

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

DON E. FEHRENBACHER

(1920 - 1997)

Don E. Fehrenbacher, the William R. Coe Professor of History and American Studies emeritus died of heart failure at his campus home on December 13, 1997; he was 77. At the time of his death, Don was one of the nation's two or three distinguished students of Abraham Lincoln and the pre-Civil War era.

Despite Don's origins in northern Illinois -- he was born in the small industrial town of Sterling -- he had little initial interest in Lincoln. But the study of history captured his mind as an undergraduate at Cornell College in nearby Iowa, where he was graduated in 1946 after having served for two years as an Air Force navigator of a 'Flying Fortress' bomber with 30 missions over Germany and occupied Europe, and for which he was decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross Air Medal with three clusters. Later his graduate studies with Avery Craven, a leading scholar of the coming of the Civil War at the University of Chicago, sparked Don's interest in the sectional crisis of the mid-nineteenth century. His 1951 dissertation brought him his first teaching post at Coe College also in Iowa. But that opportunity proved disappointing once it became clear that financial pressures were limiting the liberal arts at the college. Despite Fehrenbacher's eager defense of the liberal arts program at the college, he found himself without a job. Fortunately, a much better chance quickly came his way through his appointment at Stanford's history department in 1953. In 1957 he published his first book, *Chicago Giant; A Biography of "Long John" Wentworth*, a prominent Civil War newspaper editor and one of Chicago's several legendary mayors.

It was at Stanford that Fehrenbacher undertook his monumental dedication to the study of Lincoln and the coming of the Civil War. It began with a steady stream of scholarly articles, culminating in 1962 with the publication of *Prelude to Greatness; Lincoln in the 1850s*, a penetrating study of Lincoln's career and character in the decades preceding his election as president. (Given his deepening involvement with Lincoln and slavery, it was not surprising that Fehrenbacher became a leading supporter of those Stanford students who joined the Mississippi civil rights movement in the summer of 1964.) Don's scholarly involvement in the pre-Civil War years was also deepened by the

death in 1971 of David Potter, his close departmental colleague. During his final illness, Potter had asked Don to complete his magisterial history of the coming of the Civil War. Potter's history, which Fehrenbacher later edited, and for which he wrote the final two chapters, was published in 1976 as *The Impending Crisis*; it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize the next year. Fehrenbacher's collegial generosity was characteristic, as was his later collecting and annotating the finest and fullest two-volume compilation of Lincoln's writings in print. Published by the Library of America, Fehrenbacher's contract left no place for royalties.

Along with his developing interest in Lincoln and the coming of the Civil War, Fehrenbacher began to puzzle over the perplexing issues surrounding the Supreme Court decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857). In that controversial and consequential case, the Court held that African-Americans, free as well as enslaved, had never been citizens of the United States, and that the Missouri Compromise barring slavery in the nation's northern territories was unconstitutional. Every scholar of American history, politics, and law knew that *Dred Scott* was important -- one of the few decisions that even high school students were able to identify. Yet no scholar had as yet attempted to unravel its extraordinarily complex history, or to sift the nuances of the concurring and dissenting opinions the case produced, or to weigh whether and how this decision contributed to the outbreak of civil war only a few years later. All this Fehrenbacher set out to examine with painstaking research, careful arguments, and in lucid prose. The result, in 1978, was the truly profound *Dred Scott Decision; Its Significance in American Law and Politics*. Many books and articles have been written about that landmark decision, but it is safe to say that Fehrenbacher's study remains the benchmark against which all others will long be measured. A model of historical scholarship and craft, it was the well-deserved recipient of the Pulitzer Prize in History for 1979.

From the Sixties onward, Fehrenbacher published and lectured widely, beginning with a *Basic History of California* in 1964. For a number of years, Fehrenbacher had taught courses at Stanford on the history of the American West and of California, along with courses on the antebellum years, the Civil War and Reconstruction. In 1970 he published *Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War, 1840-1861*. He often taught at summer sessions at universities and colleges across the country. Over these same years he was offered invited lectureships in the United States and abroad. In 1967-68 he held the Harmsworth Professorship at Oxford University, and later spent a year lecturing and teaching at the College of William and Mary. Other prestigious invitations, some of which were published, were The Commonwealth Lectures at the University of London,

The Fleming Lectures at Louisiana State University, the Seagram Lectures at the University of Toronto, and the Lamar Lectures at Mercer University. All told his works included more than forty articles, a number of which appeared in his *Lincoln in Text and Context* (1987). Recognition of his scholarship came, too, with several honorary degrees, his membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and with his election as President of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association.

Fehrenbacher's last published work, *Recollected Words of Lincoln*, was a joint enterprise with his wife and long-time collaborator, Virginia Fehrenbacher, which appeared in 1996 after twelve years of interrupted effort. The book evaluated the authenticity of some 1,900 statements about Lincoln by some 500 contemporaries of Lincoln. This substantial book, beautifully produced by Stanford University Press, constitutes an archival contribution of immense value for any student of Lincoln. In recognition of Fehrenbacher's long and intense dedication to Lincoln, Gettysberg College awarded him in 1996 its annual Lincoln Prize of \$50,000. The heart problem that had bedeviled Don's health for almost two years prevented him from traveling to New York to receive the prize, but the College's representative and a donor came to Palo Alto instead to present the prize to him. Bad health, however, could not distract Don from continuing a long-standing project, which he called "The Slaveholding Republic; an Account of the United States Government's Relation to Slavery." The day before Don succumbed to death, he was happily working in his favorite place -- Green Library -- intent upon finishing his nearly completed manuscript. He and Virginia had also been working on a new book about Lincoln.

Despite Don's well-known intensive dedication to scholarly work, he exhibited to friends and family a much more diverse persona. Don was a central figure in the organizing of the frequent post-war reunions of his Eighth Air Force flight crew and their families which they maintained over the years. Don was responsible for selecting the places for their reunions since he could provide a locale and the necessary historical background. Don's years of navigational experience in the Air Force easily led him into a growing interest in astronomy, and then to the use of a sophisticated telescope, which he enjoyed for many years before the bright lights of Palo Alto finally dimmed the planets and stars. Sports were always a part of his life, beginning with a life-long appreciation of the Chicago Cubs which he continued to demonstrate in personally rooting for them when they visited Candlestick Park. His personal sport was golf, which he delighted in playing at local courses here. He much enjoyed lecturing on Stanford steamboat trips on the Delta Queen along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers.

Stanford people still remember Don's notable talk at the Centennial luncheon in 1985, where he accurately portrayed Governor Stanford as a "robber baron" who also pioneered large scale philanthropy, for Stanford's bequest constituted not only the largest single gift in American history up to that time, but also a substantial part of his personal fortune.

In all of these associations, as in his relations with many students, people recalled Fehrenbacher's broad sense of humor, which was sometimes wry, often just witty, and very often dotted with those puns he delighted to create while others just looked at their shoes. His wit was as well-known as his success in his addiction to solving double-acrostics and his pleasure in reading detective novels and hearing and seeing the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan. Above all, Don's pride was his family. He and Virginia regularly brought together their far-flung children, Susan, Ruth, and David, and later their grandchildren, in playful and enjoyable family reunions. Today, one of those eight grandchildren, Karen Koprince, is a first year student at Stanford.

As one of Fehrenbacher's graduate students recently remarked, Don's hallmarks were his scholarly integrity, his utter dependability, and his determination to leave lean as well as true sentences. Yet, as he himself once said, mere facts were never enough. "I would be the first to concede that a novel can be all mixed up about the facts, could rearrange the facts," he once wrote about Gore Vidal's controversial *Lincoln*, "and still somehow capture in a holistic way the true character or the true personality of the individual." Fiction and nonfiction, he continued, "are arbitrary categories. On the one hand, most fiction is written about the real world, that is why so many first novels are quasi-autobiographies. On the other hand, there is a fictional element in all historical narrative, and even in analytical writing there is a point beyond which inference takes on the quality of fiction. Neither the historical Lincoln nor the fictional Lincoln is the totally 'real Lincoln'. Both are constructs of factual materials shaped and cemented with imagination." In short, beyond Don's intensive commitment to history and documentary accuracy, his breadth of understanding brought a perspective on the nature of historical work that only the best of historians achieve.

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Carl N. Degler, Chairman
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