

“There I Grew Up”

By

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***Legend and myth present Abraham Lincoln as a poor and humble rail splitter from the backwoods of the American West, unschooled, without family or social place, a common man, who through his own efforts, rose to become the leading figure in the nation, the *president. He was the myth made real, *rising from a log cabin to the *White House in Washington.**

And in the legend and myth there is more: While in the White House he did mighty deeds. *He freed the slaves and he won the war and he saved the Union and he reconciled a nation and he brought a new birth of freedom. *He wrote sentences that would

live forever in the national memory. He brooded over the sins of the nation and counseled *charity and avoidance of malice. And then he died a *martyr for his mighty deeds as the last casualty of the war, and went on to lasting fame and universal approbation, and *was turned into a national monument.

And in the legend and myth there is still more: While accomplishing those mighty deeds and achieving that martyrdom and monumental fame, he remained a humble, generous person.

***People will have made their initial assumption of him, first, from his physical appearance, for which those who have described him sometimes including Lincoln himself, have used, among others, the words “ungainly,” “stooped,” *‘lanky,” “long-armed,” and “homely.” David Turnham, his older friend, said of him in Indiana: *‘Abe was a long tall raw boned boy – odd and gawky.’”**

***Young Abraham Lincoln does not appear to have been a precocious child or any kind of a natural genius. But the time would**

come when he would recognize that he was markedly superior in intellectual ability to those around him – to his father,* to his fellow students in the subscription schools, the “blab” schools that he attended for less than a year, and to the teachers of those schools, and to the other adults in the little settlements in which he found himself.

***The Lincoln log cabin in Spencer County, Indiana, was like the other 20 such cabins that made up the settlement of Pigeon Creek.**

***His father’s most distinctive skills was as a carpenter. He helped build the *Pigeon Creek Church and constructed homes, wagons, and furniture. Surely his son,* a big and strong boy for his age, had to have helped his father in his carpentry; splitting logs, whipsawing lumber, making the pegs that held logs together, daubing clay between the logs.**

But whatever Abraham did, the activity itself did not take. There is no sign that he ever gave the slightest consideration to taking up carpentry on his own, even as an avocation, let alone a vocation.

Most important, the Lincolns, like most of their scattered *neighbors in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, were farmers. In Indiana and again in Illinois the Lincoln party broke ground and hacked a farm out of the woods. They grew some corn to take to the mill in the Indiana woods. By 1824 on the Pigeon Creek farm, Thomas Lincoln had about ten acres of corn, five of wheat, two of oats, and one acre of meadow, along with some livestock. Abraham perforce had to join in the family farmwork, and in addition, owing his labor to his father until he was twenty-one, was loaned out by his father for work on neighbors' farms.

Young Lincoln never took to farming, never liked farmwork. In the short autobiography that he wrote for Jesse Fell in 1860 he

said, with a kind of noncommittal matter-of-factness: “I was raised to farm work, which I continued till I was twenty-two.”

***Spencer County, Indiana, when the family arrived there in 1816, - the year of statehood, was “woods, woods, woods, woods.” Abraham, seven years old when they arrived, big for his age, had an *ax put in his hand and, as he said, rarely put it down from then until he was twenty-one. But when he had a choice, he read books and newspapers.**

As a result of his disinclination to manual labor, and his desire to read, he was sometimes thought to be lazy. Even his cousin, Dennis Hanks, said that Abraham “was lazy – a very lazy man. He was always reading, scribbling, writing, ciphering, writing Poetry, etc.” (Notice the implied definition of what it is to be “lazy.”)

Lincoln was not, spiritually speaking, a rail-splitter.

***In the rough male world of these frontier western places physical combat was a regular feature, not only for enjoyment, but also as a**

test of one's "manhood." Lincoln preferred mediation to confrontation.

Several of those who testified to his refraining from drink said also that he was "liberal" with respect to drinking by others.

***Lincoln told a story about himself that showed a self-mockery not present in the temperance folks. As Lincoln set out from Springfield on his way to Washington, the only other passenger in the stage was a Kentuckian, on his way home from Missouri. The latter, impressed with Lincoln's gravity and melancholy, undertook to relieve the general monotony of the ride by offering him a chew of tobacco. With a plain "No, sir, thank you; I never chew," Lincoln declined, and a long period of silence followed. Later in the day the stranger, pulling from his pocket a leather-covered case, offered Lincoln a cigar, which he also politely declined on the ground that he never smoked. Finally, as they neared the station where horses were to be changed, the Kentuckian, pouring a cup of brandy from a flask offered it to Lincoln with the remark, "Well, stranger, seeing**

you don't smoke or chew, perhaps you'll take a little of this French brandy. It's a prime article and a good appetizer besides." His tall and uncommunicative companion declined this last and best evidence of Kentucky hospitality. The Kentuckian, transferring to another stage, shook Lincoln warmly by the hand. "See here, stranger," he said, good humoredly, "you're a clever, but strange companion. I may never see you again, and I don't want to offend you, but I want to say this: my experience has taught me that a man who has no vices has damned few virtues. Good-day."

***Young Lincoln was always cordial and welcoming in his treatment of individual African-Americans whom he met. This was true all the way from Billy the Barber to *Frederick Douglass, the distinguished writer and lecturer, whom he went out of his way to welcome to the White House and the reception after his second inauguration as president of the United States.**

Douglass, after his three or more meetings with President Lincoln, made statements that are often quoted – for example, "I

was never more quickly or more completely put at ease in the presence of a great man than that of Abraham Lincoln.”

***Lincoln would not be sentimental about the traditional one-room school-house where he received his very limited formal education. What Lincoln said about his teachers was that “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.” (The dropping of the g’s – the lapse into dialect – is Lincoln’s own).**

Asked for a thumbnail biography for a directory of congressmen, he took one of the six short lines to say with stunning succinctness: “Education defective.”

***In a society of hunters, Lincoln did not hunt; where many males shot rifles, Lincoln did not shoot; among fishermen, Lincoln did not fish; *among many who were cruel to animals, Lincoln was kind; *surrounded by farmers, Lincoln fled from farming; with a**

father who was a carpenter, Lincoln did not take up carpentry; in a frontier village preoccupied with physical tasks, Lincoln avoided manual labor; in a world in which men smoked and chewed,* Lincoln never used tobacco; in a rough, profane world, Lincoln did not swear; in a social world in which fighting was a regular male activity, Lincoln became a peacemaker; in a hard-drinking society, Lincoln did not drink; when a temperance movement condemned all drinking, Lincoln the nondrinker, did not join it; in an environment soaked with hostility to Indians, Lincoln resisted it; in a time and place in which the great mass of common men in the West supported Andrew Jackson, Lincoln *supported Henry Clay; surrounded by Democrats, Lincoln became a Whig; in a political party with a strong nativist undercurrent, Lincoln rejected that prejudice; in a southern-flavored setting soft on slavery, *Lincoln always opposed it; in a white world with strong racial antipathies, Lincoln was generous to blacks; in an environment indifferent to education, Lincoln cared about it intensely; in a family active in a church, young Lincoln abstained.

***At seventeen, Lincoln found a job working on a ferry on the Ohio River. Here he acquired an interest in river transportation that influenced his early political and economic views. *Two years later, Lincoln traveled by flatboat all the way to New Orleans.**

***At age eighteen, Lincoln earned his first real dollar, an occasion he remembered for the rest of his life. Working on the Ohio River, he hauled some trunks aboard a steamboat for a couple of travelers and was astounded when they each tossed him a half-dollar. “I could scarcely credit,” he recalled as president three decades later, “that I, a poor boy, had earned a dollar in less than a day.”**

***In the Lincoln cabins in Kentucky and Indiana, there would be a copy of the King James version of the Bible, and perhaps a copy of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* so that this American boy *could, while his horse was resting at the end of a row, read the words of a pious Puritan. Sarah Bush Johnston brought a copy of**

***Robinson Crusoe* to her new household, where her remarkable stepson could read it and join Crusoe on his island.**

***With family chores and on loan to neighbors for farm work at 25¢ a day, it does not sound as though there would be much time for reading books.**

***Lincoln read the books that were available, and that he could borrow, often going to some trouble (as in the legend) to borrow them. *The legend has him reading, as in a well-known painting, by firelight; his stepmother explicitly contradicted saying that he went to bed at night and read by daylight in the morning.**

He did not skim across the top of a thousand books but immersed himself in a dozen or two. Although *Pilgrim's Progress* and Aesop's *Fables* and *The Arabian Nights* have a large imaginative component, he did not read novels, or read purely for distraction.

***But Lincoln made many specific quotations of, and references to, the Bible. In the greatest speech of his life, the Second Inaugural, he would make use of biblical quotations: “Judge not that ye be not judged” would be well known.**

***He was able to read entire plays of Shakespeare, and reread them, and talk about them. His favorite plays were *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, along with *Hamlet* and *Richard III*.**

***Lincoln taught himself surveying in order to take a job as a deputy surveyor. He had to learn the practical application of the principles of trigonometry, and got two books on the subject and on surveying, and learned enough to do the job.**

***Most important, he studied the law. He borrowed books from lawyers, read and studied Blackstone, and taught himself to be a lawyer. But before, in Booneville, Indiana, Lincoln visited the Circuit Court on court day and was mesmerized by the process and the lawyering.**

***His stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln, came into the boy's life when he was ten, after the terrible period in which his mother *Nancy Hanks, had *died of "the milk sick" and then Thomas and Dennis Hanks and Abraham had lived in the squalor of the dirt-floor cabin with sister Sarah, age twelve, doing what cooking was done. *That the stepmother took over and cleaned things up is celebrated in the Lincoln legend as a kind of reverse of the stepmothers of children's stories. What she brought to young Abraham was not only a household remade but appreciation of this stepson's qualities. Lincoln scholar Mark E. Neely, Jr. has written: "No one in all the vast Lincoln literature has an unkind word to say about her. She apparently came to like Abraham better than her own progeny, and he apparently came to like her better than his own." And to compound this curious criss-crossing of relationships, *Thomas Lincoln seems to have come to like his stepson, John D. Johnston, better than he did his own son.**

What happened to poor Tom Lincoln was that, somehow, he had the bad luck to have an impossibly bright and strong-willed son. Had that not happened, his deficiencies, such as they were, would not have been spread across the pages of a thousand books for all the world to read. He appears to have been a limited man, not a bad man. But clearly there was a mismatch between father and son.

We know that this gangling, ill-clad Indiana teenager would be generous, kind, sensitive to suffering, honest to the point that would one day be famous. *His stepmother, Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln, in an interview with William H. Herndon, Lincoln's last law partner and biographer, gave one of the most impressive of the testimonies to young Abraham's conduct: "Abe never gave me a cross word or look and never refused in fact, or even in appearance, to do anything I requested him. I never gave him a cross word in all my life. He was kind to everybody and to everything . . ." *He had the moral backbone to chide his schoolmates when he was ten for cruelty to turtles, to stop his militia company when he was twenty-three from killing an old Indian. Students of his life have found his

reputation as “Honest Abe” largely deserved. So he was in some original, essential way a good boy.

***Young Lincoln would write his own name in the firm clear hand the world would come to know. He writes his name, let us guess, as a million youngsters have done, over and over, partly as practice in penmanship and signature-signing, partly as reinforcement of his identity, partly in the self-indulgent fancy that his name will someday bring him fame. He writes his name in his copybook, with some familiar schoolbook doggerel of the sort that pupils in all ages seem to pass on from one generation to the next:**

Abraham Lincoln

His hand and pen

He will be good

But God knows when

***Had Mr. Lincoln been shy, reserved, dull, and laconic, his place in Pigeon Creek and New Salem would have been quite**

different than it was. He had a gift – his storytelling, inherited in some part from his father, which helped to give him popularity.

Abraham Lincoln, throughout his life, was more than a teller of jokes, although he certainly was that. He had also a droll and witty ingredient in his daily interaction with his fellow human beings and in his reactions to the events of the day that gave flavor to his whole personality.

And as to his telling set-piece jokes, he was the retail dealer who would know just the right story to make his point, which is certainly a creative act in its own right.

Lincoln joyfully told the story of the undaring young soldier going off to war, whose sweetheart made him a sash to wear into battle bearing the brave motto “Liberty or Death”; the cautious soldier boy asked whether it might be amended to read “Liberty or Badly Wounded.”

***The widening world drew the Lincoln family further westward. The family went to settle near Decatur, Illinois without Lincoln's sister Sarah. At age twenty, a year after marrying, she died in childbirth. *By the time he was eighteen, three out of five members of Lincoln's immediate family – mother, brother, and sister – were dead. Like many resilient pioneer families, however, this fragmented family survived – indeed it grew.* Thomas Lincoln built the three covered wagons that in March 1830 transported the Lincoln-Hanks-Johnston clan to Illinois. *During fourteen years, they had turned their farm in the wilderness into a comfortable home with dependable neighbors, and now they headed for a new frontier to start all over again.**

***Although he had just turned twenty-one the previous month and was now legally an adult, Lincoln made this journey westward with his family rather than staying in Indiana. He recognized the significance of his choice and noted his *age in both of the autobiographical sketches that he wrote for his presidential campaign. *It would be another change and challenge in Abraham**

Lincoln's life – one of many that would make him the most admired man in America – a man who spent one-quarter of his life as a Hoosier.