

LINCOLN LORE

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THE IMPROVEMENT OF LINCOLN'S ATTIRE

Abraham Lincoln at no time in his life would have been set apart as a well dressed man. Even the tailor-made garments of the Washington days failed to attractively drape his tall ungainly figure and it is doubtful if any suit of clothes, however fine and even made to measure, would have appeared to advantage on him. There has been a tendency, however, to describe him as the Chief Executive of the Nation in about the same language that has been used in drawing a picture of him in early Illinois days when he first became a circuit riding lawyer. This presentation we believe to be unjust both to Abraham Lincoln and to his wife, who was somewhat responsible for the selection of his apparel in later years.

John B. Helm, who was a clerk in a store at Elizabethtown, Kentucky, has almost immortalized the child Lincoln as the little "shirt tail boy" who came to the store with his mother and where he relished the candy Helm gave him. However, it has been shown without question that the boy Helm fed candy was not Abraham Lincoln, but John D. Johnston, one of the three children of Sarah Bush Johnston, later Abraham's stepmother. At the time Helm clerked in the store Mrs. Johnston was a "poor widow" who cared for the County Court House. It might be said with respect to Abraham Lincoln's childhood clothes that they were probably similar to those worn by other children of his age and most certainly he could not be set apart as the "rag-muffin" child of any community where his parents lived, either in Kentucky or Indiana.

There was a historical shirt worn by Lincoln in Indiana, however, purchased by him at about seventeen years of age with some of the first money he ever made. According to Dennis Hanks: "About 1826 and 7, myself and Abe went down to the Ohio River and cut cord wood at 25c per cord and bought stuff enough to make both a shirt."

There is no reason to infer that Lincoln's clothes caused any special comment until he began to outgrow, in length at least, nearly everything that was made for him. One classic description of him during this growing period reads as follows:

"Cap made from skin of squirrel or coon; linsey-woolsey shirt; buckskin breeches, baggy, lacking several inches of meeting the tops of his shoes, which were low when he had any shoes, thereby exposing his shin-bones, sharp, blue and narrow." Lincoln's own statement may have contributed somewhat to this picture. He recalled that in 1828 when he secured a job on a flatboat that he possessed "but one pair of breeches which were of buckskin which shrank until they grew so short that they left a permanent blue streak around his legs." These buckskin breeches half way to his knees, that left an indelible mark on his shins, apparently captured the fancy of biographers, and they continued to dress him in these buckskin trousers long after he had acquired more comfortable and certainly more presentable attire.

A description given by Holland in his life of Lincoln states that the first year in Illinois when Lincoln was twenty-one years of age, he "wore trousers made of flax and tow cut tight at the ankles and out at both knees." It is about this time that Abraham made a bargain with Mrs. Nancy Miller "to split 400 rails for every yard of brown jeans, dyed with white walnut bark, that would be necessary to make him a pair of trousers." The brown or blue jeans probably replaced the buckskin trousers of Indiana days and it wasn't long before we find him seeking the services of Hannah Armstrong near New Salem to help him solve the clothing problem.

Hannah stated that Lincoln often came to the Armstrong home and that she "foxed his pants and made his shirts." The foxing did not consist of patching the seat but sewing long strips of deer skin along the inner seams, much like the modern riding habit.

After Lincoln's election to the legislature in 1834 when he was twenty-five years old he claimed he started to study law and commented, "I still mixed in the surveying to pay board and clothing bills." Apparently he was buying some wearing apparel at this time and unquestionably it was new clothing, probably his attire was in keeping with other members of the legislature who wore homemade clothes.

Lincoln's early years were spent in a day when a man of the pioneer country paid comparatively little attention to texture or the wrinkled condition of the clothes one wore. Homespun, regardless of its appearance, was a patriotic cloth at least and woe to the man who dared to wear a suit of English weave.

If Lincoln previously had been of unkempt appearance and ill clothed one may feel quite sure that a noticeable change occurred when Mary Todd came to Springfield in 1839. Lincoln had just reached the age of thirty. Three years later when they were married she would immediately take over the task of keeping him looking respectable and there is no need to do any guessing about his appearance when he went to Congress five years later, as we have a daguerreotype made of him at that time.

In the evolution of his attire as a lawyer the emphasis seems to shift from his shins to his head and the unsightly tall hat he wore comes in for special attention. However, he must have had a new hat occasionally as on one instance he mentions the fact that he purchased a new one and left valuable papers in the old one. Possibly the fact that Lincoln was "head and shoulders" above most of his contemporaries, accentuating his hat out of all due proportion, on a short man it would have caused no comment.

The pictures of Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, taken during the debates, do not warrant the conclusions that Lincoln was shabbily dressed while Douglas was a "dandy." In the Foundation picture collection, containing full length photographs of both candidates for the Senate taken about the time of the debates, Lincoln appears much neater in dress than Douglas, who has one button off his vest, apparently due to his habits which caused a daily expansion of the waistline.

Saint Gaudens, the sculptor, told Charles Moore at the Library of Congress, that while making the Chicago standing figure of the Emancipator, he found that "Lincoln was the first man in Springfield to sport a figured waistcoat." The Foundation has an original picture of Lincoln in which he is shown wearing such a waistcoat.

When Abraham Lincoln became the President-Elect, we may feel quite certain that Mary Todd Lincoln would be anxious for him to appear well dressed. Artists who made portraits of Mr. Lincoln at this time give us no indication that he was slovenly dressed, although his bow-tie may have been unruly on occasions. While apparently he paid little attention to keeping his clothes pressed while he was President, it is unlikely that his successors, Johnson or Grant, were any more particular about their attire than Mr. Lincoln, whose observing and persistent wife would see to it that his appearance would bring no disgrace, at least, on the Chief Executive. All must admit that there was a noticeable improvement in Lincoln's attire, but possibly room for more.