

LINCOLN LORE

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THAT HALF-FACED CAMP

Some time between Thanksgiving and Christmas in the year 1816, Thomas Lincoln built his Indiana cabin home. Nearly every biographer of Lincoln has referred to this abode as a "half-faced camp". The most complete description of it is found in volume one, page 42, of Beveridge's *Abraham Lincoln*:

"Winter was at hand—it may be that the thin snow even then was beginning to fly. Thomas hastily built a shelter for his family. It was a 'half-faced camp,' such as hunters were wont to throw up as a protection against the weather, not unlike that sometimes found in sugar-camps at a later day. A pole was laid from branch to branch of two convenient trees; a few feet opposite these trees two stout saplings forked at the top, the bottom ends sharpened, were thrust into the ground; another pole, parallel with the first, laid in the crotches; and the frame was completed by still two other poles fixed upon the ends of those already placed. On three sides poles were piled upon one another; and a roof was contrived of poles, brush, and leaves.

"One side of this structure, which was only fourteen feet wide, was not enclosed; and before this open side, a fire, started by steel and tinder, was kept burning, upon which cooking was done. The fire also furnished such heat as the inhabitants of the half-faced camp could get, albeit sometimes accompanied by smoke, according to the caprices of the wind. At night, too, the blaze served to keep wild beasts from those who slept beneath that roof of brush. The loose, unhardened earth was the floor, on which leaves were thickly strewn; and over these was spread such bedding as had been brought, skins for the most part and possibly a blanket."

Beveridge's authority for the statement that the Lincolns lived in such a home is undoubtedly William Herndon, whose manuscript he used. The Herndon version as it appears on pages 20 and 21 in volume one of his three-volume work follows:

"The head of the household now set resolutely to work to build a shelter for his family.

"The structure, when completed, was fourteen feet square, and was built of small unhewn logs. In the language of the day, it was called a 'half-faced camp,' being enclosed on all sides but one. It had neither floor, door, nor windows. In this forbidding hovel these doughty emigrants braved the exposure of the varying seasons for an entire year. At the end of that time Thomas and Betsy Sparrow followed, bringing with them Dennis Hanks; and to them Thomas Lincoln surrendered the 'half-faced camp,' while he moved into a more pretentious structure—a cabin enclosed on all sides."

Herndon secured his information about this half-faced camp from Dennis Hanks who claimed to have lived in the structure, but, three years before Dennis Hanks was interviewed by Herndon, a writer by the name of Charles M. Thayer had told the story of the half-faced camp in his book, *The Pioneer Boy*, page 88. How much this book, which Dennis Hanks had read before he was interviewed by Herndon, influenced his reminiscence of the event fifty years before we cannot say. This was Thayer's version told in conversational form. The man, Neale, was presumably a resident of the Indiana community where the Lincolns settled.

(Neale) "Better build your home like mine, it's easy made and handy. There's nothing better than a half-faced camp."

(Thomas Lincoln) "I'd as quick have that as any; I want to get our heads covered pretty soon. In fact, that was the kind of cabin we had in Kentucky."

(Neale) "It won't take long to do that. We can cut nearly logs enough to-day; and then we can put it through in a hurry."

Of course every one knows Thomas Lincoln never lived in a half-faced camp in Kentucky. Neither did he live in a "forbidding hovel" for "an entire year" in Indiana as alleged by Herndon. In Abraham Lincoln's own testimony it can be shown that he never lived in a place of this kind at any time.

The complete refutation of this story is found in an autobiographical sketch which Abraham Lincoln prepared for John Locke Scripps in June 1860. Lincoln wrote out the sketch in the third person and it contains this reminiscence:

"From this place (Kentucky) he removed to what is now Spencer County, Indiana, in the autumn of 1816, Abraham then being in his eighth year . . . A few days before the completion of his eighth year, in the absence of his father, a flock of wild turkeys approached the new log cabin, and Abraham with a rifle-gun, standing inside, shot through a crack and killed one of them."

The incident of the turkey shooting occurred some few days previous to February 12, 1816. The Lincolns had been in the state at that time less than two months, and as Lincoln states precisely, they were living in "the new log cabin," not in a three-faced camp or a hovel but a log cabin.

William Dean Howell used Lincoln's sketch prepared for Scripps in his campaign biography. This biography was corrected by Lincoln who left standing without correction this statement by Howell found on page 21:

"The rude cabin of the settler was hastily erected . . . he (Abraham) has never excelled an exploit of his eighth year, when he shot the leader of a flock of turkeys which ventured within sight of the cabin during his father's absence."

At the time Mrs. Hanaford was writing her Lincoln biography in 1865, she interviewed John Hanks who was exhibiting in Boston the cabin built by the Lincolns at Decatur, Illinois, in 1830. John Hanks who helped build the cabin told Mrs. Hanaford, "It was begun March 30, 1830; and four days were spent in building it."

There was no reason on earth why Thomas Lincoln should expose his family to the elements in a half-faced camp when a typical log cabin could be built in four days. A year before Thomas Lincoln moved to Indiana, other Lincoln relatives had preceded him and settled not far from where he built his cabin home, so there were plenty of settlers to help him cut the timber and erect his pioneer dwelling. Thomas Lincoln was, furthermore, an experienced woodsman and cabinetmaker and had built several cabins and had one contract for getting out timber for a large mill. The story of that half-faced camp is but another one of Herndon's gross exaggerations.