

LINCOLN LORE

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NEAR TRAGEDIES IN LINCOLN'S LIFE

When a person rises from obscurity to occupy a place of prominence, many incidents in his life usually forgotten are remembered and accentuated as the individual's fame becomes more firmly established. This is especially true of any events which might have ended prematurely an illustrious career.

The fact that Lincoln's life was brought to a close with what has been called the outstanding individual tragedy in our American history should stimulate an interest in the various occasions when Lincoln's life is said to have "hung by a thread."

Chilled at Birth

It would appear from the following tradition which has been given wide circulation that Abraham Lincoln got off to a bad start. According to the author of the book which published the story, Abraham Enlow, a neighbor of the Lincolns, arrived at the birthplace cabin just in time to save the child's life. Thomas Lincoln is alleged to have been away from home and Enlow found the family without food or fuel.

Mrs Lincoln said to him, "I have a baby, a boy, born early this morning. O, Mr. Enlow, do something for him." The compiler of the tradition says that "The backwoodsman raised the scant covering and there lay an infant, blue from cold. . . . The little drawn face had upon it the imprint of death." Of course Mr. Enlow built a fire that "leaped high and bright in the stick chimney" and the warmth necessary for the survival of the child was provided.

Fell In Creek

Lincoln's narrow escape from drowning is a story familiar to all who have read about the boyhood of the emancipator. One of the early biographers gives this version of the story: "One of Abraham's adventurous sports was to catch hold of a branch of a sycamore tree and swing over the water (Knob Creek). One day when indulging in this risky sport with his no less venturesome playmate Austin Gollaher he lost his hold of the limb and plunged into the water. If Gollaher had not been a cool, smart, efficient boy Thomas Lincoln would have lost a good son on that day and the United States of America a good President. But Gollaher was equal to the occasion and by brave efforts succeeded in delivering 'Abe' from a watery grave."

Kicked by a Horse

One incident which happened in Lincoln's youth he felt to be of sufficient importance to incorporate in an autobiographical sketch prepared in the third person for Scripps. He said, "In his tenth year he was kicked by a horse and apparently killed for a

time." Herndon enlarges on the story and reviews the incident with more detail:

"One day, taking a bag of corn, he mounted the old flea-bitten gray mare and rode leisurely to Gordon's mill. Arriving somewhat late, his turn did not come till almost sundown. In obedience to the custom requiring each man to furnish his own power he hitched the old mare to the arm, and as the animal moved around, the machinery responded with equal speed. Abe was mounted on the arm, and at frequent intervals made use of his whip to urge the animal on to better speed. . . . The old jade, resenting the continued use of the goad, elevated her shoeless hoofs and striking the young engineer in the forehead, sent him sprawling to the earth. Miller Gordon hurried in, picked up the bleeding senseless boy, whom he took for dead, and at once sent for his father. Old Thomas Lincoln came—came as soon as embodied listlessness could move—loaded the lifeless boy in a wagon and drove home. Abe lay unconscious all night, but towards break of day the attendants noticed signs of returning consciousness."

Attacked by Negroes

Another incident of Lincoln's early years is also recorded by him in the same sketch mentioned above:

"When he was nineteen, still residing in Indiana, he made his first trip upon a flatboat to New Orleans. He was a hired hand merely, and he and a son of the owner, without other assistance, made the trip. The nature of part of the 'cargo-load,' as it was called, made it necessary for them to linger and trade along the sugar-coast; and one night they were attacked by seven negroes with intent to kill and rob them. They were hurt some in the melee, but succeeded in driving the negroes from the boat, and then 'cut cable,' 'weighed anchor,' and left."

Mental Collapse

William Herndon is responsible for the statement that after Ann Rutledge died Lincoln had a serious mental collapse which it was feared might result in Lincoln taking his own life. This tradition has largely been discredited by most recent authors as his activities in court and public life during this period do not support this oft-repeated story. This is the Herndon version:

"Mr. Lincoln was strangely wrought up over the sad ending of the affair. He had fits of great mental depression, and wandered up and down the river and into the woods woefully abstracted—at times in the deepest distress. . . . He was watched with especial vigilance during damp, stormy days, under the belief that dark and gloomy weather might produce such a depression of spirits as to induce him to take his own life."

Challenged to a Duel

There is an event in Lincoln's life that he did not mention in any of his autobiographical sketches and did not care to have others mention in his presence. It was his difficulty with Shields. The challenge grew out of some articles which Lincoln was alleged to have written for the Journal which were derogatory to Shields. Shields challenged Lincoln and he accepted. The weapons were decided upon and both men prepared to the scene of conflict. While it is not likely that Lincoln would have been dispatched had the duel come off as scheduled, yet the hazard was there and it may properly be called one of the near tragedies of Lincoln's life.

A Target on Land and Sea

Lincoln was constantly in danger even while in Washington. This story told by a sentinel illustrates one of many similar traditions extant:

"One night I was doing sentinel duty, at the entrance to the Soldiers' Home. This was about the middle of August, 1864. About 11 o'clock I heard a rifle shot in the direction of the city, and shortly afterwards I heard approaching hoof beats. In two or three minutes a horse came dashing up. I recognized the belated President. The President was bareheaded. The President simply thought that his horse had taken fright at the discharge of the firearms.

"On going back to the place where the shot had been heard, we found the President's hat. It was a plain silk hat, and upon examination we discovered a bullet hole through the crown."

Not only on land but on sea Lincoln was a target for his enemies as the following reminiscence of a marine will reveal:

"In February, 1863, I was appointed an Acting First Engineer in the United States Navy and attached to the steamer Brooks, then used as a dispatch boat on the Potomac River.

"I remember perfectly well the day that we had Lincoln on board the Brooks. He had been down to City Point and was coming back with us. We were running by Point Tobacco, when a Confederate battery opened fire on us, and whizz came a shot through out port paddles. There was no more turning of that wheel. The steamer stopped and began to drift. We could see them on the Virginia shore preparing to get a boat off to us. . . ."

Lincoln, however, due to the efforts of Col. Silloway, was landed safely on the Maryland shore, and the colonel claimed to have received a letter from Secretary Stanton as follows:

"The President believes that you, under the guidance of Providence, saved him from capture, if not instant death, and has ordered that special record be made of your service upon the records of the War Department."