

A labor of love

Artist Vinnie Ream's life-long ambition was to sculpt President Abraham Lincoln

By **Betty Ann Newby**

The Longmont Museum

What was it that so endeared Abraham Lincoln to his countrymen — even to this day?

He, the gaunt, towering man in dusty plowman's boots, frock coat frayed at the edges; he with the hollow cheeks, the sad, yet kindly eyes, the deeply lined face ready to crinkle into a hearty laugh.

To one Miss Vinnie Ream, busily engaged in faithfully capturing the subtleties of those features, "I was modeling him in clay, but all the time his personality was sinking deeper into my soul, being engraved deeply upon my heart."

What was it about Lincoln's spirit that plucks the heart strings so tenderly — to this day? A compassion for the suffering, be they rebel or compatriot, bearing the burden of the horrible sacrifices made on the battle fields.

From her sculptor's work-place tucked in the corner of his office, where the President allowed Vinnie Ream to work while he took brief rests during his grueling 18-hour days, she observed, "I think he follows (the battles) in his mind, feeling that all the deaths should be laid at his door."

To the chagrin of his secretary, John Hay, who tried to shield him, Lincoln allowed his rest periods to be interrupted by relatives of soldiers or staff members, saying, "They don't want much; they get but little and I must see them."

Vinnie, herself was one of those, seeking word of her brother Bob who had joined Woodruff's Artillery while their father, Robert Ream, was doing government survey work in Arkansas, just prior to moving to the Capitol.

What was it about Lincoln's life that so inspired others — to this day?

Rising from a simple upbringing, a determination that did not quit, he had educated himself and overcome failure; his lonely stand for a high purpose against opposition from all sides, now had victory in sight, this spring of 1865.

Eighteen-year-old Vinnie Ream was also born in a log cabin in 1847, out west in Madison, Wis. Her craft was largely self-taught, and, like Lincoln, was filled with a vision to "do some special work in the world."

On the Ream family's arrival in Washington, D.C., in 1862, at 15, Vinnie continued telling her mother, "I don't know what it is but I must be ready when it comes." She too, would have to withstand opposition in order to "do something really worthwhile."

Soon after the family's arrival in the Capitol, Vinnie Ream chanced to meet Columbia, Mo., friend Major James Rollins. Christian College of that city, where she had been somewhat of a prodigy in music and art desired a memento of her. She soon found her-

self in the sculpture studio of Clark Mills in the lower level of the Capitol building.

As he began the piece, she blurted out, "I can do that, I would show you if I could get my hands on some of that clay." He tossed the brash young lady a wad of clay which she quickly turned into an Indian Chief, feathers and all. Major Rollins proudly kept the chief for his desk.

Mills recognized her talent, asking her to become a student-assistant and she quickly progressed to making busts and medallions of Washington figures. Then came an order for a bust, a subject to be of her own choosing. Vinnie's burning desire was to do Lincoln, as seen in today's photo.

In order to sketch him, she began to join the crowd which sought to have a word with the president as he attempted to move through the corridor from his office



Vinnie Ream



VINNIE REAM was the first woman and the youngest artist to ever receive a commission from Congress for a statue; the tragic true-to-life marble figure of Abraham Lincoln that stands in the U.S. Capitol rotunda. The work and its artist generated a storm of controversy.

to private quarters for lunch each day. Noticing her frequent attendance, sketch pad in hand, he paused in front of her, "Well, young lady, what is it that brings you here?"

"I'm a sculptor, my name is Vinnie Ream — I've come here to ..." Lincoln was convulsed in laughter, "You're a what?"

Then, calmly he said, "I remember now, ... You were here asking to see your rebel relative. Why, we are old friends. So you're the western sculptor, ... follow me."

This encounter with the president led to permission to work on the clay model in Lincoln's office while he was at leisure. In March 1865, he looking at her work, "You are fulfilling your wish. I can see that your likeness is true, I congratulate you that it is nearly finished."

Read Vinnie's amazing life story in full, including today's notes from her own pen in ["**Labor of Love**"] written by descendant [**Glenn V. Sherwood**] of Longmont. Now at Longmont Public Library, and [**SunShine Publications, Hygiene**].