about him, the men in office who wanted Confederate officers tried, convicted, hanged for treason and their property confiscated. Lincoln hedged somewhat in his lenient stand but no word of this change in policy was sent to Sherman. Newspapers carried flaming headlines about Sherman's blunder and much derogatory wordage was printed against the truly loyal general. Sec. Stanton accused Sherman of nullifying all the effort of the war, of wanting to push himself into the presidency. Other papers brought forth the former charge of insanity against Sherman, but "Noble Grant set the matter right" by extending the same merciful terms that

Lincoln had formerly divulged on the River Queen.

As the letter continues , the reader can see that there was a wise fatherly relation with his son:

" I can see no good reason why you should be kept in the Service until August. I have strong hope that you will be home in a month and be assured you will receive a cordial welcome. In relation to your voting for McClellan I have only to say that I am very thankful that I have never reproached you with one unkind word for voting as you thought best. I thought very strange of it and felt very bad about it at the time but have acted upon the principle that what could not be cured must be endured. I have always felt confident that upon calm reflection you would see the mistake that was made that when an impartial history of the rebellion and its managers should be written you would fully realize the awful malestrom we avoided by keeping the old pilot at the helm. I have great faith in Andrew Johnson but there is no man living that the people have such implicit confidence in as they did in Mr. Lincoln. Oh, my son, he was a great and a good man."

The letter continues with his characterization of people who "traduced and villified " Lincoln and their change in attitude:

"I have sent you a Daily Wisconsin of the 21st inst. containing lines and speeches on the death of Mr. Lincoln by _____ S. _____ of Milwaukee. I hope you will get the paper & read the speech . You will then discover what beautiful summer-saults a gifted Copperhead can turn".

He then gives his views on suffrage for the negro:

"Your views upon the right of suffrage agree with mine exactly."