By Russ Pankonin, The Imperial Republican Co-Publisher

Saturday night, I found a new sense of appreciation for the word “freedom” and the savage cost of war through the production of “Civil War Voices.”

During our National Newspaper trip to Asia 15 months ago, we became very good friends with Lincolnites Jim and Vicki Harris. Jim, who grew up in McCook, is an attorney in Lincoln and Vicki, a former Miss Nebraska, is a gifted musician who runs her own music teaching center in Lincoln.

Jim told me about his strong family ties to Alabama, where his family had farmed for generations.

But unbeknownst to me was Jim’s keen interest in the Civil War and his family’s involvement in the war. About 20 years ago, they found a diary of his great-great uncle Joe Harris, written from 1860-1865.

 Jim often gives talks on the diary and it has only further developed his pursuit of Civil War history.

 Also unbeknownst to me was that on the 15-hour flight to Asia, Harris was reviewing the script of a play he’d written, called “Civil War Voices.”

 The play was based on first hand accounts of the war through the eyes of his great-great uncle, an Alabama plantation owner, a Confederate Army officer and his wife from Texas, a Union Army officer, and a slave who later became a personal confidant of Mrs. Abraham Lincoln.

The play incorporated music from the Civil War era, including such notables as “Dixie,” “The Yellow Rose of Texas,” “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and “Johnny Comes Marching Home.”

After appearing at the Lied Theater earlier this month, Harris brought the production back to his hometown of McCook for a performance at the grand ol’ Fox Theater.

The story was compelling and moving. It reminded those present of the heavy cost our country paid during the Civil War, and of the lives of slaves who were considered merely a commodity for trade.

In the Civil War, 620,000 Americans on both sides died as a result of the war—more than all the nation’s other wars from the Revolution to VietNam combined.

At the end of the Civil War 20 percent of men under the age of 25 had died in the conflict. The South was ruined, leading to an era of great reconstruction.

Slave Elizabeth Keckley was an accomplished seamstress and after working for her master for many years, was able to buy freedom for herself and her child for $1,200. That $1,200 came from white women for whom she made dresses.

Finally, she owned her freedom and moved to Washington D.C., where she became the dress maker for Mary Todd Lincoln.

It was indeed a time of national trial and took a toll on our great president, Abraham Lincoln, who was assassinated just five days after the war finally ended.

Today, we have lost that meaning of what true freedom really means.

The Civil War brought forth freedom for a nation of African-American slaves. The freedom for blacks hasn’t come easy in recent generations, either. But over the years, our country has matured, as is evidenced by the election of our first president with African decent.

In the depth of the current economic crisis, we can learn from our experiences of the past that once again, this great nation will prevail.