

C. Eric Lincoln: 'Without Trinity, I don't exist.'

By Charlotte Fulton
News Courier Reporter

When 4-year-old Charles Eric Lincoln first walked through the doors of Trinity School, no one could have guessed what heights the frightened, barefoot child would reach in his life's work. But his early introduction to music, art and literature, as well as academics, was the beginning of a process that would mold the young man into author, poet, scholar and theologian.

"My first specific memory is of the legendary Ann D. Mitchell, my second grade teacher," Lincoln recalls. "It was in Miss Ann D.'s room that I learned to spell, and I eventually became the best speller at Trinity."

"Part of the ritual of second grade was to line up at 9 a.m., march outside the building, and stand in a row to brush our teeth. We each had a toothbrush and a little collapsible tin cup.

"My most abiding memory is the voice of Miss Inez Higgins Fant. She had a voice that even as a child I loved to hear. We attended chapel each morning, and Miss Inez would lead the singing. I can still hear her singing, 'O rise, shine, for the light is a-comin'. My Lord says He's comin' by and by.' That is the most moving spiritual experience I've had before or since.

"Miss Louise H. Allyn was the principal at Trinity most of the time I was there. She was tall and stately, with iron gray hair, steel blue eyes,



C. Eric Lincoln

"There were several things one must always do, according to my grandmother. One must always be clean, one must always be mannerable, one must always be respectable, and one must always respect others.

"Respect others, and they will respect you,' she always said. 'You may be poor and ragged, but you're as good as anybody, and you'd better act like it.'

"So we were the proudest peeps folks in Athens.

"My grandfather considered himself a farmer. He had three acres and a sick or blind — I forget which — mule."

From age 9 to around 13, Lincoln

had before. It meant a chance to make friends and meet personalities I'd never met before.

"It was a great boon in the sense that I learned about music, art, poetry, and religion — to say nothing of human relationships.

"I can't imagine anything meaningful in my life that didn't somehow have its roots in Trinity, and when Jay Wright came along, that capped off what had been an extraordinary experience.

"Jay Wright was young enough, versatile enough and caring enough to make an impact that only he could have made at that time.

"My grandmother had given me some reason to believe in myself, but the things she said didn't seem real in the world in which we lived.

Trinity Profiles

"When she told me I was as good as anybody else, it seemed like whistling in the graveyard, but when Jay Wright said to me, 'You have a good mind. Why don't you use it?' things looked different. The things my grandmother had always said began to sink in, take on

Wright and went down to Burkhalter's on Washington Street by the bus depot. I bought a pair of orange crepe-soled shoes with absolutely square toes. I do not have small feet, and people tell me I am pigeon-toed.

"I bought a pair of zoot-suit pants, black corduroy with orange squares. I bought a green shirt and a black corduroy cap with orange stripes. Somewhere I found a long chain. It hung from my watch pocket, looped at my knees and came back to my pocket.

"I went to the train station and bought a one-way ticket to Chicago. Then I went home to tell my grandmother that I was leaving.

"She did the necessary praying that night.

"Every night we were required to gather in one room and kneel down while she prayed. We could always tell when she was ready to wind down, because she always ended with this admonition, 'God, these are your children. You made them black. Now you make them beautiful.'

"That was 30 years before the phrase 'black is beautiful' came into use.

"The next morning my grandmother got up and fried a chicken and baked a couple of sweet potatoes and a chocolate cake with half-inch icing on it. She packed them in a shoebox.

Next year, Lincoln plans to take a year's leave of absence from his position as Professor of Religion and Culture at Duke University. He will go to Clark University in Worcester, Mass., as a visiting professor, and he will begin research on the prominent families — white and black — of Athens for a book of

historical fiction that will profile Athens through its families.

He plans also to begin a work of fiction that will be a continuation of "Clayton City."

Lincoln and a colleague also have plans to write a book on the current impact of Islam in the United States.



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"Miss Louise H. Allyn was the principal at Trinity most of the time I was there. She was tall and stately, with iron gray hair, steel blue eyes, and a Roman nose. As a young woman, she visited Switzerland and broke her hip skiing. After that, she always walked with a cane, but boy, could she move with that cane!

"She was a Congregational missionary who spent 30 years of her life in Athens as principal of Trinity School, and she was the first person I had ever known who was an effective professional reader.

"She read great literature and poetry — Browning, Shelley — to us in a way no one else could possibly replicate. She had an extraordinary command of the language and could use alliteration in such a way that you could almost see what she was reading about.

"She had a huge brass-and-mahogany wind-up phonograph and black wax records of all the great operas and symphonies. In music appreciation class, we got to listen to those, and I came to have a distinctive and lifelong love of music.

"I know all the plots of the operas and the movements of most of the symphonies.

"Miss Allyn initiated this love of music, and Mary Lou Wright (wife of principal J.T. Wright, who succeeded Miss Allyn) refined it.

"Miss Allyn had two methods of punishment — and I should know! She would have you memorize several verses of scripture — or a whole chapter if you were really bad. And she had a strap. It was of leather, with two or three

"So we were the proudest pe' folks in Athens.

"My grandfather considered himself a farmer. He had three acres and a sick or blind — I forget which — mule."

From age 9 to around 13, Lincoln would get up each day at 4 a.m. and walk into Athens to bottle milk at the Martin Dairy. Then he and Mr. Martin would climb into an old Ford car and drive around town making deliveries. After that task was complete, Lincoln still faced a full school day.

In what little free time there was between school, his job at the dairy, and chores at home, Lincoln and three friends — Charles Mason, James Baugh and Charles Tisdale — started an informal "poet's society" to read and discuss their own poetry.

As a side note, Lincoln told what became of the members of that young literary group.

Mason earned an M.A. in English at the University of Illinois, taught English at Florida A&M in Tallahassee, and had begun work toward a doctorate when he died.

Baugh entered law school in Missouri but changed to the study of psychiatric social work at Atlanta University. He is on the staff at MeHarry Medical College in Nashville, and he still writes poetry.

Charles Tisdale is editor and publisher of the *Jackson Advocate* in Jackson, Miss.

"It is impossible to adequately describe what Trinity means to me," says Lincoln. "It means everything. Without Trinity I don't exist.

"Going to school at Trinity meant that I got a very good edu-

"When she told me I was as good as anybody else, it seemed like whistling in the graveyard, but when Jay Wright said to me, "You have a good mind. Why don't you use it?" things looked different. The things my grandmother had always said began to sink in, take on credence."

When Lincoln graduated in 1941, the Wrights took him and Charles Mason on a cross-country trip to

Yellowstone Park and other points west. At the end of that sightseeing excursion, Lincoln came back to Athens to make some life decisions.

When Wright found out that Lincoln planned to go to Rockford, Ill., to work in his uncle's 'automobile laundry,' he planted the suggestion that Lincoln stop by the University of Chicago and check it out. That seed took fruition, and Lincoln continued the academic career that would eventually land him at Duke University in North Carolina, where he is a professor of African-American culture.

Lincoln recounts his Athens leave-taking:

"I borrowed \$50 from Jay

into use.

"The next morning my grandmother got up and fried a chicken and baked a couple of sweet potatoes and a chocolate cake with half-inch icing on it. She packed them in a shoebox.

"I gathered up my little Bible that I had gotten for reciting scripture for Miss Allyn, tucked the shoebox under my arm, and picked up my paper suitcase.

"That's how I left Athens."

EDITOR'S NOTE: After graduation from Trinity at the age of 14, C. Eric Lincoln went on to earn degrees from LeMoyne College, Fisk University, the University of Chicago and Boston University.

He is the author of "My Face is Black," "The Black Muslims in America," "This Road Since Freedom," and "The Black Church in the African-American Experience."

His novel, "The Avenue, Clayton City" draws heavily on Lincoln's Athens childhood and on visits to small towns across the South as business manager of the Birmingham Black Barons.



Lincoln during Trinity school days

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"She'd hit you only on the hand, and we'd stand, palms upward, and devise ways to move our hands just so to make it hurt less."

Lincoln fondly recalls Clifton H. Dyson, a black chemistry teacher from Lake Charles, Louisiana. He describes Dyson as a tall, handsome, impeccably dressed man with a beautiful baritone voice. In college, he had sung with the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

Lincoln became Dyson's protege, and Dyson's well-to-do brother-in-law in New York began to send his used suits and coats to Lincoln.

Like most of the students who attended Trinity in those early years, Lincoln came from an impoverished background.

"I knew what it was like to be hungry," he says, "and more particularly, to need clothes. Unless I was able to get someone's cast-offs, I was always patched and ragged — but always clean. My grandmother (Mattie Lincoln) made a fetish of cleanliness.

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It is impossible to accurately describe what Trinity means to me," says Lincoln. "It means everything. Without Trinity I don't exist.

"Going to school at Trinity meant that I got a very good education — probably better than I would have gotten anywhere else, but it also meant that I gained insight into the world that I'd never

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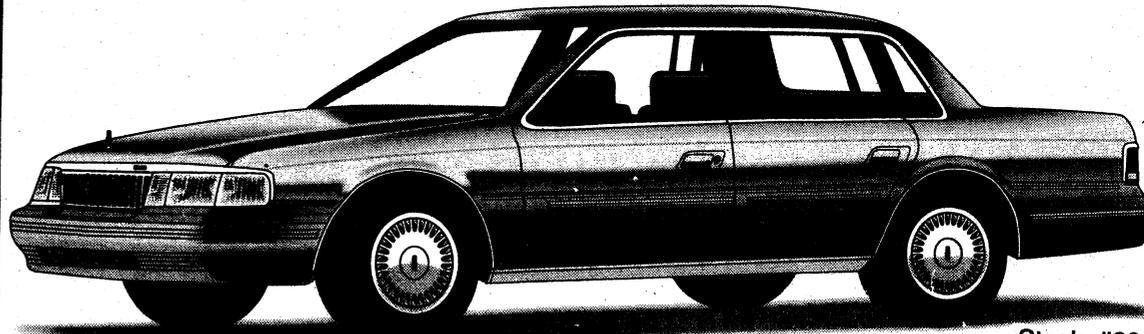
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