

# LINCOLN LORE

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## POOR WHITE TRASH

The annual approach of Lincoln's birthday naturally calls attention to the conditions surrounding the infant when he was born. No greater injustice has been done to the Lincoln family than the "stagnant, putrid pool" theory of Abraham's nativity environment, propagated by William Herndon in the preface of his famous biography of the Emancipator. A printed statement made by President Woodrow Wilson, formerly a professor of history in Johns Hopkins University, that "Abraham Lincoln came of the most unpromising stock on the continent, the 'poor white trash' of the South," indicates how generally the social and economic backgrounds of the Lincolns have been misrepresented. No Lincoln was ever a "Poor White."

Unless one is acquainted with conditions existing among the class known as "poor white trash," he may not surmise just how low this class of "ne're do-wells" rank in the social structure of American life. Woodrow Wilson, as an instructor of history, must have known the status of the "poor white," so his public announcement that the Lincolns were associated with the group would carry all the implications that the term suggests.

The wide circulation of the story *Among the Pines*, published in both magazine and book form in 1862, has one chapter on "Poor Whites." Inasmuch as the author developed the story from his own personal observations, after visiting among this class of people, he speaks with some authority on the subject. It is also known that Abraham Lincoln read the book and conferred with the author about the accuracy of many of the episodes mentioned in the text. The chapter opens with the entrance of the author into a home of the "Poor Whites" which cabin he describes as follows:

"Entering the house, we saw, by the light of a blazing pile of pine-knots, which roared and crackled on the hearth, that it contained only a single apartment. In front of the fire-place, which occupied the better half of one side of this room, the floor was of the bare earth, littered over with pine chips, dead cinders, live coals, broken pots, and a lazy spaniel dog. Opposite to this, at the other end of the room, were two low beds, which looked as if they had been 'slept in forever, and never made up.' Against the wall, between the beds and the fire-place, stood a small pine table, and on it was a large wooden bowl, from whose mouth protruded the handles of several unwashed pewter spoons. On the right of the fire was a razeed rocking-chair, evidently the peculiar property of the mistress of the mansion, and three blocks of log, sawn off smoothly, and made to serve for seats. Over against these

towered a high-backed settle . . . .

"The house was built of unhewn logs, separated by wide interstices, through which the cold air came, in decidedly fresh if not health-giving currents, while a large rent in the roof, that let in the rain, gave the inmates an excellent opportunity for indulging in a shower-bath, of which they seemed greatly in need. The chimney, which had intruded a couple of feet into the room, as if to keep out of the cold, and threatened momentarily to tumble down, was of sticks, built up in clay, while the windows were of thick, unplaned boards. . . . I had seen negro cabins, but these people were whites, and these whites were *South Carolinians*."

The author of the book carried on the following conversation with the woman of the cabin about the newly inaugurated President Abraham Lincoln. The dialogue between the author and the woman starts with the woman saying:

"What d'ye 'lect that darky, Linkum, President for?"

"I didn't elect him. I voted for Douglas. But Lincoln is not a darky."

"He's a mullater, then; I've heern he war," she replied.

"No, he's not a mulatto; he's a rail-splitter."

"Rail-splitter? Then he's a nigger, shore."

"No, madam; white men at the North split rails."

It will be observed from this conversation that Abraham Lincoln as President read in one book, at least, that there were those who held that he was of negro descent, but even then he was on a higher plane than the poor whites as we shall learn from a subsequent dialogue.

The author and his negro driver, Scip, due to a severe rain storm, found it necessary to spend the night in the one-room cabin, although the sleeping accommodations were limited. The author inquired of his "poor white" hostess:

"Where do you mean we shall sleep?"

"Ye can take that ar bed," pointing to the one nearest the wall, "the darky can sleep har"; motioning to the settle on which she was seated.

"But where will you and your daughters sleep? I don't wish to turn you out of your beds."

"Oh! don't ye keer for us; we kin all bunk together; dun it afore. Like to turn in now?"

"Yes, thank you, I would! and without more ceremony I adjourned to the further part of the room, and commenced disrobing. Doffing my boots, waistcoat, and cravat, and placing my watch and purse under the pillow, I gave a moment's thought to what a

certain not very old lady, whom I had left at home, might say when she heard of my lodging with a grass-widow and three young girls, and sprang into bed. There I removed my unmentionables, which were still too damp to sleep in, and in about two minutes and thirty seconds sunk into oblivion.

"A few streaks of grayish light were beginning to creep through the crevices in the logs, when a movement at the foot of the bed awakened me, and glancing downward I beheld the youngest girl emerging from under the clothes at my feet. She had slept there, 'cross-wise,' all night. A stir in the adjoining bed soon warned me that the other females were preparing to follow her example; so, turning my face to the wall, I feigned to be sleeping. Their toilet was soon made, when they quietly left Scip and myself in possession of the premises."

The author's driver on this trip was a colored man by the name of Scip, already mentioned. The conversation between Scip and the author, relative to the poor white trash with whom they had spent the night, is here reproduced:

"Scip, what did you think of our lodgings?"

"Mighty pore, massa. Niggas lib better'n dat."

"Yes," I replied, "but these folks despise you blacks; they seem to be both poor and proud."

"Yas, massa, dey'm pore 'cause dey wont work, and dey'm proud 'cause dey'r white. Dey wont work 'cause dey see de darky slaves doin' it, and tink it am benef white folks to do as de darkies do. Dis habin' slaves keeps dis hull country pore."

"Who told you that?" I asked, astonished at hearing a remark showing so much reflection from a negro.

"Nobody, massa; I see it myself."

"Are there many of these poor white around Georgetown?"

"Not many 'round Georgetown, sar, but great many in de up-country har, and dey'm all 'like—poor and no account; none ob 'em kin read, and dey all eat clay."

"Eat clay!" I said; "What do you mean by that?"

"Didn't you see, massa, how yaller all dem wimmin war? Dat's 'cause dey eat clay. De little children begin 'fore dey kin walk, and dey eat it till dey die; dey chaw it like 'backer. It makes all dar stumacs big, like as you seed 'em, and spiles dar 'gestion. It'm mighty on-healfy."

"Can it be possible that human beings do such things! The brutes wouldn't do that."

"No, massa, but dey do it; dey'm pore trash. Dat's what de big folks call 'em, and it am true; dey'm long way lower down dan de darkies."