

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN'S FORMAL EDUCATION

The opening of our educational institutions in September invites a further emphasis upon the fact that Abraham Lincoln for his day and time had a formal education comparable to the average student in the western country.

Certain statements Lincoln made about his training in the subscription schools of his day have been very misleading, if taken from their context and set apart by themselves. Those who have not carefully analyzed the import of his comments qualified by the sum total of the information about his schooling are apt to undervalue his formal instruction.

Lincoln prepared a sketch for the Dictionary of Congress which consisted of forty-seven words. He used but one word to tell about his education and that one word was "defective". Inasmuch as the word "defective" is a relative word, it fails to contribute much to an understanding of his deficiencies, unless there is some known standard of excellency by which he found himself wanting.

At the time Lincoln stated, his education was defective, his son, Robert Lincoln was a senior in Illinois State University (not to be confused with the University of Illinois) at Springfield.

When Abraham Lincoln observed the wonderful progress which had been made by his own son, then fifteen years of age, and compared Robert's advanced training with his own humble preparation, he could most truly say that his education was defective, using Robert's opportunities as a standard of excellency.

If Abraham Lincoln had used the educational attainments of the average boy growing up in the western country at the time he was in subscription schools, a generation earlier, he most certainly could not have called his education defective in comparison with the achievements of the youths who were his contemporaries.

Any parent today with children about to enter institutions of higher learning feels his deficiency in the educational field. Could he not say with Abraham Lincoln, using the modern educational standards as a basis of comparison, that his own education is defective?

When Lincoln prepared his autobiographical sketch for Fell in 1859, his son Robert was at Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, preparing himself for entrance into Harvard University. Abraham Lincoln undoubtedly recalled the little log cabin school house in Spencer County where he had spent a few months. His training must have seemed very humble indeed, and he could truly say there was nothing about the community that would "excite ambition for education". He states in this sketch that he learned "to read, write and cipher to the rule of three" which completed his formal education.

In this sketch Lincoln reveals his inferiority complex when he wrote, "Of course, when I came of age I did not know much," then continues, "The little advance I now have upon this education I have picked up from time to time under the pressure of necessity." Six months after he wrote this sketch in which he stated that he "did not know much" when twenty-one years old, he especially emphasizes the fact that he had advanced but "little" in knowledge, although he was then a nominee for the presidency of the United States. To take him literally he didn't know much at twenty-one and hadn't learned very much since then.

Knowing something of the many books Lincoln read which included much of the world's best literature, his success as a lawyer and the mastering of the six books of Euclid, plain and spherical trigonometry, we could say that his advance in knowledge was tremendous since he was twenty-one. We might also conclude that such an intellectual structure which he eventually built could not be erected on ignorance at twenty-one.

In the sketch that Lincoln prepared for Scripps, written in the first person, after he was already the Republican nominee for the presidency, he became a little more specific about the extent of his formal education and stated that the aggregate of his schooling did not amount to more than one year. This statement has usually been quoted to prove that Abraham Lincoln had no formal school training which is a very incorrect assumption.

In the Howell biography which Lincoln corrected, he allowed to stand the statement that he attended school during his early childhood in Kentucky with his sister "and acquired the alphabet and other rudiments of education". He named the two teachers who instructed him, and his schooling in Kentucky represented two terms of two or three months each. In the long vacation period much advancement was made by the children.

We know from Lincoln's own testament that he attended two terms, or, in our expression, two years schooling, before he was seven years of age. This seems to be getting off to a pretty good start and regardless of the ability of his school teachers, they were sufficiently informed to teach him the fundamental facts for a beginner to know.

It is Lincoln's testimony also, that he attended three different schools in the State of Indiana and inasmuch as the aggregate of his schooling did not amount to more than a year, we are assuming that these three schools limited each term to not more than three months. We may imply that Lincoln altogether received what we would call today five years schooling, although the calendar months in the aggregate did not amount to more than a year.

We have documentary proof that a child who received a total of a year's schooling received the average formal instruction for that day and time. The court established a ruling that a child bound out to a guardian should have "one year's schooling in the English language." That statement very clearly indicates that there was nothing unusual about the "one year" reference.

From these deductions it must be clear that Lincoln's formal education in Kentucky and Indiana was similar to the educational opportunities of thousands of other boys who lived out in the wilderness, and one would feel safe in concluding that when Abraham Lincoln finished his formal education under Azel W. Dorsey, a school teacher in Spencer County, Indiana, he had gone as far educationally as the average pioneer boy went in the early period of pioneer history. It is very doubtful indeed, that a very large number of children living west of the Ohio River previous to 1826 had a better formal schooling than Abraham Lincoln.

Those who take pleasure in criticising modern education, usually select Lincoln as a type representing a youth with no educational privileges whatever. This is unfair to Lincoln and unfair to the schools. Without a knowledge of the meagre but fundamental training of his formative years, the Gettysburg address becomes a literary accident and his remarkable statesmanship, a result of political wirepulling. Lindley Murray's *English Reader* and Nicholas Pike's *System of Arithmetick* are basic exhibits in an intelligent understanding of Abraham Lincoln's remarkable career.

It is unjust indeed to lift Abraham Lincoln out of a pioneer environment and judge his early training by educational standards in 1941.