In photographs, it is said, the dead laugh and wave at us. In this rare image, however, a stiff and serious young man stares at us. He holds a long-handled torch with a flag attached, its faint letters arching through the stripes. As indicated by his uniform and flag, this anonymous young man was one of several thousand across the nation who, with great enthusiasm, joined with brigades of other men called “Wide Awakes,” to support Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln in the volatile presidential campaign of 1860.

Perhaps the young man’s expression indicates the seriousness of that election: a civil war and the dissolution of a nation lay ahead. Or perhaps his serious look was part of holding still long enough for this “ambrotype” to be properly exposed directly on glass. The glass was then backed with dark cloth, paper, paint, or varnish, much like a mirror. As the 1860 campaign ended, so did the use of the heavy, fragile ambrotypes, passed over for cheaper and less fragile alternatives of tintypes (images on sheet metal) and prints from glass plate negatives, which were also developed in that decade.

Although there is little information regarding this young man (the ambrotype was found in 1964 in Green Lane, Pennsylvania), the picture itself provides some clues. We know, for instance, that torchlight parades were a common feature of American political campaigns for most of the 19th century and that the American flag attached to this man’s torch pole was obviously a campaign sign. That it was promoting Abraham Lincoln and his vice-presidential running mate, Hannibal Hamlin, dates it precisely to the 1860 election. That the sign also promotes “Congressman S. R. Curtis” on the bottom line places it in the southeast congressional district of Iowa. In 1860, Congressman Samuel Ryan Curtis was running for his third term out of Keokuk. The young man in the ambrotype, therefore, was probably an Iowa Wide Awake from the Keokuk area.

But not necessarily. The marching clubs known as Wide Awakes were not a uniquely Iowa phenomenon. The Wide Awakes originated in Hartford, Connecticut. There, ardent young Republican men had gathered to escort Cassius Clay, the famous southern abolitionist, to a lecture hall on February 25, 1860. The young men formed a torchlight parade, and to protect their clothing from the dripping oil lamps, they wore caps and capes of glazed cloth. Returning from the hall that night, one of the young men was attacked by a sturdy and determined Democrat, but a blow from a Republican’s oil lamp stretched the assailant out on the ground.

Resolved to combat Democratic interference in their rallies, the 36 Hartford men met on March 3 and organized the original Wide Awake club. They adopted a glazed-cloth cape and cap, along with an oil torch, as their standard uniform. Two days later, they escorted Abraham Lincoln to the Hartford City Hall. Initially, membership was limited to 50 men, but the Hartford group proved so popular that it would eventually boast a membership of more than 500.

The idea spread quickly in 1860, and the Hartford group soon received requests for information. Uniforms of oilcloth capes and caps and torches began selling on the market for about a dollar. By summer many Wide Awake clubs were being formed in the North and Midwest; perhaps as many as 200,000 to 400,000 men became Wide Awakes.

The original group served as the model, and a system of ranks and officers became features of a well-run Wide Awake local. Men with military experience often joined the Wide Awakes, and, as a
result, many clubs were quickly drilled into smart, well-ordered units, marching with all the fanfare and discipline of a military brigade. They would march, sometimes in a zig-zag formation to imitate a split rail fence in honor of Lincoln, and sing specially written campaign songs such as “Lincoln, Pride of the Nation,” “The Red, White, and Blue,” and “Honest Abe of the West” (sung to the tune of “The Star-Spangled Banner”).

Wide Awakes were usually committed volunteers, although sometimes men for hire were paid as much as $2 to march. They would gather in large numbers—20,000 at an October rally in New York, for example—and carry lanterns or torches atop wooden stakes (sometimes split rails) bearing small American flags. The flags were generally inscribed with the names of Lincoln and Hamlin, and often a local candidate’s name as well.

With this Wide Awake fever spreading west, Iowa was not to be left out. Reportedly the first Wide Awake club in Iowa was a Fairfield group, organized in June 1860 by, among other prominent citizens, state senator and future congressman James F. Wilson. The Fairfield Wide Awakes’ purpose, as stated in their constitution, was “supporting the Republican causes and aiding in the election of the Republican ticket, State as well as National.” “All young men who are willing to endorse the sentiments of the Republican party . . . and abide by the [Wide Awake] rules and regulations” were invited to join. These rules included holding “himself in readiness to take part in torch-light processions during the Presidential campaign, to perform escort duty, to attend the night meetings and grand rallies of the party, and to act as a Vigilance Committee on election day.”

In Fairfield, every member was to pay a $2 uniform fee or “provide himself with a uniform, consisting of a cap, cloak and torch.” According to the Fairfield Ledger, the group numbered at least 60 by mid-June. On the 15th they held their first torchlight procession through Fairfield, both “for their own amusement, and for the purposes of seeing how their uniform suited.” (The group had ordered 20 uniforms from Chicago but soon opted for cheaper, better-quality uniforms made locally.)

The procession ended in the Fairfield park, where local co-founder James Wilson urged his group “to be ever on watch, and guard the purity of the ballot-box with unceasing vigilance.” Another speaker assured the torch-bearing Wide Awakes that they were indeed “well prepared to meet the enemy” because they could “light the enemy out . . . [or] burn them out . . . [or] smoke them out.”

In the strident party loyalty of mid-century, the “enemy” was clearly the political opposition and its citizen support. Throughout the nation, Lincoln’s opponents had their own marching groups, for this was also the heyday of political parades. The “Minute Men” and “Little Giants” supported Democratic candidate Stephen Douglas of Illinois, Lincoln’s primary foe. One Douglas group, called the “Chloroformers,” was said to be dedicated to putting the Wide Awakes to sleep. The remnants of the old Whig Party in coalition with the American Party (or “Know Nothings”) organized the “Bell Ringers Union-Sentinels” and “Bell Followers” to support John Bell of Tennessee. (Ironically, the Know Nothings had used the term “Wide Awake” in 1855 in their nativist propaganda.) The secessionist Democrat John Breckinridge of Kentucky had the “National Democratic Volunteers.”

In the political give-and-take, sneering Democrats spoke of a sinister purpose behind the Wide Awakes; others called them “unmitigated nuisances,” comparing them with the tough gangs of the

day; and jokesters referred to them as the "Sleep Walkers" and the "Fast Asleeps." But the Republicans sneered back. In Iowa, for example, Fairfield Ledger editor (and charter member of the local Wide Awakes) W. W. Junkin ridiculed the local Democrats' "True Blues" and their comparatively pathetic parade in early October, in which only half of the 23 True Blues wore uniforms: "They marched around the Park, without their red lights," Junkin noted, "and had a glorious time in the dark."

Throughout the campaign, Junkin's Fairfield Ledger would keep his readers well informed about the campaign—from where they could buy Lincoln-Hamlin flags (in his office), to where Wide Awake companies had last paraded with their torchlights. In Iowa's 11 southeastern counties alone, more than 34 communities organized Wide Awake clubs—from South English to Montrose, Muscatine to Bloomfield. Ledger accounts, along with those in Keokuk's Des Moines Valley Whig, reflect all the political rhetoric and journalistic exaggeration standard to newspapers then, but they also document campaign styles typical of the mid-19th century—including the popularity of the Wide Awakes in the 1860 election. At three large rallies in particular—in Washington, Keokuk, and Fairfield—Wide Awake companies gathered to light their torches and fuel Iowa's political passions.

"Grand Times at Washington!"

On September 20, Washington, Iowa, hosted what local papers described as the largest public assembly in the community's two-decade history. The Fairfield Ledger headlines were giddy: "The Prairies A-Blaze! Grand times at Washington! 10,000 people in council! 800 Wide Awakes in procession! Keep the ball rolling!"

That 10,000 people attended a rally in a town of 2,600 is hardly credible; 19th-century editors no doubt exaggerated such estimates to imply their candidates' strength and to build bandwagon momentum. In Washington that day, the afternoon stump speeches by prominent public figures would also have built a candidate's momentum, as did the evening torchlight parade. As sky rockets and Roman candles sizzled overhead, more than a dozen Wide Awake companies marched past blazing bonfires and Washington homes "illuminated in honor of the occasion."

Earlier that day, the Fairfield Wide Awakes had led a procession of a hundred wagons into Washington, "where we saw delegations coming from all directions. The ground appeared to be covered with people," the Ledger reported. "One wagon attracted great attention. . . . Behind the wagon were chained one yoke of the poorest oxen we ever saw. A board was fastened on their horns labeled 'Poor Kansas'"—a reference to the violent conflicts Kansas Territory was weathering over its admission to the Union as a slave or free state.

"On some of the wagons were men busily engaged in carrying on the various trades, blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors coopers, &c.; others were thrashing, mauling rails, &c." the Ledger reported. "On [another] wagon were women busily at work, ironing, washing. . . knitting, sewing, darning, churning." These wagons of ordinary people engaged in productive and useful work echoed the "common man" theme used by Lincoln and other politicians in the 19th century.

They also echoed an incident the previous summer in Republican Samuel Kirkwood's campaign for Iowa governor, in which Republicans capitalized on portraying him as a man of the people. As Edgar Harlan recounted in his
Narrative History of the People of
Iowa, “A Democratic editor [had]
referred to the Republican ticket as
the ‘Plough-handle ticket,’ an epi­
thet intended to cast opprobrium,
but instead was accepted by the
Republicans as a campaign slogan.

. . . [At the last joint debate at
Washington] again the Republi­
cans found a way to emphasize the
contrast between their candidate
[Kirkwood] as a man of the people
and [Augustus C.] Dodge as a man
of aristocratic associations. The lo­
cal Democratic committee brought
Dodge into town riding in the best
 carriage that could be found . . .
but the crowd had already ex­
hausted their enthusiasm in cheer­
ing the appearance of Kirkwood
riding to the scene of the meeting
on a hayrack drawn by a team of
oxen.”

“Great Day
for Keokuk!”

The weather was beautiful and
clear when, at an early hour, “wag­
on by the hundred and people by
the thousand” converged on Keo­
kuk for a rally October 14. The Des
Moines Valley Whig reported that
many of the day’s events were de­
layed because of the crowds. The
train bringing Wide Awakes and
their supporters from Fort Madi­
son was late. “Running as fast as
the wind would permit,” the two
ferries across the Mississippi into
Keokuk could not keep up with
the demand. Standing out from the
throng were a reported
2,500 ardent Wide Awakes,
at least 22 companies from
the surrounding area, a
third of them from Illinois.

As a high wind kicked
up clouds of dust on the
streets, “the companies
marched up Main street,”
the Whig reported. “The
Ft. Madison Wide Awakes
attracted particular atten­
tion. But even they were
eclipsed by the beautiful
company of handsome
young ladies from Den­
mark [in Lee County] re­
presenting the States of the
Union . . . with the
wreaths on their heads
and the neat little banners
in their hands. . . . One
young lady was dressed in
black, for Kansas, but her
banner had the cheering
inscription—‘I am com­
ing.’”

The Des Moines Valley Whig
rhapsodized over “the thrilling
music of many bands, the firing of
cannon, the glitter of twenty-five
hundred lamps in the sun-light,
the waving of innumerable ban­
ers and transparencies, and the
gorgeously fitted up cars filled
with beautiful young ladies.”
Heading for a gala picnic and
stump speeches, the procession
marched at noon to a nearby
grove. There, perhaps the most ex­
citing speech for those intent on a
national sweep was the “glorious
news from Pennsylvania, Ohio,
and Indiana” of Republican guber­
natorial victories at state elections
already held.

The high wind had been
drowning out many of the speak­
ers, and when a 4 p.m. call came
for the Wide Awakes to assemble
and march back to town for dinner,
the “vast throng” deserted the
grove. Having missed a noon
meal, many were more eager to eat
than to hear the next speech.

With stomachs full and dark­
ness at hand, the Wide Awake
companies assembled and strutted
about in all their well-drilled fash­
ion, vying for prizes. Fort Mad­
ison’s Wide Awakes won a banner
bearing a life-size likeness of Lin­
coln; the banner for the largest
company went to Wide Awakes
from Fountain Green, Illinois.

“Main street was made brilliant by
the torch lights of the various com­
panies and by abundant fire­
works,” the Whig stated. Although
“the high wind blew out many
lights and the dust flew uncom­
fortably, yet the pavements were
lined with spectators all the
evening.”

“Greatest Meeting
in Iowa!”

The headline “Ain’t You Glad You
Joined the Republicans!” on the
front page of the October 19
Fairfield Ledger set the self-con­
gratulatory mood following Fair­
field’s rally October 17. The Ledger brazenly claimed 25,000 in attendance at Fairfield (its own population only 1,700): “Even our Douglas friends are willing to concede that we had 15,000.”

Regardless of the actual numbers, the rally included similar features of previous rallies. Companies of Wide Awakes and other citizen groups arrived by wagon or train. A large wagon with men “engaged in various branches of trade—blacksmithing, carpentering, broom making, sugar making” was again in the procession. Wapello County sent a surprise: “When [the Wide Awakes from Agency City] had formed in process, the Ledger reported, “we discovered a company of lady Wide Awakes, numbering sixty-two. They were dressed in white, with a blue sash around the waist. Each lady wore a jaunty cap, trimmed with ribbon. Each member also carried a pole with a spear on the end of it, and a flag on the pole with the names of Lincoln and Hamlin.”

The daytime parade through Fairfield featured banners and effigies, several championing Lincoln at the expense of Stephen Douglas. “On one banner was a horn,” the Ledger described, “at one end of which was ‘Old Abe’ with a long rail, punching in the horn, while at the little end of the horn was the head of Douglas, just coming out.”

On a Douglas effigy, signs bore the words “I don’t care whether slavery is voted up or voted down,” and “I’ve found my Mother, if you don’t believe it look at my boots.” The boots, the Ledger explained, were in “a very dilapidated and much abused condition.”

That last political jibe would be unintelligible to anyone who did not know that Douglas, in this campaign, had broken a long-standing taboo—he campaigned for himself and gave his own stump speeches. According to historian Gil Troy, “Originally, presidential candidates were supposed to ‘stand’ for election, not ‘run.’ They did not make speeches. They did not shake hands. They did nothing to betray the slightest ambition for office.” Candidates were supposed to stay on their farms in dignified silence, awaiting the people’s call, as George Washington had done.”

Times were changing, however, and voters were becoming more insistent in their demands that presidential candidates discuss the important issues. Douglas, the most famous orator of his day and genuinely concerned about the country’s future, broke with tradition and hit the campaign trail. But he did it surreptitiously, claiming that he was on his way to visit his mother—hence, the worn-out boots and the ridiculed claim. Douglas had made himself a laughingstock and, according to Troy, “By September, Douglas had yet to visit his mother. His opponents circulated an ADVERTISEMENT FOR A LOST BOY’ wandering in the Northeast, with a penchant for clambakes.”

Fairfield’s effigy on October 17 (Douglas had decided to actually visit his mother on September 15) was simply a variation on a national joke.

The Fairfield rally followed the usual pattern of parade and political speeches, the speakers’ voices carrying well in the clear, warm air. That night, “over 2200 torches were on fire around the Park, presenting a magnificent spectacle.... In every direction could be seen flaming lights. The whole procession reached about one and a half miles around town, and the streets of living flame presented the most imposing exhibition that our citizens ever saw in this place.”

At 9 p.m. the procession escorted the Wide Awakes to the trains; other Wide Awakes “were divided into squads by our citizens” who hosted them overnight. “Party prejudices were forgotten,”
the Ledger reported. “The commit-
tee to procure accommodation felt
da diffidence in asking Democrats
take and feed the Wide Awakes,
but on that day they came forward
and nobly assisted the Republi-
cans.”

Some Wide Awakes danced
until daylight to the Fairfield
String Band in Wells’ Hall. Even in
the morning the Wide Awakes
were reluctant to end the political
good times. Heading home in their
wagons, they turned around and
came back to Fairfield. “They felt
so good that they could not leave,”
reported the Ledger. “Old men and
young men were going round
shaking hands, embracing each
other and declaring that they
never felt so good in all their
lives.”

The good feelings apparently
continued. On November 2, four
days before the national election,
Captain R. L. Miller of Keosauqua
publicly thanked the Wide Awakes
and other Republicans of Fairfield
for their hospitality: “May the Re-
publican camp-fires which you
have lighted burn brighter and
brighter until the light thereof
shall break in upon the dark and
dimmed vision of every Democrat.
... May the Republican Thunder...
roll on and on thick and fast until
the 6th of November, with OLD
ABE in the Presidential chair, and
may it roll, roll, roll for ever... .
Hurrah for Lincoln, Hamlin,
Curtis, Free Speech, Free Homes,
Free Labor, and the Union For-
ever!”

After the election on Novem-
ber 6, the various Wide Awake
companies in southeastern Iowa
were no doubt jubilant that their
torchlight parades had contributed
to this “Republican Thunder” roll-
ing Lincoln—and Keokuk’s S. R.
Curtis—into office. Since July, the
Fairfield Wide Awakes alone had
logged 237 miles, mostly by
wagon, to attend nine meetings
outside their community. They
had held a dozen torchlight pa-
rades in Fairfield, met 22 times for
drill and business, spent $164.50
for “regalia,” and burned 60 gal-
lons of kerosene or coal oil. “And
certainly,” the Ledger added proud-
ly in its November 24 wrap-up re-
port, “no company in the State had
better music.”

“Each Wide Awake should
carefully lay aside his torch and
cape as fit and honorable memori-
als of some service rendered his
country,” the Fairfield report ad-
vised. “Though we shall not con-
sider ourselves formally dis-
banding until after ‘Old Abe’ is [af-
affirmed by the Electoral College
and] in the Presidential Chair, we
have probably had our last parade.
... It is pleasing to know that we
have closed the campaign so tri-
umphantly, but we cannot refrain
from feeling some little regrets at
parting.”

Torchlight processions, patri-
otic songs, and stump speeches
would continue to characterize
American political campaigns
through much of the 19th century.
But the Wide Awake marching
clubs were unique to Lincoln’s
1860 campaign. The writer of the
Fairfield report probably spoke for
thousands of Wide Awakes in
“feeling some little regrets at part-
ing,” for certainly exuberant politi-
cal rallies of 1860 fed Americans’
appetite for entertainment and ca-
maraderie as much as it fed their
passion for politicking.

Collectors and experts on early Ameri-
can photography, authors Floyd and
Marion Rinhart have lectured and writ-
ten extensively on the topic.

NOTE ON SOURCES
Sources used for the Wide Awakes and
the 1860 campaign include Melvin L.
Hayes, Mr. Lincoln Runs for President
(1960); J. G. Holland, Life of Abraham Lin-
coln (1866); Reinhard H. Luthin, The First
Lincoln Campaign (1944); Gerald R.
McMurtry, “The Wide Awakes and Their
Torch Light Parades,” Lincoln Lore, Bul-
letin of the Lincoln National Life Foun-
dation #1572 (Feb. 1969), 3-4; Edward A.
Rushford, “Electioneering Without Elec-
tricity,” Antiques (Nov. 1939), 236-39;
Harper’s Weekly (Oct. 13, 1860); and Gil
Troy, See How They Ran: The Changing Role
of the Presidential Candidate (1991). Iowa
sources include O. A. Garretson, “A Lin-
coln Pole Raising,” Palimpsest (April
1925); Edgar Rubey Harlan, A Narrative
History of the People of Iowa (1931), 1:409;
Susan Welsy, A Fair Field (1968); and the
Des Moines Valley Whig and The Fairfield
Ledger, June-Nov. 1860. Lisa Moran,
Stephanie Coon, and Jacqueline Smetak
researched Iowa sources. Annotations are
in the Iowa Heritage Illustrated production
files.