

LINCOLN LORE

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THE PRESIDENT'S CARRIAGES

The rubber tire situation has brought into the news, stories of horse and buggy days and primitive methods of conveyance. Possibly this interest may have caused the New York Historical Society to feature in its April bulletin the story of "Lincoln's Purchase of a Coach." To fully appreciate what the purchase of this state carriage meant to Lincoln, it might be well to note briefly the evolution of his way of traveling.

The primitive method of conveyance in Kentucky, when Abraham Lincoln was an infant, was the saddle horse. As a baby in his mother's arms he must have first experienced this method of transportation and later seated on a horse with his father took his first riding lessons. In 1815, the year before the Lincolns left Kentucky for Indiana, Thomas Lincoln listed five horses for taxation, one of them a stallion. It is doubtful if there was ever a period while Abraham lived in his father's home that he did not have a horse to ride. We know that in Indiana he rode alone to a mill when but nine years old, as he has given us in his own words a reminiscence of a specific occasion.

The first step in transportation by vehicle is observed when we find Lincoln at twenty-one years of age driving an ox cart helping to move the Lincoln family to Illinois. There were also some horse-drawn wagons in the caravan. Lincoln had need of a horse of his own when he was appointed Deputy Surveyor of Sangamon County, Illinois, and had the humiliation to see it sold from under him for debt, but it was bid in by a friend along with the saddle and bridle, that he might continue his work uninterrupted.

At just what time Lincoln entered the ranks of the horse and carriage gentry we are unable to learn. When he first went to Springfield in 1837 he wrote to one young lady whom he had invited to become Mrs. Lincoln, "There is a great deal of flourishing about in carriages here, which it would be your doom to see without sharing in it."

We do know that some time after he began to practice law he did buy a horse which he rode on the circuit, but just when his horse and buggy days began we are not advised. That he did eventually own a light carriage we are certain, but he is not known to have had but one horse at a time and never did own a fine carriage and a span while in Springfield.

Anthony Thornton, one of Lincoln's contemporaries on the circuit, gave this reminiscence about Lincoln having "tire trouble" on one occasion, "Once when he was about to start from Taylorsville to Decatur the tires of the wheels of his buggy were so loose as to be dangerous, he secured them by wrapping with hickory bark." A good soaking in the river, however, when he was not using the vehicle would bring about a more permanent result.

During the last years of traveling the circuit it is likely he relied more often on the stage coaches and trains. "Old Bob," the family horse and buggy, was then left at home for the boys and Mrs. Lincoln to use. When Lincoln was elected to the presidency he was still a "one horse" man.

One of the more troublesome of the minor problems which confronted Abraham Lincoln in making the transition from Springfield to Washington was the acquisition of vehicles which would be appropriate and with which he had had little experience. The President's carriages were expected to be in keeping with the other trappings associated with the White House and a recent acquisition of the New York Historical Society throws some light on the President's venture in the carriage market.

In the New York Historical Society archives are some account books of Brewster and Company, carriage makers. In volume one on page 331, under the date of February 18, 1861, is an entry which reads as follows: "Sold—For Hon. Abram Lincoln. One Elegant H. Cloth Coach. # 588. \$1400." The H. is said to have been an abbreviation for "hammer" which would suggest that the cloth used was highly decorative and indicated richness and elegance. Even though Mr. Lincoln paid for the coach in three installments \$1400 was a big price nevertheless, for a man who had ridden in a buggy with tires bound on with hickory bark.

On one occasion when Mrs. Lincoln was out riding in the coach a small boy named James Scheel, ran in under one of the wheels and had a leg broken. He tells the story in these words, "I was a boy of seven then and was playing in the street at Pennsylvania Ave. and 7th St. Mrs. Lincoln was in the carriage with her sister, Mrs. Helm. They stopped and took me to a hospital. Mrs. Lincoln came to see me in the hospital several times and the President came once." From Mrs. Helm's own reminiscence of the account we find this report of one of the visits she made with Mrs. Lincoln to the hospital, "We called again to-day on the little invalid with toys, fruit and a box of candy. He is a brave little fellow, his eyes glisten when he sees us coming and he forgets he has a broken leg in his pleasure over his toys."

Late in life Scheel was living in Oak Park, Illinois, when he again, to use figurative language, ran into the old coach. It had found a place in the collection of Lincoln curios at Chicago Historical Society and Scheel learning of its presence there visited the Historical Society and upon viewing the old coach said, "That's it! And that's the wheel that ran over me—the right hind wheel and it broke my leg."

But the coach was not the only carriage that the Lincolns owned. They were presented with a luxurious open barouche. It was built by Wood Brothers and was the gift of a group of New York citizens. It was this carriage which was used by Lincoln on the night of his assassination. On May 11, while the Lincolns were still in Washington it was sold by the family to Dr. F. B. Brewer of Westfield, New York, an intimate friend. A copy of the bill of sale, signed by Robert Lincoln, follows:

"Washington, D. C., May 11, 1865.

"Recd. of Col. E. R. Goodrich, Mil. St., Agt. of N. Y., one thousand (\$1000) dollars in payment of open Barouche with one set of double harness, the property of the late President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, being purchased by Dr. F. B. Brewer of Westfield, N. Y.

"Robert T. Lincoln"

In 1892 the barouche was acquired by the Studebaker Brothers of South Bend, Indiana, and added to their extensive collection of historic vehicles. It was on exhibition at the Columbian Exposition and facsimiles of it have often been displayed.

Little space is left to say very much about the horses which drew the vehicles. A newspaper clipping, dated in 1888, states: "When President Lincoln became a resident of the White House there was purchased for him in central New York, a pair of very stylish black carriage horses, the reputed price being \$3000. Mr. Lincoln did not possess the provincial southern love for good horses and was an indifferent judge of them. The black team was of the tough Morgan breed and lasted him as long as he lived."