



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

When Herbie Met Mr. Lincoln

The high point of Arthur Harris's life happened when he was ten years old, and at age 89, he wanted his neighbors in Berkeley, California, to know all about it. He posted a sign on his front door declaring himself to be "The man whose hand was grasped by the hand of Abraham Lincoln in the



Abraham Lincoln autograph, with autograph of his Secretary of State, William Seward, from a fragment, perhaps of a diplomatic document. In the Museums' archives.

Senate Chamber of the Ohio State Capitol on Feb. 13, 1861. He will be glad to have you come in and shake hands with him." Whether this invitation found many takers or not, it somehow caught the attention of the Toledo *Blade*, Arthur's home state newspaper. In an interview published on February 29, 1940, he was happy to relive the whole story, even the embarrassing part about his little brother Herbie's gauche behavior.

"It was in Columbus, Ohio, when I was 10 years old," Arthur recalled. "I went with my father and younger brother to the reception for Lincoln at the state capitol. We had to stand in line for hours, but finally arrived before him. My little brother was in front of me and my father behind. Herbie was left-handed, and we all wished afterward that he had thought of this before. The first thing I knew, he was sticking out his left hand. Towering far above him, Lincoln was nowhere within gun shot of his small hand. He had to lean downward almost to the floor to get Herbie's ear and whisper: 'Oh, you'll have to give me the other hand, my boy,' and as Herbie put out his right hand, he said, 'That's right; we've done it right now, haven't we?'"

"I was so ashamed of Herbie's mistake that after Mr. Lincoln had taken my hand, I hurried right on as fast as I ever could, but that one moment and handshake has never faded in my memory."

Arthur clearly was not a master of nuance. Using a "gunshot" metaphor while relating a happy memory about Lincoln is proof of that. More importantly, he seems not to have realized that the awkward, left-handed Herbie is the real star of his story. After all,

Herbie is the one who got Lincoln to bend down to his level, to speak to him, and to show him how to shake hands properly—a lesson that the boy likely never forgot.

The modest, mild-mannered Herbie went in a direction opposite from his brother's. After graduating from Kenyon College, he left Ohio, went east, and dedicated himself to a life of service. His path crossed that of the Beebe family, who brought him to Falmouth. Their patronage and his own gentle temperament assured him of a comfortable life filled with friends and admirers. He never did break his left-handed habit, but his associates tried to accommodate it when they could. Secretary of State Richard Olney, a summer resident of Mill Road, once scrawled him a note, saying, "I am going to the links (Fenno's) this morning about ten. Don't you want to join? I have no left-handed clubs, but can fit you out otherwise with balls or club. I can start at anytime convenient to you—can send the wagon for you, or if you come here on your wheel can take you from here." At age six, Herbie had seen a president-elect bend to his level; as a grown man he had a cabinet secretary seeking his company and arranging his transportation. Of course, by that time nobody called him "Herbie" anymore. He was known as the

Reverend Henry Herbert Smythe, pastor of St. Barnabas Church.

Not being boastful, he never made a fuss about his encounter with Lincoln. His brother, Arthur Harris Smythe, did more to keep the story alive than "Herbie" ever did. But among Rev. Smythe's papers at the Society, mixed in with scores of letters and autographs from local people, is a fragment of a government document bearing Lincoln's signature. We speculate that Smythe either purchased it from a dealer, or was given it by someone who knew of his interest in the president.

Abraham Lincoln had taught him the ritual of extending his hand in friendship. Smythe lived the reality for the rest of his life. His hands, both left and right, were always stretched out to his Falmouth neighbors, either in friendship or in blessing.



Above: Smythe family members at home in Ohio (ca. 1880). Henry Herbert Smythe is standing fourth from left, wearing a flat hat.



Left: The future Rev. Smythe, ca. 1880.

Rev. H. H. Smythe

Meg Costello