

SNG-Land of somebody else-12-31-18

Illinois: Land of somebody else

By Jim Nowlan

I had a dream the other night. Abraham Lincoln was looking down from above, somewhere. Mr. Lincoln had been dismayed by the corruption, governmental dysfunction and relative economic decline he saw in his Illinois.

Yet, now he was even seeing his own good name dragged across the muck of Illinois government, by a ruckus over whether a top hat purchased for \$5+ million by a state-related foundation was actually his. Politicos down here were squabbling over what to do with “his” hat, and of how to pay the debt incurred in purchasing it some years ago.

It was too much. Mr. Lincoln (I won’t use the nickname “Abe,” as he never liked it) sat down at a desk up there. He brushed off a couple of cherubs on his sleeve and penned a letter to Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White: Mr. White, I demand that you change the slogan on your license plates to: “Illinois: Land of Somebody Else.”

Which got me to thinking, as we wrap up our bicentennial year, if Lincoln’s name weren’t on our license plates, who might replace him?

So, off the top of my head, I came up with a short list of possibly worthy candidates. [(Readers are asked to submit their own candidate lists, which I could possibly use as grist for a column later, when I had nothing better to write about, at jnowlan3@gmail.com.)]

Among elected officials of note, I came up with 19th Century governors Edward Coles and Thomas Ford. Coles led a just barely successful fight in 1824 against efforts to enact a pro-

slavery state constitution, which would have wreaked havoc in Illinois and across the Northwest Territories.

In the 1840s, Ford brow-beat a reluctant legislature into increasing taxes sharply to pay off a massive debt incurred earlier by state lawmakers, including Mr. Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas. Prior to Ford's governorship, the legislature had approved grandiose plans for canals, plank roads, railroads and other projects, most of which died aborning, for lack of capital and engineering capacity.

Ford's leadership gave English and Eastern moneyed interests the confidence to invest in Illinois, which soon thereafter became the fastest growing state in the nation.

More recently, we have, of course, Illinoisans Reagan and Obama. I am guessing each alone would receive many votes from readers for the license plate honors, but few would support the idea of both of them on the same plate.

We might deem our state the Land of Innovators, drawing on the examples of John Deere and his revolutionary plow, and Cyrus McCormick and his reaper. What we fail to appreciate as well is that there were scores, maybe hundreds, of other clever tinkerers who invented farm equipment that helped make Illinois and the Midwest the world's breadbasket.

Then there are the more recent Illinois-based scientists who opened up the modern era. Because of my U. of I. ties, illustrations from that university come to mind [(there have been others as well at our other great Illinois research centers at Northwestern, IIT and the University of Chicago)].

John Bardeen was a really rare bird who received *two* Nobel prizes, for inventing the transistor and for his theory of superconductivity. Nicholas Holonyak came up with the light-emitting diode (LED), which has transformed illumination across the world. And with Mosaic, Marc Andreessen paved the way for the world-wide web.

Business transformers include Marshall Field (“Give the lady what she wants”), and Julius Rosenwald, who made Sears into a model of marketing and home delivery that foreshadowed Amazon.

I could go on. Beloved “Mother” Mary Ann Bickerdyke was a national leader of Civil War nurses; she established 300 field hospitals to care for both Union and Confederate wounded. Gen. Sherman observed: “She ranks me.” And Carl Sandburg gave voice to both city and prairie with his poems and history.

My puckish sister chimed in with Al Capone(!), which brings to mind another, more positive icon of Chicago, Michael Jordan, but these are about notoriety and celebrity, not greatness.

And greatness requires something to be great about. Had Lincoln come of age a bit earlier, in the Era of Good Feelings (1812 and on for a while), he might have been simply a good frontier lawyer.

Yet, he matured professionally just as slavery and Union became flashpoints, rising to meet the challenges with epochal greatness, achievement that deserves all the homage and respect we can muster.

So, Mr. Lincoln, I hope Secretary White dismisses your plea. While Illinois has produced many iconic achievers, you are beyond special. Alas, for you, Mr. Lincoln, you are stuck as Illinois' favorite son. And, by the way, Thanks.