

The Boys' Life of Abraham Lincoln

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A President's Childhood

Abraham Lincoln's forefathers were pioneers--men who left their homes to open up the wilderness and make the way plain for others to follow them. For one hundred and seventy years, ever since the first American Lincoln came from England to Massachusetts in 1638, they had been moving slowly westward as new settlements were made in the forest. They faced solitude, privation, and all the dangers and hardships that beset men who take up their homes where only beasts and wild men have had homes before; but they continued to press steadily forward, though they lost fortune and sometimes even life itself, in their westward progress. Back in Pennsylvania and New Jersey some of the Lincolns had been men of wealth and influence. In Kentucky, where the future President was born on February 12, 1809, his parents lived in deep poverty. Their home was a small log cabin of the rudest kind, and nothing seemed more unlikely than that their child, coming into the world in such humble surroundings, was destined to be the greatest man of his time. True to his race, he also was to be a pioneer--not indeed, like his ancestors, a leader into new woods and unexplored fields, but a pioneer of a nobler and grander sort, directing the thoughts of men ever toward the right, and leading the American people, through difficulties and dangers and a mighty war, to peace and freedom.

The story of this wonderful man begins and ends with a tragedy, for his grandfather, also named Abraham, was killed by a shot from an Indian's rifle while peaceably at work with his three sons on the edge of their frontier clearing. Eighty-one years later the President himself met death by an assassin's bullet. The murderer of one was a savage of the forest; the murderer of the other that far more cruel thing, a savage of civilization.

When the Indian's shot laid the pioneer farmer low, his second son, Josiah, ran to a neighboring fort for help, and Mordecai, the eldest, hurried to the cabin for his rifle. Thomas, a child of six years, was left alone beside the dead body of his father; and as Mordecai snatched the gun from its resting-place over the door of the cabin, he saw, to his horror, an Indian in his war-paint, just stooping to seize the child. Taking quick aim at a medal on the breast of the savage, he fired, and the Indian fell dead. The little boy, thus released, ran to the house, where Mordecai, firing through the loopholes, kept the Indians at bay until help arrived from the fort.

It was this child Thomas who grew up to be the father of President Abraham Lincoln. After the murder of his father the fortunes of the little family grew rapidly worse, and doubtless because of poverty, as well as by reason of the marriage of his older brothers and sisters, their home was broken up, and Thomas found himself, long before he was grown, a wandering laboring boy. He lived for a time with an uncle as his hired servant, and later he learned the trade of carpenter. He grew to manhood entirely without education, and when he was twenty-eight years old could neither read nor write. At that time he married Nancy Hanks, a good-looking young woman of twenty-three, as poor as himself, but so much better off as to learning that she was able to teach her husband to

sign his own name. Neither of them had any money, but living cost little on the frontier in those days, and they felt that his trade would suffice to earn all that they should need. Thomas took his bride to a tiny house in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, where they lived for about a year, and where a daughter was born to them.

Then they moved to a small farm thirteen miles from Elizabethtown, which they bought on credit, the country being yet so new that there were places to be had for mere promises to pay. Farms obtained on such terms were usually of very poor quality, and this one of Thomas Lincoln's was no exception to the rule. A cabin ready to be occupied stood on it, however; and not far away, hidden in a pretty clump of trees and bushes, was a fine spring of water, because of which the place was known as Rock Spring Farm. In the cabin on this farm the future President of the United States was born on February 12, 1809, and here the first four years of his life were spent. Then the Lincolns moved to a much bigger and better farm on Knob Creek, six miles from Hodgenville, which Thomas Lincoln bought, again on credit, selling the larger part of it soon afterward to another purchaser. Here they remained until Abraham was seven years old.

About this early part of his childhood almost nothing is known. He never talked of these days, even to his most intimate friends. To the pioneer child a farm offered much that a town lot could not give him--space; woods to roam in; Knob Creek with its running water and its deep, quiet pools for a playfellow; berries to be hunted for in summer and nuts in autumn; while all the year round birds and small animals pattered across his path to people the solitude in place of human companions. The boy had few comrades. He wandered about playing his lonesome little games, and when these were finished returned to the small and cheerless cabin. Once, when asked what he remembered about the War of 1812 with Great Britain, he replied: "Only this: I had been fishing one day and had caught a little fish, which I was taking home. I met a soldier in the road, and having always been told at home that we must be good to soldiers, I gave him my fish." It is only a glimpse into his life, but it shows the solitary, generous child and the patriotic household.

It was while living on this farm that Abraham and his sister Sarah first began going to A-B-C schools. Their earliest teacher was Zachariah Riney, who taught near the Lincoln cabin; the next was Caleb Hazel, four miles away.

In spite of the tragedy that darkened his childhood, Thomas Lincoln seems to have been a cheery, indolent, good-natured man. By means of a little farming and occasional jobs at his trade, he managed to supply his family with the absolutely necessary food and shelter, but he never got on in the world. He found it much easier to gossip with his friends, or to dream about rich new lands in the West, than to make a thrifty living in the place where he happened to be. The blood of the pioneer was in his veins too--the desire to move westward; and hearing glowing accounts of the new territory of Indiana, he resolved to go and see it for himself. His skill as a carpenter made this not only possible but reasonably cheap, and in the fall of 1816 he built himself a little flatboat, launched it half a mile from his cabin, at the mouth of Knob Creek on the waters of the Rolling Fork, and

floated on it down that stream to Salt River, down Salt River to the Ohio, and down the Ohio to a landing called Thompson's Ferry on the Indiana shore.

Sixteen miles out from the river, near a small stream known as Pigeon Creek, he found a spot in the forest that suited him; and as his boat could not be made to float up-stream, he sold it, stored his goods with an obliging settler, and trudged back to Kentucky, all the way on foot, to fetch his wife and children-- Sarah, who was now nine years old, and Abraham, seven. This time the journey to Indiana was made with two horses, used by the mother and children for riding, and to carry their little camping outfit for the night. The distance from their old home was, in a straight line, little more than fifty miles, but they had to go double that distance because of the very few roads it was possible to follow.

Reaching the Ohio River and crossing to the Indiana shore, Thomas Lincoln hired a wagon which carried his family and their belongings the remaining sixteen miles through the forest to the spot he had chosen--a piece of heavily wooded land, one and a half miles east of what has since become the village of Gentryville in Spencer County. The lateness of the autumn made it necessary to put up a shelter as quickly as possible, and he built what was known on the frontier as a half-faced camp, about fourteen feet square. This differed from a cabin in that it was closed on only three sides, being quite open to the weather on the fourth. A fire was usually made in front of the open side, and thus the necessity for having a chimney was done away with. Thomas Lincoln doubtless intended this only for a temporary shelter, and as such it would have done well enough in pleasant summer weather; but it was a rude provision against the storms and winds of an Indiana winter. It shows his want of energy that the family remained housed in this poor camp for nearly a whole year; but, after all, he must not be too hastily blamed. He was far from idle. A cabin was doubtless begun, and there was the very heavy work of clearing away the timber--cutting down large trees, chopping them into suitable lengths, and rolling them together into great heaps to be burned, or of splitting them into rails to fence the small field upon which he managed to raise a patch of corn and other things during the following summer.

Though only seven years old, Abraham was unusually large and strong for his age, and he helped his father in all this heavy labor of clearing the farm. In after years, Mr. Lincoln said that an ax "was put into his hands at once, and from that till within his twenty-third year he was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument--less, of course, in ploughing and harvesting seasons." At first the Lincolns and their seven or eight neighbors lived in the unbroken forest. They had only the tools and household goods they brought with them, or such things as they could fashion with their own hands. There was no sawmill to saw lumber. The village of Gentryville was not even begun. Breadstuff could be had only by sending young Abraham seven miles on horseback with a bag of corn to be ground in a hand grist-mill.

About the time the new cabin was ready relatives and friends followed from Kentucky, and some of these in turn occupied the half-faced camp. During the autumn a severe and mysterious sickness broke out in their little settlement, and a number of people died, among them the mother of young Abraham. There was no help to be had beyond what the

neighbors could give each other. The nearest doctor lived fully thirty miles away. There was not even a minister to conduct the funerals. Thomas Lincoln made the coffins for the dead out of green lumber cut from the forest trees with a whip-saw, and they were laid to rest in a clearing in the woods. Months afterward, largely through the efforts of the sorrowing boy, a preacher who chanced to come that way was induced to hold a service and preach a sermon over the grave of Mrs. Lincoln.

Her death was indeed a serious blow to her husband and children. Abraham's sister, Sarah, was only eleven years old, and the tasks and cares of the little household were altogether too heavy for her years and experience. Nevertheless they struggled bravely through the winter and following summer; then in the autumn of 1819 Thomas Lincoln went back to Kentucky and married Sarah Bush Johnston, whom he had known, and it is said courted, when she was only Sally Bush. She had married about the time Lincoln married Nancy Hanks, and her husband had died, leaving her with three children. She came of a better station in life than Thomas, and was a woman with an excellent mind as well as a warm and generous heart. The household goods that she brought with her to the Lincoln home filled a four-horse wagon, and not only were her own children well clothed and cared for, but she was able at once to provide little Abraham and Sarah with comforts to which they had been strangers during the whole of their young lives. Under her wise management all jealousy was avoided between the two sets of children; urged on by her stirring example, Thomas Lincoln supplied the yet unfinished cabin with floor, door, and windows, and life became more comfortable for all its inmates, contentment if not happiness reigning in the little home.

The new stepmother quickly became very fond of Abraham, and encouraged him in every way in her power to study and improve himself. The chances for this were few enough. Mr. Lincoln has left us a vivid picture of the situation. "It was," he once wrote, "a wild region, with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods. There I grew up. There were some schools, so-called, but no qualification was ever required of a teacher beyond 'readin', writin', and cipherin'" to the Rule of Three. If a straggler supposed to understand Latin happened to sojourn in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizard."

The school-house was a low cabin of round logs, with split logs or "puncheons" for a floor, split logs roughly leveled with an ax and set up on legs for benches, and holes cut out in the logs and the space filled in with squares of greased paper for window-panes. The main light came in through the open door. Very often Webster's "Elementary Spelling-book" was the only text-book. This was the kind of school most common in the middle West during Mr. Lincoln's boyhood, though already in some places there were schools of a more pretentious character. Indeed, back in Kentucky, at the very time that Abraham, a child of six, was learning his letters from Zachariah Riney, a boy only a year older was attending a Catholic seminary in the very next county. It is doubtful if they ever met, but the destinies of the two were strangely interwoven, for the older boy was Jefferson Davis, who became head of the Confederate government shortly after Lincoln was elected President of the United States.

As Abraham had been only seven years old when he left Kentucky, the little beginnings he learned in the schools kept by Riney and Hazel in that State must have been very slight, probably only his alphabet, or at most only three or four pages of Webster's "Elementary Spelling-book." The multiplication-table was still a mystery to him, and he could read or write only the words he spelled. His first two years in Indiana seem to have passed without schooling of any sort, and the school he attended shortly after coming under the care of his stepmother was of the simplest kind, for the Pigeon Creek settlement numbered only eight or ten poor families, and they lived deep in the forest, where, even if they had had the money for such luxuries, it would have been impossible to buy books, slates, pens, ink, or paper. It is worthy of note, however, that in our western country, even under such difficulties, a school-house was one of the first buildings to rise in every frontier settlement. Abraham's second school in Indiana was held when he was fourteen years old, and the third in his seventeenth year. By that time he had more books and better teachers, but he had to walk four or five miles to reach them. We know that he learned to write, and was provided with pen, ink, and a copy-book, and a very small supply of writing-paper, for copies have been printed of several scraps on which he carefully wrote down tables of long measure, land measure, and dry measure, as well as examples in multiplication and compound division, from his arithmetic. He was never able to go to school again after this time, and though the instruction he received from his five teachers--two in Kentucky and three in Indiana--extended over a period of nine years, it must be remembered that it made up in all less than one twelve-month; "that the aggregate of all his schooling did not amount to one year." The fact that he received this instruction, as he himself said, "by littles," was doubtless an advantage. A lazy or indifferent boy would of course have forgotten what was taught him at one time before he had opportunity at another; but Abraham was neither indifferent nor lazy, and these widely separated fragments of instruction were precious steps to self-help. He pursued his studies with very unusual purpose and determination not only to understand them at the moment, but to fix them firmly in his mind. His early companions all agree that he employed every spare moment in keeping on with some one of his studies. His stepmother tells us that "When he came across a passage that struck him, he would write it down on boards if he had no paper, and keep it there until he did get paper. Then he would rewrite it, look at it, repeat it. He had a copy-book, a kind of scrap-book, in which he put down all things, and thus preserved them." He spent long evenings doing sums on the fire-shovel. Iron fire-shovels were a rarity among pioneers. Instead they used a broad, thin clapboard with one end narrowed to a handle, arranging with this the piles of coals upon the hearth, over which they set their "skillet" and "oven" to do their cooking. It was on such a wooden shovel that Abraham worked his sums by the flickering firelight, making his figures with a piece of charcoal, and, when the shovel was all covered, taking a drawing-knife and shaving it off clean again.

The hours that he was able to devote to his penmanship, his reading, and his arithmetic were by no means many; for, save for the short time that he was actually in school, he was, during all these years, laboring hard on his father's farm, or hiring his youthful strength to neighbors who had need of help in the work of field or forest. In pursuit of his knowledge he was on an up-hill path; yet in spite of all obstacles he worked his way to so much of an education as placed him far ahead of his schoolmates and quickly abreast of

his various teachers. He borrowed every book in the neighborhood. The list is a short one: "Robinson Crusoe," "Aesop's Fables," Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress," Weems's "Life of Washington," and a "History of the United States." When everything else had been read, he resolutely began on the "Revised Statutes of Indiana," which Dave Turnham, the constable, had in daily use, but permitted him to come to his house and read.

Though so fond of his books; it must not be supposed that he cared only for work and serious study. He was a social, sunny-tempered lad, as fond of jokes and fun as he was kindly and industrious. His stepmother said of him: "I can say, what scarcely one mother in a thousand can say, Abe never gave me a cross word or look, and never refused . . . to do anything I asked him. . . . I must say . . . that Abe was the best boy I ever saw or expect to see."

He and John Johnston, his stepmother's son, and John Hanks, a relative of his own mother's, worked barefoot together in the fields, grubbing, plowing, hoeing, gathering and shucking corn, and taking part, when occasion offered, in the practical jokes and athletic exercises that enlivened the hard work of the pioneers. For both work and play Abraham had one great advantage. He was not only a tall, strong country boy: he soon grew to be a tall, strong, sinewy man. He early reached the unusual height of six feet four inches, and his long arms gave him a degree of power as an axman that few were able to rival. He therefore usually led his fellows in efforts of muscle as well as of mind. That he could outrun, outlift, outwrestle his boyish companions, that he could chop faster, split more rails in a day, carry a heavier log at a "raising," or excel the neighborhood champion in any feat of frontier athletics, was doubtless a matter of pride with him; but stronger than all else was his eager craving for knowledge. He felt instinctively that the power of using the mind rather than the muscles was the key to success. He wished not only to wrestle with the best of them, but to be able to talk like the preacher, spell and cipher like the school-master, argue like the lawyer, and write like the editor. Yet he was as far as possible from being a prig. He was helpful, sympathetic, cheerful. In all the neighborhood gatherings, when settlers of various ages came together at corn-huskings or house-raising, or when mere chance brought half a dozen of them at the same time to the post-office or the country store, he was able, according to his years, to add his full share to the gaiety of the company. By reason of his reading and his excellent memory, he soon became the best story-teller among his companions; and even the slight training gained from his studies greatly broadened and strengthened the strong reasoning faculty with which he had been gifted by nature. His wit might be mischievous, but it was never malicious, and his nonsense was never intended to wound or to hurt the feelings. It is told of him that he added to his fund of jokes and stories humorous imitations of the sermons of eccentric preachers.

Very likely too much is made of all these boyish pranks. He grew up very like his fellows. In only one particular did he differ greatly from the frontier boys around him. He never took any pleasure in hunting. Almost every youth of the backwoods early became an excellent shot and a confirmed sportsman. The woods still swarmed with game, and every cabin depended largely upon this for its supply of food. But to his strength was added a gentleness which made him shrink from killing or inflicting pain, and the time

the other boys gave to lying in ambush, he preferred to spend in reading or in efforts at improving his mind.

Only twice during his life in Indiana was the routine of his employment changed. When he was about sixteen years old he worked for a time for a man who lived at the mouth of Anderson's Creek, and here part of his duty was to manage a ferry-boat which carried passengers across the Ohio River. It was very likely this experience which, three years later, brought him another. Mr. Gentry, the chief man of the village of Gentryville that had grown up a mile or so from his father's cabin, loaded a flatboat on the Ohio River with the produce his store had collected--corn, flour, pork, bacon, and other miscellaneous provisions--and putting it in charge of his son Allen Gentry and of Abraham Lincoln, sent them with it down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, to sell its cargo at the plantations of the lower Mississippi, where sugar and cotton were the principal crops, and where other food supplies were needed to feed the slaves. No better proof is needed of the reputation for strength, skill, honesty, and intelligence that this tall country boy had already won for himself, than that he was chosen to navigate the flatboat a thousand miles to the "sugar-coast" of the Mississippi River, sell its load, and bring back the money. Allen Gentry was supposed to be in command, but from the record of his after life we may be sure that Abraham did his full share both of work and management. The elder Gentry paid Lincoln eight dollars a month and his passage home on a steamboat for this service. The voyage was made successfully, although not without adventure; for one night, after the boat was tied up to the shore, the boys were attacked by seven negroes, who came aboard intending to kill and rob them. There was a lively scrimmage, in which, though slightly hurt, they managed to beat off their assailants, and then, hastily cutting their boat adrift, swung out on the stream. The marauding band little dreamed that they were attacking the man who in after years was to give their race its freedom; and though the future was equally hidden from Abraham, it is hard to estimate the vistas of hope and ambition that this long journey opened to him. It was his first look into the wide, wide world.

Captain Lincoln

By this time the Lincoln homestead was no longer on the frontier. During the years that passed while Abraham was growing from a child, scarcely able to wield the ax placed in his hands, into a tall, capable youth, the line of frontier settlements had been gradually but steadily pushing on beyond Gentryville toward the Mississippi River. Every summer canvas-covered moving wagons wound their slow way over new roads into still newer country; while the older settlers, left behind, watched their progress with longing eyes. It was almost as if a spell had been cast over these toil-worn pioneers, making them forget, at sight of such new ventures, all the hardships they had themselves endured in subduing the wilderness. At last, on March 1, 1830, when Abraham was just twenty-one years old, the Lincolns, yielding to this overmastering frontier impulse to "move" westward, left the old farm in Indiana to make a new home in Illinois. "Their mode of conveyance was wagons drawn by ox-teams," Mr. Lincoln wrote in 1860; "and Abraham drove one of the teams." They settled in Macon County on the north side of the Sangamon River, about ten miles west of Decatur, where they built a cabin, made enough rails to fence ten acres of ground, fenced and cultivated the ground, and raised a crop of corn upon it that first season. It was the same heavy labor over again that they had endured when they went from Kentucky to Indiana; but this time the strength and energy of young Abraham were at hand to inspire and aid his father, and there was no miserable shivering year of waiting in a half-faced camp before the family could be suitably housed. They were not to escape hardship, however. They fell victims to fever and ague, which they had not known in Indiana, and became greatly discouraged; and the winter after their arrival proved one of intense cold and suffering for the pioneers, being known in the history of the State as "the winter of the deep snow." The severe weather began in the Christmas holidays with a storm of such fatal suddenness that people who were out of doors had difficulty in reaching their homes, and not a few perished, their fate remaining unknown until the melting snows of early spring showed where they had fallen.

In March, 1831, at the end of this terrible winter, Abraham Lincoln left his father's cabin to seek his own fortune in the world. It was the frontier custom for young men to do this when they reached the age of twenty-one. Abraham was now twenty-two, but had willingly remained with his people an extra year to give them the benefit of his labor and strength in making the new home.

He had become acquainted with a man named Offut, a trader and speculator, who pretended to great business shrewdness, but whose chief talent lay in boasting of the magnificent things he meant to do. Offut engaged Abraham, with his stepmother's son, John D. Johnston, and John Hanks, to take a flatboat from Beardstown, on the Illinois River, to New Orleans; and all four arranged to meet at Springfield as soon as the snow should melt.

In March, when the snow finally melted, the country was flooded and traveling by land was utterly out of the question. The boys, therefore, bought a large canoe, and in it floated down the Sangamon River to keep their appointment with Offut. It was in this

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