

# LINCOLN LORE

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## AN OCTOBER TRAGEDY

A visit to the grave of Abraham Lincoln's mother in October, the month of her untimely death, invites one to visualize the tragic circumstances under which Nancy Hanks Lincoln was taken from her family. The disease from which she died was known as trembles or milk sickness. It was first identified by the patient showing symptoms of dizziness followed by nausea and persistent vomiting with stomach pains and a burning sensation. The tongue became swollen and the breath very offensive. The patient experienced prostration and collapse, then coma developed and continued until death which often occurred within three days from the time of the attack.

Writers who first observed the havoc caused by this disease referred to it as the "terrible malady" and one informant states "its terrible fatality at one period created a perfect panic in the settlers." Nicolay and Hay in their *Abraham Lincoln A History* published in 1890 make this comment, "In the autumn of 1818 the little community of Pigeon Creek was almost exterminated by a frightful pestilence called the milk sickness or in the dialect of the country, "the milk sick." Mrs. Nancy Hanks Lincoln, Mr. and Mrs. Sparrow, Mrs. Bruner and two children, were among the dead who were buried in the same cemetery.

Although the disease was usually fatal and often claimed all the members of a family one wonders whether or not the two Lincoln children, Sarah and Abraham, and their father may not have had light cases of the disease. There is some evidence that the removal of the Lincolns from Indiana to Illinois in 1830 was partly due to the return, during the previous fall, of the dreaded trembles. Ten years later, in 1840, the *Providence (R. I.) Journal* carried a story entitled "The Milk Sickness of the West" which was copied in the *Evansville (Ind.) Journal* for Oct. 14, 1840. Some excerpts from this descriptive article follows:

"There is no announcement which strikes the members of a western community with so much dread as the report of a case of milk sickness. The uncertainty and mystery which envelopes its origin, and its fearful and terrible effects upon the victims, and the ruinous consequences upon the valuable property which follows in its train, make it in the eyes of the inhabitants of a district the worst looking foe which can beset their neighborhood. No emigrant enters a region of Southern Indiana, Illinois, or Western Kentucky to locate himself without first making the inquiry if the milk sickness was ever known there and if he has any suspicions that the causes of the disease exist in the vegetable or mineral productions of the earth he speedily quits it. . . . I have passed many a deserted farm where the labors of the emigrant had prepared for himself and family a comfortable home, surrounded with an ample corn and wheat field, and inquired the reason of its abandonment, and learned that the milk sickness had frightened away its tenants and depopulated the neighborhood. . . . I saw this season a number of farms in Perry County, Indiana, lying uncultivated and the houses tenantless which last autumn were covered with corn fields whose gigantic and thrifty stalks overtopped a man's head on horseback."

Perry was the county in which the Lincolns settled and Mrs. Lincoln died a resident of that portion of Perry that was the very year of her death, to become Spencer county.

Not until recent years has medical science been able to give a positive diagnosis with respect to those afflicted with the trembles or milk sickness as it was called. It was originally believed to be derived from a poisonous dew caused by mineral evaporation at night or by poisonous springs contaminated by minerals. That its origin could be traced to malaria or to some micro-organism was also believed. But from the very earliest appearance of the disease there was a belief that the milk of a cow was the medium through which humans contracted the disease. As late as 1890 Nicolay and Hay referring to the disease stated, "It is a mysterious disease" and even then they considered it might be "a malignant form of fever."

It was about 1840 that Dr. Robert C. Holland of Lexington, Kentucky, in a paper read before Transylvania University eliminated the claim that milk sickness was of malarious origin as was often claimed. His preliminary studies of the cause of the disease warranted this conclusion; "The malady in man must be derived from cattle and that the cow does often feed upon the poison and secrete it in her milk. . . . The herb or mineral imparting the poison has not yet been detected. In man the first attacks are accompanied by violent tremblings, dizziness, excessive vomiting and excruciating pains in the epigastrium, medicine has little power over it; if the constitution of the patient be sufficiently robust to withstand the first assault of the disease or the amount of poison imbibed be not sufficient to destroy him he lingers for years in a state of prolonged misery . . . with a cadaverous countenance, sunken eye and sickly complexion. He looks like a risen tenant from the tomb with digestive powers destroyed he is unable to endure food and retains a loathsome disgust for meat and milk."

James Tilton Couch, a chemist for a long time with the Pathological Division, Bureau of Animal Industry has after several years of research reached this conclusion with respect to the cause of the malady. He states the milk sickness or trembles is due to "a poisonous substance, TREMETOL, present in white snake root (EUPATORIUM URTICAEFOLIUM)." He further comments, "The poison is secreted in the milk of animals that have grazed on these plants and such milk is capable of causing the disease in persons."

The Poison Snake Root still grows in the vicinity of the Spencer County home of the Lincolns. Upon a recent visit there one of the citizens of the community, Mr. S. Grant Johnson, had no difficulty in finding a stalk of it which reached almost to the shoulders of the editor of *Lincoln Lore* as it was photographed by another resident, Ora Brown. The same obnoxious weed might still take the lives of other mothers were cattle still allowed the freedom of the woods in the fall of the year. It is not likely that livestock would graze on it while there is good forage in the fields but it would be consumed only after the pastures had become dry and the cattle seek shade and vegetation in the woods.