May 2, 1932

Mr. W. H. Townsend
620 First National Bank Building
Lexington, Kentucky

Dear Mr. Townsend:

It was pleasant to hear from you again and I am glad you are making a little study of Lincoln and the liquor question. I am always interested to see how people come out who attack that topic.

The point that you raise, that is the exchange of accusation and denial in the Ottawa speech on Lincoln's liquor selling, I have always taken as a very good example of the looseness of the statement of men in political debate. Douglas declares Lincoln to have been, when he first knew him, a "flourishing grocery-keeper." That is rather amusing as it is certain that Lincoln was never flourishing. Moreover, Douglas in his attempt to belittle Lincoln, or to raise at least a question of his early habits, says that he could "drink more liquor than all of the boys of the town together." That I think is the plainest of political exaggeration. There seems to be good evidence that Lincoln never drank at all in those days, chiefly because he did not like liquor, and also because he did not approve of the sort of life it led to in those he saw around him. So far as I have been able to judge he was always temperate in his habits. It was the nature of the man.

Lincoln does not deny the accusation of, "ruining more liquor than all the men in the town" when he comes to answer Douglas but he does say that "Lincoln never kept a grocery anywhere in the world," and he goes on to make an admission which from the point of view of today is even more damaging and that is, that he did run a still for a time. I do not remember to have ever heard about this still from any other source. Did you?

I am not sure that we can judge of what was in Lincoln's mind when he used the word "grocery" - the name seems to have been applied pretty generally in those days to what we would call a saloon. Beverage, Vol. I. Page 269 quotes from the

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debates in the Illinois legislature where the word is apparently used in the sense of saloon.

Lincoln may not have considered his store a saloon in spite of the fact that Burner says that he, Burner, sold liquor by the glass.

It seems clear that the time Burner became the shop keeper that Lincoln was not having much to do with what went on in the store, that it was as he says, petering out and he was looking elsewhere for a means of support. Under those circumstances Burner probably did, as he said, sold his liquor by the glass. They were closing out and were probably not too careful about the law.

As to Burner's reliability as a witness I never met him but I had my associate, McCann Davis, excellent and thoroughly reliable interviewer, talk to him. He was eighty - garrulous - but told the truth, so we thought.

If you are going to take the exchange between Douglas and Lincoln very seriously, that is if you are going to take it as something more than a bit of political charge and denial, interjected without much thought on either side, well it seems to me that the real point is what Lincoln had in mind when he talked about a grocery.

That there were other goods in the combined stores which he and his associates merged in New Salem is certain. But as I have looked at it no business arrangement could have been more accidental, carried on with less previous planning and on Lincoln's part certainly with less interest.

What does interest me is the fact that while he denies he kept a grocery he admitted he ran a still!

I shall be very glad to know how you come out on the matter. With all good wishes

Very sincerely yours

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