

LINCOLN LORE

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THE LINCOLNS' BELATED SANTA CLAUS

Many thousands of people will receive Christmas greetings this year via Santa Claus, Indiana, bearing the post mark of this unique Hoosier town. Such an expression of good will is before the editor of Lincoln Lore just now. Besides the customary post mark and stamp cancellation on the cover there is a cachet imprint depicting the reindeer drawn sled with its popular driver. Above the picture is the printed line, "Santa Claus Land" and below the design the words, "Santa Claus, Ind."

Very few of the recipients of these tokens will associate the "Santa Claus Land" with the boyhood surroundings of Abraham Lincoln. The cabin home where Abraham Lincoln lived for fourteen years, from seven to twenty-one years of age, is but four miles from Santa Claus neighborhood, which we might say embraces part of the playground of Lincoln as a Hoosier youth.

Contributing further to this coincident of place is the concurrent use of the new Lincoln three cent stamp and the Santa Claus post mark. It appears as if many of the purchasers of the Christmas-blue stamp, memorializing Lincoln's address at Gettysburg, had in mind the Christmas mailings through the Santa Claus post office. It is not likely that people associating the stamp and the post mark have reflected that Lincoln had been "Back home again in Indiana."

A recent Associated Press dispatch dated Santa Claus, Indiana, Dec. 18, carried this story with reference to the annual tourist parade: "Crowds of more than 1,000 turned out each day this week, and 25,000 visitors passed through Santa Claus Park last Sunday."

This auto parade is not confined exclusively to the last two weeks in December, but all through the year increasingly large numbers of tourists visit this interesting children's community. A large majority of the visitors drive through the Nancy Hanks Lincoln State Park and pass directly in front of the memorial building erected to the memory of Lincoln's mother, who lies buried within five hundred feet of the highway.

It will be observed that the Santa Claus enterprise will indirectly make a tremendous contribution to the Lincoln saga of Southern Indiana by calling further attention to the home of the Lincolns and especially the boyhood days of Abraham. Hence, a little known Lincoln shrine, possibly inadvertently, will become one of the best known of the many Lincoln memorials.

It might be expected that there would be some legends associated with the story of Santa Claus, but unfortunately they do not reach back to the days when the Lincolns lived close by. It is a belated Santa Claus as far as the Lincolns are concerned. The settlement in the immediate vicinity where the village is now located began to take some form about 1850 when a German Methodist Church was organized and later a building constructed. The community which soon boasted a store became known as Santa Fe.

The village had grown sufficiently by 1855 to warrant the application for a post office and here is where the legend comes in. The people had hoped that Uncle Sam's Christmas gift to the town that year would be a post office, and sure enough just the day before Christmas, a large white envelope bearing the seal of the United States arrived. But the people were doomed to disappointment as the enclosure stated that there was already a town in Indiana bearing the name of Santa Fe.

It was suggested by the authorities at Washington that the community would have to specify a different name before a post office could be established. That very Christmas Eve at their annual celebration while the people were discussing the choice of a new name, according to the tradition extant:

"A little boy came rushing into the hall shouting—'The Christmas Star is falling.' Everyone rushed to the door and windows just in time to behold a flaming mass shooting down from the heavens and go crashing with a thunderous roar against a low, distant hill. The earth and building shook for a moment, then all was quiet. Scarcely anyone dared to breathe. 'It is a good omen,' some said, 'A star from the East has fallen in our midst.'"

After the excitement of the hour had passed and the crowd had become somewhat composed, that very night it was suggested that they apply for a post office under the name of Santa Claus. Eventually the commission for the post office arrived. It appeared that the name of Santa Fe—spelled Santafee on one map—was also retained for a portion of the town proper. The road running east and west through Section 1 in Clay Township shows the northern division labeled "Santafee" and the adjacent southern section "Santa Claus Post Office."

It was not until 1925 that any special attention was given to the Santa Claus Post Office, when it was visited by newspaper photographers and also given some attention by "Believe-it-or-not Ripley." At this time a press correspondent stated that the hamlet consisted of sixteen houses, a white church, a one room school, a tavern, a general store, a barber shop, and a post office. He also stated that there were sixty inhabitants there, but felt the number was somewhat exaggerated.

It was during the long term of Jim Martin, who was postmaster for thirty years (1905-1935), that the post office with the bewitching name slowly emerged as a center of yuletide enterprise. Since the statue of Santa Claus was erected in 1935 the pattern and immediate location of the site has undergone considerable change and is still in the process of development.

The hamlet promises to become, for Indiana at least, a mecca for children with its own miniature railroad system, Christmas tree lane, trail of Mother Goose characters, house of dolls, etc., and especially at this season of the year, the center of interest is the large tableau depicting the nativity scene. There is also Candy Castle which will not be overlooked. From the historical viewpoint the most important development is a museum for children's playthings of the long ago, attractively displayed and continually growing.

Abraham Lincoln during the Washington years often visited a store where toys were sold, situated but four blocks from the White House. It was operated by Joseph Stuntz, a former color bearer under Napoleon. Forty years ago Margarita Gerry wrote a little book entitled "The Toy Shop," in which she dramatized the President's visits to the store. It is said that when Lincoln was missing from the White House the search usually ended at the toy shop where Lincoln had gone to pick up something for Willie or "Tad." When one remembers the small boy Abraham in the Indiana log cabin with his sister Sarah, two years older than himself, and then visits the toy emporium, now so close to their former home, he may be led to think of the town as The Lincolns' Belated Santa Claus.