

LINCOLN LORE

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CAPTAIN LINCOLN RETURNS FROM WAR

The difficulties between the western settlers and the Indians in 1832 might be classified as little more than a skirmish, but it is usually referred to as the Black Hawk War. Abraham Lincoln participated in the hostilities as an enlisted man and was chosen captain of a company of Sangamon County volunteers. He reenlisted twice during the contest and although he saw no active participation against the Redskins he remained with the troupes until finally they were mustered out.

Lincoln was released from the army on July 10, 1832 at the mouth of White Water River in what is now the state of Wisconsin. Inasmuch as he was attached to a mounted company the question of transportation homeward apparently did not bother him so he planned to leave with his associates in a body the following morning after receiving his discharge notice. That very night however Lincoln and a friend named George Harrison had their horses stolen and found themselves without mounts. Possibly they were able to thumb rides with more fortunate veterans by some kind of a cooperative agreement whereby they alternately occupied the saddles as the two hundred miles to Peoria, Ill., seems to have been made in about four days.

On July 15th Lincoln and Harrison purchased a canoe at Peoria and for two days slowly made their way down the Illinois River as far as Havana. Here they sold the canoe and on July 17 started across country afoot probably arriving at New Salem a day or two later.

There was no special committee at New Salem to greet Lincoln upon his return from the war, and certainly no home with a greeting over its door "Welcome home Abe." It is doubtful if there was any specific place in New Salem which he could call his home. More painful however, than the loneliness he must have experienced, was the possibly unintentional frustrating during his absence of his plans to gain political recognition.

Although in the spring of 1832 Lincoln had been in Illinois but two years and for only six months of this period a resident at New Salem, just before the war broke he had announced as a candidate for representative from Sangamon County in the Illinois Legislature. It would be expected that his military service would help his candidacy and many biographies have implied it did, but in Lincoln's case just the reverse was true.

Possibly the first important fact that Lincoln learned after reaching New Salem at the close of the war was the omission of his name from a list in the Sangamon Journal featuring the candidates for the legislature who were in the military service. The announcement apparently printed as an apology to Mr. Lincoln appeared in the Sangamon Journal for July 19, 1832. It follows:

"Some weeks ago, May 3, we gave a list of those candidates of this county (omitting by accident the name of Captain Lincoln, of New Salem) who were on the frontier periling their lives in the service of their country."

This notice could not have been of much assistance to him at so late a date as the election was a little more than two weeks away. The shortness of time before the election gave him little opportunity to canvass the people. It is not surprising that he failed to poll a sufficient number of votes to become elected and in after years he referred to this experience as the only time he was ever defeated by a vote of the people.

Here we have a picture of a returned soldier twenty-three years old with no job waiting for him, rejected at the polls and undecided what was before him. In this attitude of mind Lincoln made this interesting observation written in his own words in the third person:

"He studied what he should do—thought of learning the blacksmith trade—thought of trying to study law—rather thought he could not succeed at that without a better education."

It also appears that thousands of returning young soldiers are reacting identically as Lincoln did. As has been suggested he had decided to enter the political arena before he went off to war. In the meantime he had come in contact with men who encouraged him to better prepare himself for whatever he might undertake and the thought of blacksmithing was dismissed in order that he might give himself to study in preparation for the profession of law. Not all of the young men now crowding our colleges are merely continuing their college courses interrupted by war but great numbers of them who years ago were satisfied with merely a high school diploma, are for the first time planning courses in higher education.

As we look back on the career of Abraham Lincoln we feel very thankful that the reverses indirectly brought about by his war service brought him to the realization of the need of better preparation before he launched out into the field of politics via the profession of law which has been the vehicle which has assisted so many successful statesmen to reach their objectives. For five years Lincoln pursued his self conducted course of study before he felt he was qualified to apply for a permit to practice law.

The experience of Abraham Lincoln returning from the war at twenty-three years of age with no position waiting for him, and poorly prepared to enter any profession that demanded a specific course of training should serve as a source of inspiration for the young men of today. He did not hesitate to use up five more years of his life in preparation before he felt he was qualified to start his life's task which eventually culminated in saving the union.