

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana

Number 689

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

June 22, 1942

THAYER'S PIONEER BOY

The earliest cloth bound story of Abraham Lincoln's youth which was widely circulated and used more or less as a source book by other biographers, was *The Pioneer Boy* by William M. Thayer. This publication came from the press about the first of April 1863, and by July 31 of that year five thousand copies had been issued. Before 1864 had closed, 26,000 copies were in the hands of the people. Later on, according to the author, the book "after a very large sale, passed out of print in consequence of the destruction of the plates by fire."

In March, 1882, a revised edition of *The Pioneer Boy* was published by Thayer and he extended the story to cover the President's complete life. This book also had a large sale, the eleventh edition with an English imprint reached a total, for all editions, of fifty thousand copies. This book had a tremendous sale in European countries and was translated into many languages. The conception of Abraham Lincoln held in foreign lands was largely influenced by Thayer's work.

Thayer was the first biographer to use in his writing what was known as "the conversational style," and most of his many big sellers were written in dialogue form. This manner of composition invited the use of extraneous data and while *The Pioneer Boy* written in this form was looked upon with askance by some authors, others used many of the human interest stories and gave them the atmosphere of authenticity by placing them in reputable biographies of the President.

There was something of the earmarks of genuineness in Thayer's work which may account for the acceptance of much of the folklore found therein. In the preface the author states "the imagination had done nothing more than connect facts gathered from authentic sources." Again he states, "Real names are generally used in the work. In some instances, however, where objections to such a use seemed to exist, fictitious names are employed."

Possibly Thayer's most valuable testimonial was a letter written on April 17, 1863 which he received from the President's son, Robert Lincoln. Robert stated, "You have been singularly successful in avoiding errors, as I find I have at some time heard nearly everything you narrate from a 'reliable gentleman.'" The publishers took full advantage of this statement and claimed that *The Pioneer Boy* "contains the full and reliable life of President Lincoln, from the time he was seven years of age until he took his seat in the Presidential chair."

The publishers, furthermore, made the statement that, "This is the authentic and authorized life of the President as is shown by the subjoined letter from the son of the President, a student in Harvard College." The letter was then printed in full.

It is doubtful if there is a single early Lincoln biography published after 1863 that is not somewhat influenced by this book. Indirectly it helped to color the personal testimonies of nearly everyone interviewed who had read the book, so that those authors who hesitated to take the stories from Thayer were willing to take them as personal reminiscences of those who had read Thayer's work.

A few outstanding stories in the Thayer book follow:

Sale of Kentucky Farm For Whiskey

Thayer is the first author to tell the story of the sale of the Lincoln farm in Kentucky in 1816 for 10 barrels of whiskey and the transportation of the liquor by flatboat to Indiana. There is not a single available fact to support this tradition and plenty of documentary evidence to refute it. Apparently Thayer used the whiskey story to teach a lesson in temperance and utilized three chapters of his book to fully relate an incident that never happened. Minus the moral Thayer drew, nearly every Lincoln biographer has accepted the story.

The Half-faced Camp

Thayer was evidently the inventor of another story which had no factual background. He goes into some detail how Thomas Lincoln concluded to build a "half-faced camp." He was very much confused as to just what the cabin was like. Authors who used his story have supplied this difficulty and taken no pains to stress the fact that the Lincolns lived through one or two winters in a cabin in Indiana with one side open to the weather.

Letter To Parson Elkins

Another story which apparently printed for the first time in Thayer's work may still be classified as folklore, although there is some evidence which might support part of the story. Thayer says Dennis Hanks taught Lincoln to write and that the first letter Lincoln penned was to a preacher by the name of David Elkins, living in Kentucky, whom he asked to come to Indiana to preach his mother's funeral. Most authors have accepted the story but some have been skeptical about using it.

Weem's and Ramsey's Washington

There were some incidents in the early life of Lincoln that Thayer told with some accuracy and which were later on bungled by authors who felt they were correcting a mistake. It was undoubtedly Weem's Washington that Lincoln read in early Indiana days, and Ramsey's Washington that he borrowed from Josiah Crawford and which became damaged by the storm.

Flatboat Trip to New Orleans

Another excellent version of an important episode in Lincoln's early life is Thayer's story of the first river trip to New Orleans. It seems likely from Thayer's account of the trip that he secured the story from one of the members of the Gentry family. Lincoln's almost superhuman strength displayed on this trip, made with Allen Gentry, is seldom emphasized.

New Salem Days

Thayer's informant for Abraham Lincoln's days spent in New Salem was William Green. From Green's testimony it would appear as if he were largely responsible for some of Lincoln's important decisions and achievements. It was Green who taught Lincoln grammar (pp. 243). Green claimed he suggested to Lincoln that they raise a company of militia to fight Black Hawk (pp. 246) and that a talk Green's father made to the recruits was responsible for Lincoln receiving a unanimous vote for captain (pp. 247). Green happened to be the person who won a hat by telling Lincoln could lift a whiskey barrel and drink from the bung hole (pp. 250). Green was the first one to propose that Lincoln run for the legislature (pp. 254) and he also championed the candidacy of Lincoln two years later (pp. 266). Green was the person who first suggested to Abraham Lincoln that he should study law (pp. 259, 274). It was Green who examined Lincoln on his first volume of Blackstone (pp. 278) and the New Salem years for Lincoln closed with William Green claiming that in after years Lincoln admitted while President that it was Green who "made him" during the New Salem years.

It is very likely that it was the reading of these New Salem chapters by Thayer that caused Herndon to call "Slippery Bill Green," as he referred to him, "a blow and an exaggerator." It might be of interest to note that Green had nothing to say about Ann Rutledge and the family is not mentioned by Thayer, while the New Salem years gave a general idea of Lincoln's experiences there, the over-emphasis of Green in the picture makes it a very much colored narrative.