

The Growing Boy Lincoln

"Poor Lincoln!" sighed a gentleman one day to James Whitcomb Riley, as a group of Hoosiers were discussing the fourteen years - those from seven to twenty-one - that Abraham Lincoln spent in South Western Indiana.

"Poor!" exclaimed the poet. "the boy by the cabin fire in the backwoods was infinitely rich."

Here we have two ways of looking at the formative period of Abraham Lincoln's life, the years in which he began to discover men and their ways, to figure out why their actions were what they were, what were the reasons for the strong man as well as for the "no account", to measure himself, decide what road he must follow. The remark which aroused Riley's ire reflects the point of view of the majority of Lincoln's biographers. They have looked only to externals, seen nothing but the unquestionable poverty, hardship, and discouragements, the ignorance and meanness. But men of imagination like Riley know what boys are. He saw other things in these fourteen growing years, and one of first importance was high adventure.

It is a fortunate thing that there are people in South Western Indiana today, particularly in Spencer County

where Lincoln spent these fourteen years, that have recognized this element of adventure and have boldly undertaken to dramatize it for themselves and for the public. Probably no more interesting monument will ever be raised to Abraham Lincoln than the one that the Spencer County, Indiana Historical Society is undertaking, - a permanent biennial pageant, on the Fourth of July, celebrating the life of the Boy Lincoln in their county.

What episodes they have to draw from! There is the crossing of the Ohio in 1816, when the boy was seven years old and Tom Lincoln moved his family from slave-ridden Kentucky to free Indiana. The river must have been like a sea to him who had never laid eyes on big waters. - There is the journey in golden October, through a forest of primeval trees, rich in wild animals, to the land which they must clear for their first shelter, a half-face camp; there is the fight for food and clothing; the tragedy of his mother's death and burial; the coming, months later, of a new mother, who was to become his best friend. There is his first long journey to the outside world - down the Ohio and the Mississippi - a "hand" on a flat-boat carrying a load of produce, and finally the marvels of New Orleans. And at the end of these fourteen years the greatest adventure of all - the migration of the entire family

from the forests of Indiana to the prairies of Illinois.

As a background for these dramatic episodes, the pageant-makers have the bold bluff near which the Lincolns landed when they first entered Indiana - as a foreground the wide sweep of the noble river which was both to bring the world to the boy and to take ^{the boy} him to the world. Here the episodes will be enacted by those who are for the most part descendants of the very boys and girls who became his schoolmates and his companions in labor and amusement.

It would be difficult to devise a monument more capable of illustrating the kind of thing James Whitcomb Riley had in mind when he exclaimed on the richness of the life of the pioneer boy.

The effort to dramatize the Boy Lincoln's Indiana years is really one of the by-products of an extensive piece of local historical research which has been going on for several years in the South Western corner of the state. The leaders in it speak of it as the "Lincoln Inquiry", and what they mean by that is that they are trying to establish beyond doubt what kind of people made up their community from 1816 to 1830 - what they were thinking and doing - which means what kind of thoughts and actions played on the impressionable nature of this extra-

ordinary boy, when ^{over} the early comers knew ~~him~~ merely as a willing and husky laborer of eager curiosity and great good nature.

In this "Inquiry" they have turned up some really important fresh material: among other things documentary proof that it was in this part of the world that Lincoln laid the foundations for that vast repertoire of stories which he used in later years to illustrate, to divert, to clinch an argument - a repertoire which for its variety and extent was always the puzzle of his associates.

The proof that South Western Indiana gave him his foundation for this important part of his political and social equipment comes from one of the most distinguished of the group of Lincoln lovers and students which centers in Indiana - Mr. William Fortune, of Indianapolis.

Mr. Fortune was born in South Western Indiana, and when he was but 15 or 16 years old undertook to write the history of his native county. He did it so well that one of Abraham Lincoln's personal friends, the well known Civil War soldier, General James C. Veatch, commissioned him to go through that part of the world and gather recollections of Lincoln.

Young Fortune undertook the commission with enthusiasm, and for weeks trod the paths of the county, making

notes of all he could hear and of all he could learn. ~~There~~
~~is much of interest, much of freshness in these unpublished~~
~~notes of Mr. Fortune.~~ ^{finders} ~~This~~ most significant and important
~~contribution he first made public a couple of years ago in an~~
~~address before the South Western Indiana Historical Society.~~

It came from a character, famous in the stories of Lincoln's youth, "Uncle Natty", an intimate friend of the Boy Lincoln. He was old and feeble when Mr. Fortune found him by the roadside. "I began asking him questions, among others, 'What were the books the boys of the neighborhood read?' Uncle Natty named several, and then," said Mr. Fortune, "I noticed that he was looking down to the ground, leaning on his cane, chuckling to himself. I asked him why he was smiling. 'There was another book we boys got a lot of fun out of,' he answered, in the indistinct voice of a feeble old man.

"What was it?" I asked.

"A book of funny stories," he replied. "Lincoln would read it to us out in the woods on Sundays."

"Do you remember the name of it, Uncle Natty?"

"Oh, yes; oh, yes, mighty well."

"What was it?"

"I understood him to say, 'The King's Jester.'"

Later, Mr. Fortune tried to find the book, but

neither he nor the expert book buyers that he consulted were able to locate it. What they did find, however, was an English "funny book" of the 18th century called, "Quinn's Jester".

"Quinn's Jester" is a rare book now, but there are later books which may have come into Lincoln's hands containing many stories credited to "Mr. Quinn." For instance, there was published in Philadelphia, in 1789, a book in two parts, the first called "The American Jest Book", the second, "The Merry Fellow", containing stories of the "celebrated Mr. Quinn." Undoubtedly it was "Quinn's" - not "King's" - "Jester" which young Abraham Lincoln read surreptitiously on Sunday afternoons to his Spencer County mates.

One can go through these early jest books, story by story, and find little reason why the boys should have gone to the woods to read the book. Now and then there is a story which we would class as gross or vulgar, but there is precious little that could be called obscene credited to Mr. Quinn. Probably the reason that the boys slipped away on Sunday to read this book in the woods was that both parental and community authority frowned on light reading on the Sabbath Day - rather frowned, too, on frivolous reading of any sort. Reading was a serious matter, and "funny books", innocent as they might be, were under more or less suspicion, though the telling of stories

around the fireside was a well recognized recreation.

An important matter with which the "Lincoln Inquiry" has not as yet dealt concerns the awakening the boy must have gotten from the picturesque class of "Hawkers & Walkers" who did so much to keep American pioneers in touch with the ways of civilization. They threaded the highways of new communities - on foot - by cart - by boat - no corner too remote for them -- read about them in Richardson Wright's fascinating recent book.

Think of Lincoln as a boy running a ferry across the Ohio River, picking up every day one or more peddlers coming from Pittsburgh, New York, New Orleans, carrying articles the like of which he had never seen, but which he was sure to examine with the liveliest curiosity. Think of the gossip they retailed of the cities from which they came.

Think of his carrying over the river one of the many scientists that walked the country in those days. For all we know, even Audubon himself may have been ferried over by young Lincoln and talked to him about the birds in the Spencer County forests, their migrations, their habits. Who knows what he may not have heard from travelers across his ferry or at his father's or somebody else's fireside at night, of Andrew Jackson, of the dangers of a national bank, of the crime of slavery. Or what reminiscences of George Washington, the battles of the

Revolution, the War of 1812, from men who had taken part in all those great doings, even seen George Washington.

Although Lincoln must have gleaned much from "~~Hawkers and Walkers~~", it was the people in the little town and settlement where he worked that did most for him. It must be remembered that from the time he was 12 or 14 he, like all boys of his age, sought work after the crops were in, outside of the family. The jobs he found often brought him in contact with the merchants, the preachers, the lawyers, the judges of the settlements. ~~That he sought these contacts all the reminiscences of his life in this period agree.~~

A stimulating result of the "Lincoln Inquiry" is that these people ~~with whom in the nature of his life he came into more or less direct contact~~ were much superior to those which biographers have painted as his associates - people of better background - more education - more definite purposes - higher political and social ideals. One thing in particular should be remembered about them. They passed on to this boy the books which laid the foundation of his tremendous faith in American Democracy and its possibilities, and there is no doubt in the world that he discussed his faith and its implications with them. It was among them that in childhood, so he says himself, he got the idea that the men who made the revolution of

1776 struggled for "something more than common" as ~~he~~ put it. It was "something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come." It was these people that introduced him to the Declaration of Independence - the document which gave him the foundations for his political faith. "I have never had a feeling politically," he said once, "that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence."

No. James Whitcomb Riley was right, when he exclaimed on the richness of this pioneer boy's life, and we who have been content to see only a one-room cabin, lins^{ey}-wolsey trousers, coonskin cap, long days of hard labor, drawling, shiftless neighbors, are guilty both of ignorance of facts and dullness of imagination. The Boy Lincoln found richness there, and it is a splendid thing that at last those who have followed him in Spencer County have taken it upon themselves to dramatize these fourteen years, to help us to understand what was going into the making of this man who, more than any other in our history, has given us an inspiring demonstration of the meaning to human beings of the document that we celebrate on the Fourth of July - the Declaration of Independence.