IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

CHAPTER XIV

The most unique, and I am inclined to believe, the most popular monument that ever will be erected to Abraham Lincoln, is the restoration now in process of the town of New Salem on the Sangamon river, in Menard County, Ill.

This was the town to which, as we have already seen, Lincoln came back in July, 1831, to take a position as clerk in a grocery store. Here he spent the six years following his arrival - years of livliest intellectual and social activity - here he discovered that he had a power over men which could be utilized to further his natural ambition for public life - here he definitely decided to make a profession of the law - here there came to him the deepest love and the greatest sorrow of his life.

It was a town of short life - this New Salem - short, but colorful. Founded in 1829, it thrived amazingly for seven or eight years; then, as quickly as it sprung into life, it dropped out. In a dozen years is was a deserted village; one by one all but one or two of its cabins were carried away, and the little that was left crumbled to dust. For forty years, New Salem was only a rough cow pasture.

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But it was an unforgetable spot. Here Abraham Lincoln had lived for six years, and here was the scene of a hundred episodes of his life - grave and gay. In New Salem he had found himself - and men had found him. The memory of his life there had become the great romance of Menard County, and a few years ago, descendants of the very people who had made New Salem, began to talk of its restoration. Out of the gradual growing interest there arose what was called "The Old Salem Lincoln League," committed to rebuilding the village.

The idea captivated the imagination not only of Menard County but of the State. What a monument, not only to Abraham Lincoln but to their own heroic pioneers! Fittingly enough, the leaders and backers in this undertaking were of the town of Petersburg, two miles up the Sangamon - a town born after New Salem, and really born to absorb it.

A more rewarding site ~~than New Salem~~ for such an undertaking as that of the League could not be imagined. It lies along the top of a bluff, a hundred feet or more high, a segment of the long chain of bluffs that in past centuries the Sangamon river had worn out of the soft Illinois soil. The land rises sharply from the river bank, a highway at its foot, and spreads back into the wide prairies. From the top one looks today over a long winding stretch of the river, over broad plains, and north, south, and east upon segments of bluffs like that on which the town set, all heavily timbered ~~with many varieties~~ of white-limbed sycamores

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along the river, maples, locuts, beechs, oaks on the hill sides. Sixteen miles in a straight line to the east the dome of the capitol at Springfield is visible - a lovely picture, awakening an involuntary comparison to the scene from the height at Mt. Vernon.

As a first step towards the permanent remaking of New Salem which it dreamed, the League decided on a pageant - a pageant rehearsing Lincoln's life in the town, as its contribution towards the Illinois centennial of 1918. It began its work in the rough field at the top of the bluff - a field now a tangled bed of prairie grass and underbrush. The first investigations were more rewarding than ~~would be~~ had been expected, - a little cutting and digging revealed depressions, foundation stones, walls, the tracks of old roads, until soon - to the joy of the League - they had New Salem plotted more perfectly than most of them had dreamed it could be. The windings of the roads, the location of the tavern, of the stores and houses in which Lincoln had worked and lived, the position of the dam where he had made his first dramatic appearance - these things fixed upon, log cabins were quickly erected, and in September of 1918 the pageant was given.

It caught attention, stirred interest far and wide, doing not only what the devoted and enthusiastic group hoped it might do, but much more. The State itself was not slow in seeing that Menard County had a big and beautiful idea, and it has given since full backing to the plan of permanent restoration of the town,

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acquiring most, if not all, of the land needed for a complete piece of work. It has built, too, on the bluff overlooking the river a small but most attractive and satisfactory museum in which a collection of Lincoln and pioneer relics is growing healthily. It is not going to be very long - possibly before the end of the present year - when the entire town will be reproduced in solid timber and according to carefully worked out specifications. It is hoping to furnish cabins, shops and mills as they were in 1831. Luckily, not a few original articles are to be had in Menard County itself.

When New Salem stands again complete on its bluff overlooking the Sangamon river, the six happiest and most fruitful years Abraham Lincoln had spent up to this point in his life will lie before us more truthfully and vividly than pen or brush could ever reproduce them.

One then can see the town into which he walked that July day in 1831, see the store in which he was to work, the mill over which he was to preside, the homes of the friends he so readily made.

New Salem when Lincoln first found it was only two years old, but in those two years it had gathered a population of something like a hundred people and had, scattered up and down its one long street, something between twenty and twenty-five cabins of varying size - from the big, two story, double roomed tavern down

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to a tiny 8 ~~ft.~~ x 12 ft. bachelor's quarters.

The group of people, taken as a whole, which Lincoln now joined ~~in New Salem~~, was altogether the most substantial, the widest awake and the most cultivated with which ~~that~~ he had ~~ever found~~ so far been provided. Take James Rutledge, the owner of the mill and also of the tavern on the hill. Here was a man of the famous Rutledge family, who with his wife had first come into the Illinois country from Kentucky a dozen years earlier, and had prospered here. He had a large family of fine children - ambitious, upright, generous people - the Rutledges. Take the Rev. John Cameron, James Rutledge's partner in the mill. He was a Cumberland Presbyterian minister, devout, courageous, and with an eye to sound business - the kind of man that everybody respected and listened to. Born in Kentucky, he and his wife had moved to Illinois in 1815, and in 1829 when he and Rutledge decided that they wanted a mill at a particular bend in the Sangamon river he had taken land on the bluff above it and incorporated the town of New Salem, with the results we have seen. Then there was a young man of parts, around Lincoln's age, Samuel Hill, a store-keeper, and an all around good citizen. There was Dr. John Allen, who attended to spiritual as well as physical wants, running a Sunday school and temperance society. There was a school teacher, one Mentor Graham, of good mind and acquirements, intent on seeing that New Salem did not grow up ignorant, and fostering

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every spark of interest in knowledge that he found.

Already the little town was something of an industrial centre. There was a blacksmith, a tinner, a cooper, a wheel wright, a weaver, a hatter - industries carried on on the premises where the craftsman lived. They had a large, fairly prosperous section to serve, for, in the dozen years since the first settlers had come, some of them had already taken strong hold - men like Squire Coleman Smoot, who lived across the river, and in time built up a great fortune, - men like Squire Bowling Green and James Short, successful farmers already.

But the New Salem into which Lincoln came in 1831 had not only its substantial, decent people, interested in building up an orderly community and educating its children - the ambition of its boys and girls was already stirring to get a year or more in the academy at Jacksonville 30 miles away - it had, like every pioneer settlement, a boisterous, sporting element. A little ways outside of the town, and using it as their market and trading place, there was a settlement called, from its founder, one of the first to come into the country, Clary's Grove. The young men of this neighborhood had banded themselves into what we would call today a gang, a group of as ingenious and reckless rowdies as ever enlivened and terrified a countryside. Mr. Herndon, who knew them first hand, declares that they were as generous as they were riotous; but it is not their generosity which figures in tradition.

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One of the Clarys from the settlement had a grocery in New Salem, not on the main street, but, as the little map here published shows, around a bend in the road, bringing it directly above the dam and effectively concealing it from the town proper. Whiskey was the chief stock in Clary's grocery, it is said. The place had come to be a rendezvous for all that was rough in the countryside - here horse races began and ended, and here regularly cock fights and gander pulling went on. To this store, night after night, after the day's work was done, the Clary Grove boys made their way, racing down the half mile street of New Salem, whooping and shouting, terrifying the children and making all the good citizens shake their heads.

As chance had worked it, the store of which Lincoln was to take charge was not in the main part of the town, but directly above the mill dam, side by side with Clary's grocery, and across the street from the cock pit. The nearness was such that inevitably Lincoln was forced almost at the start of his life in the town to settle on his relations to the Clary Grove boys. He could join the gang; he could withdraw from them and become their butt; but he did neither. By his superior skill in their favorite game of wrestling, he defeated their champion, ~~winning their whole-hearted admiration~~, and, by his fierce indignation and severe punishment when that champion tried to trick him, he won their whole-hearted admiration as well as a half-awed respect. His popularity with them only grew as time went on. The episode is significant. It shows

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the kind of a man he had come to be - one that could live among rowdies, beat them at their own game, walk untouched by their excesses and meannesses and yet be an acceptable, unquestioned umpire of their sports - already a self-directing human being, understanding and sympathizing with weaknesses and able to discriminate between weaknesses and meannesses, good intentions and malice - a man who could put up with idle, rough, drinking and adventuring men so long as they neither lied nor tricked nor practiced cruelty. Let them do that and they found quickly how heavy his blow, how stern his temper.

If Lincoln established his ascendency at the start with the lower half of New Salem, he was no less successful with the upper half. The good citizens of the town discovered quickly that here was a young man who was as ready with words and even with a pen as he was with his fists - who fitted in, took hold, wherever there was anything going on; ~~and~~ thus it happened that the election returns in the first election held in New Salem after his coming to the town are all in his hand. They found he had a deep interest in politics, was informed, read the newspapers, could debate the issuesof the day, national as well as local, was not afraid of discussion, of challenging an opinion, a fact-or of accepting correction. More than politics interested him. There was religion; ~~and~~ they found that in the continuous debate on the evidences and doctrines and practices of Christianity that divided the evenings

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on the doorsteps or around the stove in the grocery store, with local gossip and politics, ~~that~~ Lincoln was sure to take a serious and and thoughtful part.

He soon knew everybody, knew their intellectual resources, and availed himself of them. His headquarters of course were his grocery store and the mill on the stream below, which Denton Offutt had leased and put in his charge - wonderful centres for acquaintanceship, when a man had the genius for companionship that this young man had. The traders that came in from the country round, men like Squire Smooth and Squire Bowling Green and James Short - the prosperous men, listened to him, sized him up, and went home to repeat what he had said and comment as men had in Macon County and back in Indiana, that here was somebody "different," somebody that was worth keeping an eye on.

That is, in a very few months after his appearance in New Salem, this chance young man had built up a following - was everybody's friend and had made everybody his friend. His following ~~It~~ was on a solid basis, too, born of their liking and respect. Somehow he had contrived to meet every man on his own ground, establish a point of contact and interest with him. He liked them all and liked them for what was decent and natural ~~in them~~ and interesting in them. He already was the man of the White House.

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Lincoln sensed his popularity in New Salem - knew men liked him, saw that they listened to his views, respected his integrity. Why not cash in on his popularity? He was ambitious to be a public man. Was there anybody in the neighborhood more fit than he for public office? Did he not understand the pith of the matters to be handled as well as those about him? He thought so. Did he not hold the public good above his own advancement, and was not that the heart of the matter, after all? If those people whom he had won so solidly would back him, why should he not venture? There you have the young pioneer American, confident that whatever there is to be done he can learn to do in the doing - the inevitable product of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution!

By this time Lincoln had made his way with the school teacher, Mentor Graham, as he had with all the rest of the town, and he discussed with him going into public life. Probably he said to the school teacher about what later he wrote into his first political address: "Every man," he said there, "is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed by my fellow men by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition is yet to be developed."

Graham, having some sense of the limitations of the young man, particularly of the handicap his handling of English would be

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when he came to be placed side by side with men who had had the advantages of the schools, suggested grammar to him. We can read between the lines that Lincoln's verbs and nouns did not always agree, that he spoke of "that there grub-hoe" and "them fellers." The significant thing of the episode is his immediate response to the suggestion, his ability quickly to take a hint, and never to resent it; his willingness to make a supreme effort, to sacrifice, labor to the point of weariness, to add something to his equipment. And so he studied grammar, borrowing his book, the only one in the neighborhood. Kirkham's Grammar it was; and the fact that in the winter of 1831-32 down in New Salem, Ill, Abraham Lincoln put in weeks of day and night labor over this book, gives Kirkham's Grammar, which, in the natural course of things, would have passed out of history forever, a permanent place on its page!

It is consoling that it is so good a book. Twenty-five years ago, J. McCan Davis of Springfield, Ill, who was assisting me in gathering pictures and verifying data for a life of Lincoln on which I was working, ran down the very copy which Lincoln studied. At that time it was in Dakota, owned by a descendant of James Rutledge, coming to him by a course of events which belong to a later chapter in our story.

Recently, Miss Jane Hamand, the owner of the Lincoln collection housed in the public library of Decatur, of which I have already spoken, has secured the book for exhibition - I hope it means a permanent place in the Decatur Lincoln room — certainly

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it will never anywhere have better care of be shewn with greater pride.— It was in this collection that last year I first went over Lincoln's copy of Kirkham's Grammar - went over it page by page, with a lingering hope that I might find somewhere a line in Lincoln's hand, but never was a book, although studied by many different people, more respectfully treated. There is not an interlineation in Lincoln's or anybody's else hand, outside of these on the title page and cover.

I suspect that a modern teacher would laugh at Kirkham's Grammar, and at the "systematic order of parsing" which its author presents as a proof that he has done what no previous grammarian had ever been able to do. Whether that is so or not, I confess I found the book not only entertaining but highly stimulating. I really think Samuel Kirkham was justified in claiming that his grammar would "accelerate the march of the juvenile mind in its advance in the path of science by dispersing those clouds which so often bewilder it, removing those obstacles that ordinarily retard its progress" and that it would "render interesting and delightful a study which has hitherto been considered tedious, dry and irksome." He does it by an extreme conciseness of definition, and a wealth of easily understood illustration, plenty of exercises in false syntax, and every now and then a paragraph of good advice to the student, such as:

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"You will now please read this lecture - Kirkham's Grammar is divided into lectures instead of chapters - four times over, and read closely and carefully. . . . exercise a little sober thought, five minutes spent in reflection are worth whole days occupied in careless reading."

What could you have better? Kirkham's Grammar was a n excellent self-teacher, just the kind of a book for a young man of Lincoln's meagre schooling and desultory reading. He came out from it with an ability to make nouns and verbs agree - indeed, to handle his "parts of speech" with a high degree of success. But the great thing it did for him, I imagine, was to show him the value of systematized knowledge of a subject. He must have found a real intellectual satisfaction in the clearness, the logical sweep, the orderliness of the matter in the book. He had read widely - far more widely, I am convinced, than we can prove; he had reflected much; but his mind was full of unrelated information. And it was a mind with a necessity for having things in their places, of seeing relations - a necessity, too, for expressing those relations so that he could get over to others what he thought and felt about them. He had come to this point when he takes up this simple, practical, serious discussion of Samuel Kirkham's; and I think there is no doubt that it gave him a sense of the possibilities in study which he had never fully grasped before. It was a sense expressed in his comment when he had mastered the book: "Well, if that's what they call a science,

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I think I will try another." - a great intellectual discovery, you see.

His resolve to capitalize his popularity and this preparation he had been making in study, crystalized in February, of 1832 in his first public document - indeed the first written thing that we have from his pen. It is his thinking on public affairs and his way of expression that are really important about this document, outside of the fact, of course, that "humble Abraham Lincoln" as he calls himself in the announcement of his candidacy, should have had the audacity to plunge into a world that was unknown to him and for which, as he himself realized, he had so little preparation.

He wasted no time in attacking the "issue," which, in his judgment, was the vital one at the moment: - "easier means of communication" for the County of Sangamon. Reluctantly he argued that railroads and canals were not for them. His objection was "paying for them; and the objection arose from the want of ability to pay." He rehearsed the project then under consideration for a railroad from Springfield to Jacksonville, and argued that the estimated cost - some $290,000 - was what he called a "heart-appalling shock." There was nothing for their "in fact resources" but improvement of the Sangamon river. Here he was at home, and here he argued from his personal adventures and observation on the stream, and came out with a plan which today - over ninety years

after the appearance of his "announcement"

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has been adopted and is being applied in more than one of the Middle West States.

Briefly, what Lincoln proposed was that the channel of the Sangamon between New Salem and Beardstown should be straightened; by damming up the river at the upper end of the great bends and then cutting straight through the sod of the prairie a low channel which the water itself would in a short time sufficiently deepen. One of the great difficulties in the navigation of the Sangamon was the enormous amount of drift timber which piled up at every bend, damming the water and making a passage impossible. This drift, Lincoln believed, would be carried swiftly down stream if once the channel was deepened. Above New Salem there were numbers of short loops in the river which he proposed also to cut off.

There was no doubt about the common sense of the plan - that every one who saw his announcement agreed.

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That is, here was a young man that based what he had to say on serious reflection; it was not merely political palaver; it was good and practical suggestion.

Taking the document as a whole it shows that Lincoln had already begun to sense the difference between imitative and personal expression, that he was already struggling to make words say what was in his mind, that clearness, making others understand, was the aim he had in writing. That is, this document of his shows very little effort at fine writing, has few phrases that would be called purely conventional - things said in the way he had heard other people say them. He is still a little awkward, not entirely free with words. Probably he was considerably under the influence of Mentor Graham, who no doubt labored with him over the document, though I suspect that aside from verbal changes that Graham may have suggested, there is very little in this first piece of writing that we have of Lincoln's that is not his own. We must admit that it is a fine showing for a pioneer boy of twenty-three, whose schooling, all told, had been less than a year, and whose strong and willing hand had been busy almost daily since he was eight years old with the ax and the grub hoe, not with the pen.

Outside of transportation, the main subject he takes a whack at is the exorbitant interest rates which were common in those days. With that characteristic frankness which so often

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impelled him to do what in later years his friends called "giving his case away", he emphasized his advocacy of a law fixing the limits of usury by saying that in case of extreme necessity there could always be means found to cheat the law! There is significance in his frankness, for if he is going to frame a law with a loop hole in it, a place of escape, he is not going to pretend that there is no such opening there. He is going to tell you in advance exactly what is in his mind. That is, here is no political dissembler, hypocrite; on the contrary, a youthful politician, both canny and honest. Confident and bold as the address is in the main, it is quite evident that he put it out with more or less misgivings; his humility, his constitutional sense of inferiority, comes out at the end. "I was born and have ever remained," he said, "in the most humble walks of life, I have no wealthy or popular relations or friends to recommend me. . . . If the good people in their wisdom shall see fit to keep me in the background, I am too familiar with disappointment to be very much chagrined,"--a combination of humility and philosophy which attended him to the end of his days.

It was in March that his address went out to his fellow citizens; but before he had time to follow it up, all Illinois wasplunged into the excitement of an Indian war. Instead of campaigning, as he had expected in the spring and summer of 1832, Lincoln joined the state militia that was preparing to chase the Indian chief, Black Hawk and his followers,

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out of the Rock river country in the north-western part of the State. According to the arrangement of Black Hawk and his people with the government of the United States, they had the right to hunt and raise corn in this district until it was surveyed and sold to settlers. Squatters had invaded the territory, Black Hawk felt that his rights were being disregarded, and decided to evict the trespassers. Hence the call to evict him.

Lincoln did not hesitate. He enlisted with all the young men of his neighborhood. The next experience in his so far varied career was to be that of war.

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