

Lincoln's Personal Life

By

Nathaniel Wright Stephenson

[Web-Books.Com](http://www.Web-Books.Com)

Lincoln's Personal Life

Foundations	3
The Child Of The Forest.....	3
The Mysterious Youth.....	8
A Village Leader.....	12
Revelations.....	17
Prosperity.....	24
Unsatisfying Recognition.....	28
Promises	31
The Second Start.....	31
A Return To Politics.....	36
The Literary Statesman.....	41
The Dark Horse.....	46
Secession.....	49
The Crisis.....	54
Eclipse.....	58
Confusions	62
The Strange New Man.....	62
President And Premier.....	69
"On To Richmond!".....	83
Defining The Issue.....	87
The Jacobin Club.....	93
The Jacobins Become Inquisitors.....	99
Is Congress The President's Master?.....	105
The Struggle To Control The Army.....	110
Lincoln Emerges.....	121
Audacities	128
The Mystical Statesman.....	128
Gambling In Generals.....	132
A War Behind The Scenes.....	138
The Dictator, The Marplot And The Little Men.....	146
The Tribune Of The People.....	154
Apparent Ascendency.....	163
Catastrophe.....	166
The President Versus The Vindictives.....	172
Victory	175
A Menacing Pause.....	175
The August Conspiracy.....	183
The Rally To The President.....	188
"Father Abraham".....	193
The Master Of The Moment.....	196
Preparing A Different War.....	202
Fate Interposes.....	206
BIBLIOGRAPHY	209
Notes	216

Foundations

The Child Of The Forest

Of first importance in the making of the American people is that great forest which once extended its mysterious labyrinth from tide-water to the prairies when the earliest colonists entered warily its sea-worn edges a portion of the European race came again under a spell it had forgotten centuries before, the spell of that untamed nature which created primitive man. All the dim memories that lay deep in subconsciousness; all the vague shadows hovering at the back of the civilized mind; the sense of encompassing natural power, the need to struggle single-handed against it; the danger lurking in the darkness of the forest; the brilliant treachery of the forest sunshine glinted through leafy secrecies; the Strange voices in its illimitable murmur; the ghostly shimmer of its glades at night; the lovely beauty of the great gold moon; all the thousand wondering dreams that evolved the elder gods, Pan, Cybele, Thor; all this waked again in the soul of the Anglo-Saxon penetrating the great forest. And it was intensified by the way he came,--singly, or with but wife and child, or at best in very small company, a mere handful. And the surrounding presences were not only of the spiritual world. Human enemies who were soon as well armed as he, quicker of foot and eye, more perfectly noiseless in their tread even than the wild beasts of the shadowy coverts, the ruthless Indians whom he came to expel, these invisible presences were watching him, in a fierce silence he knew not whence. Like as not the first signs of that menace which was everywhere would be the hiss of the Indian arrow, or the crack of the Indian rifle, and sharp and sudden death.

Under these conditions he learned much and forgot much. His deadly need made him both more and less individual than he had been, released him from the dictation of his fellows in daily life while it enforced relentlessly a uniform method of self-preservation. Though the unseen world became more and more real, the understanding of it faded. It became chiefly a matter of emotional perception, scarcely at all a matter of philosophy. The morals of the forest Americans were those of audacious, visionary beings loosely hound together by a comradeship in peril. Courage, cautiousness, swiftness, endurance, faithfulness, secrecy,--these were the forest virtues. Dreaming, companionship, humor,--these were the forest luxuries.

From the first, all sorts and conditions were ensnared by that silent land, where the trails they followed, their rifles in their hands, had been trodden hard generation after generation by the feet of the Indian warriors. The best and the worst of England went into that illimitable resolvable, lost themselves, found themselves, and issued from its shadows, or their children did, changed both for good and ill, Americans. Meanwhile the great forest, during two hundred years, was slowly vanishing. This parent of a new people gave its life to its offspring and passed away. In the early nineteenth century it had withered backward far from the coast; had lost its identity all along the north end of the eastern mountains; had frayed out toward the sunset into lingering tentacles, into broken minor forests, into shreds and patches.

Curiously, by a queer sort of natural selection, its people had congregated into life communities not all of one pattern. There were places as early as the beginning of the century where distinction had appeared. At other places life was as rude and rough as could be imagined. There were innumerable farms that were still mere "clearings," walled by the forest. But there were other regions where for many a mile the timber had been hewn away, had given place to a ragged continuity of farmland. In such regions especially if the poorer elements of the forest, spiritually speaking, had drifted thither--the straggling villages which had appeared were but groups of log cabins huddled along a few neglected lanes. In central Kentucky, a poor new village was Elizabethtown, unkempt, chokingly dusty in the dry weather, with muddy streams instead of streets during the rains, a stench of pig-sties at the back of its cabins, but everywhere looking outward glimpses of a lovely meadow land.

At Elizabethtown in 1806 lived Joseph Hanks, a carpenter, also his niece Nancy Hanks. Poor people they were, of the sort that had been sucked into the forest in their weakness, or had been pushed into it by a social pressure they could not resist; not the sort that had grimly adventured its perils or gaily courted its lure. Their source was Virginia. They were of a thriftless, unstable class; that vagrant peasantry which had drifted westward to avoid competition with slave labor. The niece, Nancy, has been reputed illegitimate. And though tradition derives her from the predatory amour of an aristocrat, there is nothing to sustain the tale except her own appearance. She had a bearing, a cast of feature, a tone, that seemed to hint at higher social origins than those of her Hanks relatives. She had a little schooling; was of a pious and emotional turn of mind; enjoyed those amazing "revivals" which now and then gave an outlet to the pent-up religiosity of the village; and she was almost handsome.[1]

History has preserved no clue why this girl who was rather the best of her sort chose to marry an illiterate apprentice of her uncle's, Thomas Lincoln, whose name in the forest was spelled "Linkhorn." He was a shiftless fellow, never succeeding at anything, who could neither read nor write. At the time of his birth, twenty-eight years before, his parents--drifting, roaming people, struggling with poverty--were dwellers in the Virginia mountains. As a mere lad, he had shot an Indian--one of the few positive acts attributed to him--and his father had been killed by Indians. There was a "vague tradition" that his grandfather had been a Pennsylvania Quaker who had wandered southward through the forest mountains. The tradition angered him. Though he appears to have had little enough--at least in later years--of the fierce independence of the forest, he resented a Quaker ancestry as an insult. He had no suspicion that in after years the zeal of genealogists would track his descent until they had linked him with a lost member of a distinguished Puritan family, a certain Mordecai Lincoln who removed to New Jersey, whose descendants became wanderers of the forest and sank speedily to the bottom of the social scale, retaining not the slightest memory of their New England origin.[2] Even in the worst of the forest villages, few couples started married life in less auspicious circumstances than did Nancy and Thomas. Their home in one of the alleys of Elizabethtown was a shanty fourteen feet square.[3] Very soon after marriage, shiftless Thomas gave up carpentering and took to farming. Land could be had almost anywhere for almost nothing those days, and Thomas got a farm on credit near where now stands Hodgenville. Today, it is a famous place, for there, February 12, 1809, Abraham Lincoln, second child, but first son of Nancy and Thomas, was born.[4]

During most of eight years, Abraham lived in Kentucky. His father, always adrift in heart, tried two farms before abandoning Kentucky altogether. A shadowy figure, this Thomas; the few memories of him suggest a superstitious nature in a superstitious community. He used to see visions in the forest. Once, it is said, he came home, all excitement, to tell his wife he had seen a giant riding on a lion, tearing up trees by the roots; and thereupon, he took to his bed and kept it for several days.

His son Abraham told this story of the giant on the lion to a playmate of his, and the two boys gravely discussed the existence of ghosts. Abraham thought his father "didn't exactly believe in them," and seems to have been in about the same state of mind himself. He was quite sure he was "not much" afraid of the dark. This was due chiefly to the simple wisdom of a good woman, a neighbor, who had taught him to think of the night as a great room that God had darkened even as his friend darkened a room in her house by hanging something over the window.[5]

The eight years of his childhood in Kentucky had few incidents. A hard, patient, uncomplaining life both for old and young. The men found their one deep joy in the hunt. In lesser degree, they enjoyed the revivals which gave to the women their one escape out of themselves. A strange, almost terrible recovery of the primitive, were those religious furies of the days before the great forest had disappeared. What other figures in our history are quite so remarkable as the itinerant frontier priests, the circuit-riders as they are now called, who lived as Elijah did, whose temper was very much the temper of Elijah, in whose exalted narrowness of devotion, all that was stern, dark, foreboding--the very brood of the forest's innermost heart--had found a voice. Their religion was ecstasy in homespun, a glory of violent singing, the release of a frantic emotion, formless but immeasurable, which at all other times, in the severity of the forest routine, gave no sign of its existence.

A visitor remembered long afterward a handsome young woman who he thought was Nancy Hanks, singing wildly, whirling about as may once have done the ecstatic women of the woods of Thrace, making her way among equally passionate worshipers, to the foot of the rude altar, and there casting herself into the arms of the man she was to marry.[6] So did thousands of forest women in those seasons when their communion with a mystic loneliness was confessed, when they gave tongue as simply as wild creatures to the nameless stirrings and promptings of that secret woodland where Pan was still the lord. And the day following the revival, they were again the silent, expressionless, much enduring, long-suffering forest wives, mothers of many children, toilers of the cabins, who cooked and swept and carried fuel by sunlight, and by firelight sewed and spun.

It can easily be understood how these women, as a rule, exerted little influence on their sons. Their imaginative side was too deeply hidden, the nature of their pleasures too secret, too mysterious. Male youth, following its obvious pleasure, went with the men to the hunt. The women remained outsiders. The boy who chose to do likewise, was the incredible exception. In him had come to a head the deepest things in the forest life: the darkly feminine things, its silence, its mysticism, its secretiveness, its tragic patience. Abraham was such a boy. It is said that he astounded his father by refusing to own a gun. He earned terrible whippings by releasing animals caught in traps. Though he had in fullest measure the forest passion for listening to stories, the ever-popular tales of Indian

warfare disgusted him. But let the tale take on any glint of the mystery of the human soul--as of Robinson Crusoe alone on his island, or of the lordliness of action, as in Columbus or Washington--and he was quick with interest. The stories of talking animals out of Aesop fascinated him.

In this thrilled curiosity about the animals was the side of him least intelligible to men like his father. It lives in many anecdotes: of his friendship with a poor dog he had which he called "Honey"; of pursuing a snake through difficult thickets to prevent its swallowing a frog; of loitering on errands at the risk of whippings to watch the squirrels in the tree-tops; of the crowning offense of his childhood, which earned him a mighty beating, the saving of a fawn's life by scaring it off just as a hunter's gun was leveled. And by way of comment on all this, there is the remark preserved in the memory of another boy to whom at the time it appeared most singular, "God might think as much of that little fawn as of some people." Of him as of another gentle soul it might have been said that all the animals were his brothers and sisters.[7]

One might easily imagine this peculiar boy who chose to remain at home while the men went out to slay, as the mere translation into masculinity of his mother, and of her mothers, of all the converging processions of forest women, who had passed from one to another the secret of their mysticism, coloring it many ways in the dark vessels of their suppressed lives, till it reached at last their concluding child. But this would only in part explain him. Their mysticism, as after-time was to show, he had undoubtedly inherited. So, too, from them, it may be, came another characteristic--that instinct to endure, to wait, to abide the issue of circumstance, which in the days of his power made him to the politicians as unintelligible as once he had been to the forest huntsmen. Nevertheless, the most distinctive part of those primitive women, the sealed passionateness of their spirits, he never from childhood to the end revealed. In the grown man appeared a quietude, a sort of tranced calm, that was appalling. From what part of his heredity did this derive? Was it the male gift of the forest? Did progenitors worthier than Thomas somehow cast through him to his alien son that peace they had found in the utter heart of danger, that apparent selflessness which is born of being ever unfailingly on guard?

It is plain that from the first he was a natural stoic, taking his whippings, of which there appear to have been plenty, in silence, without anger. It was all in the day's round. Whippings, like other things, came and went. What did it matter? And the daily round, though monotonous, had even for the child a complement of labor. Especially there was much patient journeying back and forth with meal bags between his father's cabin and the local mill. There was a little schooling, very little, partly from Nancy Lincoln, partly from another good woman, the miller's kind old mother, partly at the crudest of wayside schools maintained very briefly by a wandering teacher who soon wandered on; but out of this schooling very little result beyond the mastery of the A B C.[8] And even at this age, a pathetic eagerness to learn, to invade the wonder of the printed book! Also a marked keenness of observation. He observed things which his elders overlooked. He had a better sense of direction, as when he corrected his father and others who were taking the wrong short-cut to a burning house. Cool, unexcitable, he was capable of presence of mind. Once at night when the door of the cabin was suddenly thrown open and a monster appeared on the threshold, a spectral thing in the darkness, furry, with the head of an ox, Thomas Lincoln shrank back aghast; little Abraham, quicker-sighted and quicker-witted,

slipped behind the creature, pulled at its furry mantle, and revealed a forest Diana, a bold girl who amused herself playing demon among the shadows of the moon.

Seven years passed and his eighth birthday approached. All this while Thomas Lincoln had somehow kept his family in food, but never had he money in his pocket. His successive farms, bought on credit, were never paid for. An incurable vagrant, he came at last to the psychological moment when he could no longer impose himself on his community. He must take to the road in a hazard of new fortune. Indiana appeared to him the land of promise. Most of his property--such as it was--except his carpenter's tools, he traded for whisky, four hundred gallons. Somehow he obtained a rattletrap wagon and two horses.

The family appear to have been loath to go. Nancy Lincoln had long been ailing and in low spirits, thinking much of what might happen to her children after her death. Abraham loved the country-side, and he had good friends in the miller and his kind old mother. But the vagrant Thomas would have his way. In the brilliancy of the Western autumn, with the ruined woods flaming scarlet and gold, these poor people took their last look at the cabin that had been their wretched shelter, and set forth into the world.[9]

The Mysterious Youth

Vagrants, or little better than vagrants, were Thomas Lincoln and his family making their way to Indiana. For a year after they arrived they were squatters, their home an "open-faced camp," that is, a shanty with one wall missing, and instead of chimney, a fire built on the open side. In that mere pretense of a house, Nancy Lincoln and her children spent the winter of 1816-1817. Then Thomas resorted to his familiar practice of taking land on credit. The Lincolns were now part of a "settlement" of seven or eight families strung along a little stream known as Pigeon Creek. Here Thomas entered a quarter-section of fair land, and in the course of the next eleven years succeeded--wonderful to relate--in paying down sufficient money to give him title to about half.

Meanwhile, poor fading Nancy went to her place. Pigeon Creek was an out-of-the-way nook in the still unsettled West, and Nancy during the two years she lived there could not have enjoyed much of the consolation of her religion. Perhaps now and then she had ghostly council of some stray circuit-rider. But for her the days of the ecstasies had gone by; no great revival broke the seals of the spirit, stirred its deep waters, along Pigeon Creek. There was no religious service when she was laid to rest in a coffin made of green lumber and fashioned by her husband. Months passed, the snow lay deep, before a passing circuit-rider held a burial service over her grave. Tradition has it that the boy Abraham brought this about very likely, at ten years old, he felt that her troubled spirit could not have peace till this was done. Shadowy as she is, ghostlike across the page of history, it is plain that she was a reality to her son. He not only loved her but revered her. He believed that from her he had inherited the better part of his genius. Many years after her death he said, "God bless my mother; all that I am or ever hope to be I owe to her."

Nancy was not long without a successor. Thomas Lincoln, the next year, journeyed back to Kentucky and returned in triumph to Indiana, bringing as his wife, an old flame of his who had married, had been widowed, and was of a mind for further adventures. This Sarah Bush Lincoln, of less distinction than Nancy, appears to have been steadier-minded and stronger-willed. Even before this, Thomas had left the half-faced camp and moved into a cabin. But such a cabin! It had neither door, nor window, nor floor. Sally Lincoln required her husband to make of it a proper house--by the standards of Pigeon Creek. She had brought with her as her dowry a wagonload of furniture. These comforts together with her strong will began a new era of relative comfort in the Lincoln cabin.[1]

Sally Lincoln was a kind stepmother to Abraham who became strongly attached to her. In the rough and nondescript community of Pigeon Creek, a world of weedy farms, of miserable mud roads, of log farm-houses, the family life that was at least tolerable. The sordid misery described during her regime emerged from wretchedness to a state of by all the recorders of Lincoln's early days seems to have ended about his twelfth year. At least, the vagrant suggestion disappeared. Though the life that succeeded was void of luxury, though it was rough, even brutal, dominated by a coarse, peasant-like view of things, it was scarcely by peasant standards a life of hardship. There was food sufficient, if not very good; protection from wind and weather; fire in the winter time; steady labor; and social acceptance by the community of the creekside. That the labor was hard and long, went without saying. But as to that--as of the whippings in Kentucky--what else, from the peasant point of view, would you expect? Abraham took it all with the same stoicism

with which he had once taken the whippings. By the unwritten law of the creekside he was his father's property, and so was his labor, until he came of age. Thomas used him as a servant or hired him out to other farmers. Stray recollections show us young Abraham working as a farm-hand for twenty-five cents the day, probably with "keep" in addition; we glimpse him slaughtering hogs skilfully at thirty-one cents a day, for this was "rough work." He became noted as an axman.

In the crevices, so to speak, of his career as a farm-hand, Abraham got a few months of schooling, less than a year in all. A story that has been repeated a thousand times shows the raw youth by the cabin fire at night doing sums on the back of a wooden shovel, and shaving off its surface repeatedly to get a fresh page. He devoured every book that came his way, only a few to be sure, but generally great ones--the Bible, of course, and Aesop, Crusoe, Pilgrim's Progress, and a few histories, these last unfortunately of the poorer sort. He early displayed a bent for composition, scribbling verses that were very poor, and writing burlesque tales about his acquaintances in what passed for a Biblical style.[2]

One great experience broke the monotony of the life on Pigeon Creek. He made a trip to New Orleans as a "hand" on a flatboat. Of this trip little is known though much may be surmised. To his deeply poetic nature what an experience it must have been: the majesty of the vast river; the pageant of its immense travel; the steamers heavily laden; the fleets of barges; the many towns; the nights of stars over wide sweeps of water; the stately plantation houses along the banks; the old French city with its crowds, its bells, the shipping, the strange faces and the foreign speech; all the bewildering evidence that there were other worlds besides Pigeon Creek!

What seed of new thinking was sown in his imagination by this Odyssey we shall never know. The obvious effect in the ten years of his life in Indiana was produced at Pigeon Creek. The "settlement" was within fifteen miles of the Ohio. It lay in that southerly fringe of Indiana which received early in the century many families of much the same estate, character and origin as the Lincolns--poor whites of the edges of the great forest working outward toward the prairies. Located on good land not far from a great highway, the Ohio, it illustrated in its rude prosperity a transformation that went on unobserved in many such settlements, the transformation of the wandering forester of the lower class into a peasant farmer. Its life was of the earth, earthy; though it retained the religious traditions of the forest, their significance was evaporating; mysticism was fading into emotionalism; the camp-meeting was degenerating into a picnic. The supreme social event, the wedding, was attended by festivities that filled twenty-four hours: a race of male guests in the forenoon with a bottle of whisky for a prize; an Homeric dinner at midday; "an afternoon of rough games and outrageous practical jokes; a supper and dance at night interrupted by the successive withdrawals of the bride and groom, attended by ceremonies and jests of more than Rabelaisian crudeness; and a noisy dispersal next day." [3] The intensities of the forest survived in hard drinking, in the fury of the fun-making, and in the hunt. The forest passion for storytelling had in no way decreased.

In this atmosphere, about eighteen and nineteen, Abraham shot up suddenly from a slender boy to a huge, raw-honed, ungainly man, six feet four inches tall, of unusual muscular strength. His strength was one of the fixed conditions of his development. It delivered him from all fear of his fellows. He had plenty of peculiarities. He was ugly,

awkward; he lacked the wanton appetites of the average sensual man. And these peculiarities without his great strength as his warrant might have brought him into ridicule. As it was, whatever his peculiarities, in a society like that of Pigeon Creek, the man who could beat all competitors, wrestling or boxing, was free from molestation. But Lincoln instinctively had another aim in life than mere freedom to be himself. Two characteristics that were so significant in his childhood continued with growing vitality in his young manhood: his placidity and his intense sense of comradeship. The latter, however, had undergone a change. It was no longer the comradeship of the wild creatures. That spurt of physical expansion, the swift rank growth to his tremendous stature, swept him apparently across a dim dividing line, out of the world of birds and beasts and into the world of men. He took the new world with the same unflinching but also unexcitable curiosity with which he had taken the other, the world of squirrels, flowers, fawns.

Here as there, the difference from his mother, deep though their similarities may have been, was sharply evident. Had he been wholly at one with her religiously, the gift of telling speech which he now began to display might have led him into a course that would have rejoiced her heart, might have made him a boy preacher, and later, a great revivalist. His father and elder sister while on Pigeon Creek joined the local Baptist Church. But Abraham did not follow them. Nor is there a single anecdote linking him in any way with the fervors of camp meeting. On the contrary, what little is remembered, is of a cool aloofness.[4] The inscrutability of the forest was his--what it gave to the stealthy, cautious men who were too intent on observing, too suspiciously watchful, to give vent to their feelings. Therefore, in Lincoln there was always a double life, outer and inner, the outer quietly companionable, the inner, solitary, mysterious.

It was the outer life that assumed its first definite phase in the years on Pigeon Creek. During those years, Lincoln discovered his gift of story-telling. He also discovered humor. In the employment of both talents, he accepted as a matter of course the tone of the young ruffians among whom he dwelt. Very soon this powerful fellow, who could throw any of them in a wrestle, won the central position among them by a surer title, by the power to delight. And any one who knows how peasant schools of art arise--for that matter, all schools of art that are vital--knows how he did it. In this connection, his famous biographers, Nicolay and Hay, reveal a certain externality by objecting that a story attributed to him is ancient. All stories are ancient. Not the tale, but the telling, as the proverb says, is the thing. In later years, Lincoln wrote down every good story that he heard, and filed it.[5] When it reappeared it had become his own. Who can doubt that this deliberate assimilation, the typical artistic process, began on Pigeon Creek? Lincoln never would have captured as he did his plowboy audience, set them roaring with laughter in the intervals of labor, had he not given them back their own tales done over into new forms brilliantly beyond their powers of conception. That these tales were gross, even ribald, might have been taken for granted, even had we not positive evidence of the fact. Otherwise none of that uproarious laughter which we may be sure sounded often across shimmering harvest fields while stalwart young pagans, ever ready to pause, leaned, bellowing, on the handles of their scythes, Abe Lincoln having just then finished a story.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

