

In this first 21 years of his life, the student is constantly called upon to sift fact from tradition, to balance traditions, the law of probability, the personal equation, the imagination, prejudices, the pride and bias of witnesses--all always in contest. It is picking one's way through a forest full of underbrush, with only now and then a clearly blazed tree, and all in twilight, shadows, mists. Explorers have taken all sorts of paths through this twilight forest of Lincoln's first 21 years. The insistence that he was an illegitimate child. One understands why his political enemies would gladly believe and circulate the tale. It is not quite so clear why friends should shout it--clear, indeed, only in the light of the human propensity to seek for sexual stains and weakness--a reflection of what is going on in the seeker's mind. Old notions, too, of heredity, and an entire underestimate of the value of the pioneer heredity. Students floundered around on this trail of illegitimacy until finally there were too many trees on which were nailed documents that you could not get around--a marriage certificate, with the bond and returns required by law in that early day. They cannot be explained away. And we have all these things.

And so they sifted the strain about his mother, could not give it up, such a precious bit of gossip to roll on tongues and such an easy way to explain the man. And so poor Nancy Hanks, whose father recognized her in his will, and who was brought up largely by a brother whom nobody ever suggested was illegitimate, whose sisters followed her to Indiana, whose nieces and nephews never rejected her. Actual fact has cleared up the misty trail.

Curious enough how these facts came to light. 20 years

ago when I was floundering in the woods, I regarded it as a certainty that Abraham Lincoln's grandmother was a Shipley. By all the tradition and records grandfather Abraham Lincoln had married a Shipley. But 10 years (?) after me along comes a student with the passion and the opportunity of clearing up the family line. He is not willing to take a step in the woods without a written chart, a document, and he looks in the proper place for documents, Rockingham County, Va. Here he finds what all of us before had never discovered, that unquestionably grandfather Lincoln's first wife had died, that unquestionably he married again, for we find in his papers a recognition of Bethsaida (See Lea and Hutchinson) so right away everything is changed. This Mordachai and Josiah that we have called brothers of Thomas were half-brothers. This Nancy and Sarah (Mrs. Brumfield and Mrs. Crume) are half-sisters.

As one picks up more and more the threads, gathers up aunts and uncles and cousins, one realizes how far from lonely Abraham Lincoln's boyhood home ~~ever~~ had a chance to be. As a matter of fact, they were overrun with relatives--young relatives.

Then the question comes up of the probable accuracy of all of these relatives and acquaintances who actually did grow up with or near Lincoln, who were associated with him, in his life of labor and hardship with his father and who caught glimpses, very vague, of a superiority of mind and spirit. What are they worth, all of these things? What is your own memory of the boy or girl you know 25, 30, 40, 50 years ago worth? Try to set it down, what you remember of the most intimate friend, your inseparable of 50 years ago, that probably you have not seen for forty years. As an honest man, can you take your oath that the words that you put into this old companion's mouth are exact.



That what you tell of what he did and said and how he looked are the real truth? It is not so sure. Probably the best that we can say of reminiscences is that they give the outline of the person, or of the events; that they give the feel and color of the witness himself to those things. All that he tells you, you must correct by what you see he--this man talking to you--is. Is he a Dennis Kanks? (See Layman's talk) Is he a Gentry, a Hall, etc. (See Murr)

Take one of the latest contributions to this early period, an article in the Atlantic Monthly by Arthur Morgan, the result of talks with Dr. LeGrand in Missouri. Dr. LeGrand is the grandson of a sister of Nancy Hanks, Lucy or Polly, who, he quite frankly says, was never married, though she had six children. I do not see why I should deny a grandson who does not lay it up against his grandmother that she gave him and his brothers and sisters no grandfather. He certainly was in a position to know much more than I about it, much as I dislike to believe that Nancy Hanks had a sister of what we speak of as that sort. But, accept his testimony that his mother did live in Indiana with Nancy Hanks, and you will have to question his memory in regard to his ever having been trotted on the knee by Abraham Lincoln himself for the good doctor was not born until 1843 in Dubois County, Indiana, and at that time Lincoln was a very busy man in Illinois. True, he did in 1844 make a trip into Indiana. It is quite probable, I should say, that he did go to see this cousin, now Mrs. LeGrand, whom his aunt Lucy had brought into the home in Spencer County; but that he could have trotted the baby on his knee as often and as long as one gets the impression from the tale is quite impossible.

And it is highly improbable that Lucy Hanks and her unfathered brood could have lived long in the Lincoln house, otherwise there must have been, from Johnston and Dennis as well as from Abraham and all the Grentyville neighbors, some reference to them. And this we do not find, in the tales that any of the most indefatigable collectors of Spencer County legends--Herenden, Layman, Murr, tell. That is, in all these stories there is truth, but you must apply all sorts of tests to bring it out. Weigh and compare it with others of its kind and square it up always with the few clear things that we do know.

As I wander in the woods today, trying to put my foot only in tracks that Lincoln really made, I am confused again and again by the number of times that 20 years ago I got out of the way. According to my findings then, grandfather Abraham Lincoln died in 1788. I think it is quite clear now that it was in 1785. I have already confessed that the grandmother I took with me in the woods was the wrong one, and that Thomas Lincoln's brothers and sisters were half-brothers and half-sisters.

The mistakes I made of course have not gone without detection nor questioning of my method. The announcement of new material on Lincoln's life was received even 20 years ago with surprising scepticism, the scepticism of those who knew him least. Personally, I was not very insistent on the importance of anything that I scraped up. I rather did pride myself on publishing first a few important letters. I rather think the warning that Mr. John Nicolay put in his bibliography to the sketch of Lincoln that he prepared for the Encyclopedia Britannica was justifiable, though I must confess that when I



first came upon it, probably 15 years at least after it was written, it affected me like a slap in the face. Mr. Nicolay enters my Life of Lincoln and remarks in parenthesis "contains new material to which too much prominence and credence is sometimes given." That is true as to the prominence, but as to the credence, I think not. I have never published anything, never, as a matter of fact, put down an adjective that I did not believe to be true. Certainly, everything that I labeled new I believed it to be new, and I believed it to be worthy of credence. I always had an uncomfortable feeling about the advertising of the articles as they appeared in McClure's Magazine, the shout that here was new material was louder than was justified, so here Mr. Nicolay was right.

Mr. Nicolay's attitude towards my undertaking was always a little surprising to me. I did not undertake to write a life of Lincoln, but to edit certain unpublished reminiscences if they could be found, and I went to Herndon. As it turned out, and as I have written many times, the other things I came across were too scrappy, as a rule, to justify separate publication so I found myself forced as it were to justify my work for the Magazine to write the story, using what I had picked up. I remember well my amazement and my grief when Mr. Nicolay who had honored me with his acquaintance and for whom I had an enormous respect, should come one evening to my apartment in Washington and remonstrate with me for writing a life at all, and the reason that he gave was not my unfitness but that another life of Lincoln would interfere with the sales of his own, that he and Mr. Hay had written the life, which is of course true.

From purely a publishing point of view, I argued with him that he was wrong, that if I was able to produce anything that interested more people in Lincoln, it would inevitably lead

more people to his work, which was of course a great authority and storehouse.

Ever since my work was out, I have been running upon people who challenge it because I had not seen them or had not spent as much time in their locality as possible. The most serious charge against me came out of Southern Indiana. The material which I used for this period of Lincoln's life was (expand)

As a matter of fact, I never stopped in Spencer County myself. A Hoosier had sent us her manuscript. She was there one day, and she made notes that seemed to me desirable. Moreover, I felt, and I think I was right, that the material that Layman and Herenden had collected must remain the chief material for this period.

(Explain use of word "God-forsaken.")

Mr. Murr voiced his complain against me in a letter to the Evansville Courier:

First of all, I wish to say that it would be in bad taste for me or anyone at this late day to attempt to disparage the work of Miss Tarbell. I have quite carefully read all of the numerous pretentious biographies of Lincoln and of course Miss Tarbell's--and I certainly regard it highly. But I happen to know some things relative to her visit to Spencer County that I judge you may not know. She actually remained over night in Spencer County! ONE NIGHT and only one day. She interviewed one man and only one man who knew Lincoln, and with preconceived views concerning Lincoln's boyhood. She so wrought up the old gentleman that she relieved his ire and she went away in high dudgeon--taking the next train out of Rockport.

Miss Tarbell does not make a single contribution to the Boyhood Life of Lincoln. Not one! She borrowed the whole of her treatment--I grant you she gave the matter the benefit of her genius, but she borrowed the whole of it and as she says from HERNDON. She also takes her fling, as do other biographies, at the "DOG FENNEL Streets of Gentryville," "Abandoned Farms," etc. etc. Massachusetts has abandoned farms.

You further quote Mr. Iglehart saying that Miss Tarbell spent four days gathering material, etc. Mr. Iglehart knew that from my conversation with him but it was a slip of the memory, not four but one day instead."