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LINCOLN THE RAILSPLITTER

We have Lincoln's own testimony to the effect that rail splitting was one of his early accomplishments. It is written in the third person by himself:

"Abraham, though very young (eight years), was large for his age and had an axe put in his hand at once, from that time until his twenty-third year he was constantly handling that most useful instrument, less of course in plowing and harvesting time."

His apprenticeship, begun at so young an age, allowed him to become very proficient in the use of this pioneer instrument. Some of the neighbors of Lincoln as a youth have left reminiscences which state that one hearing the young giant chopping in the forest would conclude that three or four men were at work. Lincoln's first wages are said to have been earned through this occupation.

His First Wages

"It was necessary to protect the pigs, lambs, and poultry at night by penning them up. Grandfather employed young Abe to make rails for pens. These rails were longer than the ordinary ten-foot rails and larger. Abe notched the rails at the end to make them fit close together. After they were no longer needed for protecting pens they were used about the place to repair fences," says Mr. William Adams, of Rockport, who is a grandson of Josiah Crawford, one of the Indiana neighbors for whom Lincoln worked.

After Lincoln's candidacy in 1860, as soon as the people found out that there were a number of these rails scattered about the farm in the fences, there was such a demand for them to be made into canes that the supply soon became exhausted.

"I well remember," says Adams, "as a boy of eight, going over the farm with grandfather searching for these rails. They were easily identified by their length and size and the notches in the ends. There were many rails of the usual size that Lincoln had made, but they could not be identified from others."

The Rail Candidate

The first task which confronted Abraham Lincoln after the family migrated to Illinois and settled near

Decatur is set forth in the autobiographical sketch prepared for Scripps:

"Here they built a log cabin into which they removed, and made sufficient of rails to fence ten acres of ground, fenced and broke the ground, and raised a crop of sown corn upon it the same year. These are, or are supposed to be, the rails about which so much is being said just now, though these are far from being the first or only rails ever made by Abraham."

It was the rails on his father's farm which John Hanks introduced into a political convention that caused Lincoln to be called "The Rail Candidate."

Throughout Lincoln's entire political campaign much use was made of his past occupation of splitting rails. We have adequate proof of this in "A Cartoon History" by Albert Shaw. Rails that he split thirty years earlier played a prominent part in the demonstration at Chicago and throughout the campaign.

In the cartoons of those days, Lincoln is shown fighting with rails, being ridden on them, piloting boat loads of them, and even being constructed out of them himself, this resulting wooden armed mannequin being captioned "A Rail President!"

A political magazine with the name "Rail Splitter", was also published.

One very striking cartoon depicts Lincoln, in the garb of a tight wire walker, poised on a rope spanning a chasm; the balancing stick or rail that he holds is labelled "Constitution" and on his shoulders, like Sinbad's Old Man of the Sea, is perched a full grown negro.

Another significant cartoon shows Lincoln perched on top of a heap of rails, through the bars of which peers a frightened negro; underneath this cartoon is the caption, "There's a Nigger in the Woodpile". Still another portrays several of the notables of the day in company with Lincoln, having a game of baseball. Lincoln is at bat with a long and capable looking fence rail in his hand.

A Rail Contract

William D. Howells records a reminiscence of George Close, a partner of Abraham's in the rail splitting business in Illinois:

"Lincoln was at this time a farm laborer, working from day to day for different people chopping wood, hauling rails, or doing whatever was to be done. The country was poor, and hard work was the common lot; the heaviest lot fell to young unmarried men with whom it was a continual struggle to earn a livelihood. Lincoln and Close made about 1000 rails together for James Hanks and William Miller receiving their pay in home-spun clothing. Lincoln's bargain with Miller's wife was that he should have one yard of brown jeans (richly dyed

with walnut bark) for every four hundred rails made, until he should have enough for a pair of trousers. As Lincoln was already of great altitude, a number of rails that went to the acquirement of his pantaloons was necessarily immense."

Among the most familiar tasks which Lincoln performed, was a contract to split three thousand rails for Major John Warnick, of Macon County, Illinois, and several other similar tasks for his father's new neighbors along the Sangamon.

Rail Reminiscences

Ward Lamon says that when he was a young man anticipating the study of law he was introduced to Lincoln who addressed him as follows:

"Going to try your hand at the law, are you? I should know at a glance that you were a Virginian; but I don't think you would succeed at splitting rails. That was my occupation at your age, and I don't think I have taken as much pleasure in anything else from that day to this."

In his book on the Civil War, Moore relates an incident which points back to the rail splitting days:

"During one of the last visits that the martyred president made to James River, a short time before the capture of Richmond he spent some time in walking around among the the hospitals and in visiting various fatigue parties at work in putting up cabins and other buildings.

"He came upon one squad who were cutting logs for a house, and chatting for a moment with the hardy woodsmen asked one of them to let him see his axe. Mr. Lincoln grasped the helve with the easy air of one perfectly familiar with the tool and remarked that he 'used to be good on the chop'.

"The President then lit in on a big log, making the chips fly, and making as smooth a cut as the best lumberman in Maine could do.

"Meantime the men crowded around to see the work; and as he handed back the axe, and walked away with a pleasant joke, the choppers gave him three as hearty cheers as he ever heard in the whole of his political career."

Some experiments with a new gun called Lincoln to Washington Navy yard with several other men, one afternoon in 1862. He saw an axe hanging outside the cabin door of a boat, brought it back to the group and remarked:

"Gentlemen, you may talk about Raphael repeaters and your eleven-inch Dahlgrens, but here is an institution which I guess I understand better than any of you."

With that he held out the axe by the helve at arm's length. Not another man in the company could perform this feat.