

LINCOLN LORE

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THE ACCIDENT AT THE MILL

The story of Lincoln's youth which has the most interesting sequel is related about an accident at a mill when he was but nine years old. The episode as recorded by Lincoln himself in the autobiographical sketch prepared for John Lock Scripps in 1860, told in the third person, is as follows: "In his tenth year he was kicked by a horse and apparently killed for a time." The incident has been enlarged upon by several biographers and of course has lost nothing of human interest in the telling.

Holland, whose biography was published in 1864, was under the impression that Abraham had to go fifty miles to get the family corn ground. But that would be a long trip for a nine year old boy, especially so if he had to travel fifty miles each way. Coffin, another biographer who visited the Indiana country some years after Lincoln's death and apparently made some inquiries about certain incidents which occurred there, was under the impression that the mill where the accident occurred was fifteen miles from the Lincoln home or thirty miles for the round trip.

Fifteen miles is about the distance to Hoffman's Mill on Anderson River near New Boston on the Spencer-Perry County Line ten miles from Troy. This mill was built in 1812 by George H. Hoffman and operated later by his son Harrison, a friend of Lincoln and still later by Harrison's son, Riley Hoffman. Henry Brooner, a playmate of Abraham Lincoln stated "I often went with Lincoln to Hoffman's mill on Anderson River." As early as 1827 there was a well-kept road from Hoffman's Mill to Fredonia as recorded in the Perry County Court House.

The Hoffman mill, however, was operated by water power and while it is likely the Lincoln's patronized it, the story so often recorded, definitely states the place where the accident occurred was a horsepower mill. The accident more likely occurred at Noah Gordon's mill which was but two miles from the Lincoln's. In fact, the Gordon's were neighbors of the Lincoln's which makes the picture of a small lad riding a horse to a mill a short distance away, seem more reasonable. When Tom Lincoln's nine year old boy arrived on that particular day he had to wait his turn and the horse mills were slow affairs indeed. A boy companion who used to accompany Lincoln to Gordon's said Lincoln often remarked that "his dog could eat the meal as fast as the mill could grind it."

Not only was the customer obliged to furnish the horse power but also he must attend to the driving of the horse. A long beam was fastened to the upper mill stone, the horse hitched to the end of the beam then round and round the animal was driven until the grinding was completed. On the day the accident occurred Abraham is said to have arrived rather late and when his turn came he was determined to make a quick job of it by hurrying the horse. Apparently the boy by the use of a whip was trying to stimulate the horse to move more rapidly. The animal retaliated with her hind feet which knocked him unconscious:

Opinions as to just how long Lincoln remained in an unconscious state also vary. Holland apparently felt it was but a short time. Herndon in the Lamon letters notes the reviving of his senses "that night, say about midnight," but nine years later his book states; "Abe lay unconscious all night, but towards break of day the attendants noted signs of returning consciousness." The extension of the time element in the story makes the sequel to this accident of much more interest which may possibly account for the discrepancy.

Just here the details of the story again differ to suit the taste and imagination of the author telling the story. Holland in 1865 stated that "after Abraham had fastened his mare to the long beam, and was following her closely upon her rounds, when urging her with a switch and 'clucking' to her in the usual way, he received a kick from her which prostrated him and made him insensible. With the first instant of returning consciousness he finished the cluck, which he had commenced when he received the kick."

Herndon enlarges upon the aftermath of this experience in a letter he wrote to Lamon on March 6, 1870. Although he had read the Holland version of the story he states that Abe was addressing some rather harsh language to the horse and was kicked just as he had uttered the first part of the command "Get up, you lazy old devil," and after he had come to, the latter part of the expression was spoken. In Herndon's own book published in 1889 he claims Lincoln used the term, "Get up, you old hussy."

The most interesting variation in the two Herndon narratives is his report of how he and Mr. Lincoln used to speculate on the incident. In 1870 Herndon wrote: "We came to the conclusion—I being somewhat of a psychologist as well as physiologist—he aiding me and I him, that the mental energy, force, had been flashed by the will on the nerves and thence on the muscles and that energy, force or power had fixed the muscles in the exact shape, or form, or attitude, or position, to utter those words; that the kick shocked him, checked momentarily the action of muscles; and that so soon as that check was removed or counteracted by a returning flow of life and energy, force, and power in their proper channels, that the muscles fired off, as it were functioned as the nervous energy flashed there by the will through the nerves—acted automatically under a power in response. This seemed to us to be the legitimate conclusion of things."

Herndon's explanation of it later on in his book was much abbreviated, he said, "Without expressing my own views I may say that his (Lincoln's) idea of it was that the latter half of the expression, "Get up, you old hussy," was cut off by a suspension of the normal flow of his mental energy, and that as soon as life's forces returned he unconsciously ended the sentence, or as he in a plainer figure put it: "Just before I struck the old mare my will through the mind had set the muscles of my tongue to utter the expression, and when her heels came in contact with my head the whole thing stopped half-cocked, as it were, and was only fired off when mental energy or force returned."

Beveridge in his volume on Lincoln used quite freely the Herndon sources but fails to call attention to the accident given in such detail by Herndon. This statement Beveridge allows to cover the gristmill experiences: "When Abraham was old enough, he was sent to the mill with a bag of corn, and these journeys left upon his mind the most pleasing recollections of his boyhood."

Regardless of the confusion as to place, what Lincoln said, how long he was unconscious, and what he later thought about the peculiar incident, it is worthy of notice that he was but nine years old when the episode occurred. Whether it was before or after his mother's death in October, 1818, it would seem quite important whether he received the tender ministrations of a mother or no more attention than an eleven year old sister and his father could give him. The fact that he mentions the episode in his brief autobiographical sketch is sufficient evidence that it was one of the memorable incidents of his boyhood.