

LINCOLN LORE

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"FIXINGS" FOR A HOOSIER THANKSGIVING

The approach of Thanksgiving day not only reminds one of the religious fervor of the Pilgrim fathers, but also calls attention to the festive side of pioneer life. The marvelous harvests which mother nature provided for her children of the plains and forests were phenomenal, indeed, when we observe that often no effort was put forth in the reaping, except the joy of gathering. These periods of bringing in nature's store was one of the bright spots on the frontier.

Recently there has been published under the title, *The Indiana Home*, a few notes on early pioneer life, which the late Logan Esarey, professor of History at Indiana University, used in his classroom over a period of many years.

A casual reading of Professor Esarey's notes, largely composed of family reminiscences, will allow one to orient the Lincolns in their early home in Indiana Territory. While this book contains but an occasional reference to the Lincolns, it does allow us to appreciate more fully the wonderful playground which surrounded Abraham Lincoln as a growing boy.

There are many testimonials in Esarey's book about the natural beauty of the southern Indiana country. He comments, "The region was perhaps as beautiful a forest as the world has ever known." His description of the trees and shrubbery is interesting, indeed. The story of the frontier, which brought so much pleasure to youth, is of timely interest at this season of the year, and it appears as if there were plenty of "fixings" for a Hoosier Thanksgiving in Lincoln's day.

Candy Bars for the Whole Year

The pioneer's harvests, contributed freely and with great abundance by mother nature, began in the early spring when the sap began to run. The gathering at the sugar camp was a social event of supreme importance to all, and offered about the only opportunity during the year for the younger element to sit up all night. The fire under the giant kettle had to be kept burning steadily; however, there were plenty of volunteers to watch the fire. Here the stock of candy for the year in the form of sugar hearts, diamonds, or little scalloped pies were stored in great jars at no cost except the fun of boiling down the sap.

"Pop" Made at Home

The sassafras shrub was one of the children's favorite bushes, and in the spring of the year its roots were dug up and the sassafras tea made from them was a drink not to be despised, either as a beverage or a spring tonic. The bark and root of the sassafras tree through the year was always within reach of the children of the forest.

Berries for Every Taste

Not even the children of today with all of their imported fruits have the variety of berries which the pioneer children harvested as their taste prompted. First came the June berry, and shortly after the mulberry, and also the wild strawberries which were so plentiful in some places that an early traveler stated that in riding through some localities "his horses hoofs were red with their juice." The large black dewberry also grew in great abundance and was equally enjoyed. For both stimulant and medicine the blackberry was a more welcome gift of nature, but not so tasty as the red raspberry which was not only harvested for immediate consumption, but with its cousin the blackberry, found its way into cordials.

The Pioneer's Fruit Basket

It was in the Fall of the year, more often associated with harvests, that nature made her best gifts to the pioneers. It seems as if the fun of gathering harvests, especially fruits and nuts, must have been of innate origin, certainly it was not work to the average pioneer boy. The

pawpaw and the persimmons, which are unknown to most American boys and girls, were abundant in southern Indiana. Some of the finest persimmons the editor of *Lincoln Lore* ever ate were shaken one frosty morning from a persimmon tree which stood within a hundred feet of where Abraham Lincoln lived from the time he was seven until he was twenty-one.

The wild grape crop in the Indiana territory was abundant and the clusters of two varieties, October and fox grapes, were gathered for jellies, beverages, etc. The fox grapes were often found hanging on the vines until Christmas time. Nature usually provided some low tree as a grape basket into which the pioneer child could reach and satisfy his appetite without price. Along with the grapes should be mentioned red and black haws, also the wild plum and the crab apple which were often made into marmalade or fruit butter.

A Mixed Nuts Bowl

Possibly it was the gathering of the nut crop which offered, the boys especially, as much real fun as the harvesting of any other crop which nature provided, all unaided. The shell or shag bark was the favorite nut tree. The harvesting of the shell, hickory, pecan, walnut and hazelnuts, according to Esarey, along with "the mellow autumn weather, the gorgeous decoration of the trees. . . all combined to make this a carnival of nature for the country children."

Turkey in the "Raw"

The store of fruits from the forest and field were not so important to the pioneer as the store of game which was almost as easily obtained. Every Lincoln student is familiar with the story about the boy's first memorable experience in Indiana, told in these words: "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 rifle gun, standing inside, shot through a crack and killed one of them. Wild turkeys in the "raw," right in one's doorway.

Turkeys, although plentiful, did not appear in such vast numbers as wild pigeons which Audubon claimed, while they were in passage, entirely obscuring the sun. Quail were usually trapped at will and the pioneer table did not lack the usual tasty water fowl which were abundant along the rivers at certain seasons.

Small Game Everywhere

The woods and fields of southern Indiana were full of squirrels and rabbits and while the men of the pioneer days did not pay much attention to them, they were the practice pieces for the boys who were growing up, and they contributed much to the table. No squirrels or rabbits ever tasted so sweet as did those that the boy brought down with his own gun, or caught in his own trap.

The raccoon and other fur bearing animals of the smaller variety were abundant, and contributed much of interest to the ever changing pageantry of the wilderness.

Venison for All

The best gift nature had to offer the Indiana pioneer for both food and clothing was the deer. These animals were killed by the thousands and not only provided meat for the table through the year, but the hides were serviceable for gloves, shoes, pants, shirts, and suspenders. No animal outside the domesticated group ever contributed so much to the welfare of those living on the frontiers, the early hunters, and explorers, as did the deer.

It is not strange that one of Lincoln's friends who interviewed him with respect to his Indiana boyhood received this impression, "There was nothing sad nor pinched, and nothing of want, and no allusions to want, in any part of it. Lincoln's own description of his youth was that of a joyous, happy boyhood."