

LINCOLN LORE

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BOYHOOD PLAYMATES OF LINCOLN

This month of flowers recalls the May day festivities of long ago with the Maypoles and their encircling groups of children and also the presentation of May baskets during the evening hours. This might be the proper season to pay some attention to the boyhood days of Lincoln which were not so bleak and colorless and so void of a merry congenial atmosphere as has been portrayed. We erroneously visualize the homes of the Lincoln family in both Kentucky and Indiana, when they are looked upon as shacks or half-face camps, little better than shelters for animals. It has been difficult to associate laughter and merriment with home surroundings that have been described as dismal and depressing.

Abraham Lincoln recalled for Leonard Swett on one occasion when they were riding the circuit together in Illinois some of the experiences of his youth. Swett said, "Mr. Lincoln told this story as the story of a happy childhood. There was nothing sad or pinched, and nothing of want, and no illusion to want in any part of it. His own description of his youth was that of a happy joyous boyhood. It was told with mirth and glee and illustrated by pointed anecdotes often interrupted by his jocund laugh."

Another factor which invites, just at this particular time, a monograph on the "Boyhood Playmates of Lincoln" is the taking of the 1950 United States Census. It was the census enumeration recorded in Hardin County Kentucky in 1810 which made available the earliest duly authorized public record referring to Abraham Lincoln. The report shows the Thomas Lincoln home to have contained four people and the first and most important one recorded was "males under 10 years, one (Abraham Lincoln)." Then followed "males between 26 and 45, one (Thomas Lincoln); females under 10 years, one (Sarah Lincoln), between 26 and 45, one (Nancy Hanks Lincoln)."

As Abraham was not born until 1809 he would be but a year old when his presence in the world was first officially announced. The girl recorded was Sarah, two years older than her brother. These were the first playmates in the Lincoln home. When Abraham was but two years old and Sarah four, the Lincoln family moved to the Knob Creek home. Here a second boy, named Thomas for his father, was born to the Lincoln's. He died in infancy.

Abraham Lincoln attended two schools in Kentucky by the time he was seven years of age. This would open up a new area for playmates. Two LaFollette families lived on farms adjacent to the Lincoln Knob Creek farm. According to the 1810 census there were two girls under 10, in Isaac LaFollette's family and five boys under 10 in his brother Usual's family; Joseph, 1801; Robert G., 1804; Isaac, 1806; John, 1808; and William, 1810. Another brother, Jesse LaFollette and wife Polly, lived close by and their first child, Rebecca, was born the same year Abraham was born. Other children of Jesse and Polly born during the Lincoln's residence at Knob Creek were: William, 1810; Phoebe, 1813; Abigail, 1813; Warren C., 1815, but Josiah, father of the famous Robert M. LaFollette, was not born until 1817, the year following the departure of the Lincolns.

Austin Gollaher, born in 1805, most famous of the Kentucky playmates of Abraham, who is supposed to have saved him from drowning, did not arrive in the Lincoln country until 1812. The census for 1820 shows that Austin had several brothers and sisters about the age of the Lincoln children.

During the three years following the removal of the Lincoln family to Indiana when Abraham was growing from 7 to 11, his sister Sarah was probably his constant companion. When he was nine his mother died and what might be termed the loneliest year of his life followed. A boy, Dennis Hanks, nine years older than Abraham, came to live in the Lincoln home when his foster parents died at the same time Mrs. Lincoln passed away. However, eight weeks before Abraham's 11th birthday Thomas Lincoln brought a step-mother into the lonely cabin which so much needed a home maker. With her came three children by her first husband. No one should think of the Lincoln cabin as a lonely and desolate place after this composite group of the remnants of three broken families started to live under the same roof.

The census taker came around again in 1820 and these are his notations about the occupants of the Thomas Lincoln home in Carter Township, Spencer County, Indiana: "Males: under 10, one (John D. Johnston); between 10 and 16, one (Abraham Lincoln); between 18 and 26, one (Dennis Hanks); between 26 and 45, one (Thomas Lincoln). Females: under 10, one (Matilda Johnston); between 10 and 16, two (Sarah Lincoln and Elizabeth Johnston); between 26 and 45, one (Mrs. Sarah Johnston Lincoln)."

The ages of the youthful members of the family group follow: Dennis Hanks, 20; Sarah Lincoln, 13; Elizabeth Johnston, 13; Abraham Lincoln, 11; Matilda Johnston, 10; John D. Johnston, 9. The mother of this household, Sarah Johnston Lincoln, was but 32, therefore 12 years younger than her husband, Thomas.

We are not dependent on the Lincoln home to furnish all the playmates for Abraham as the census of 1820 reveals quite a striking picture of the large families in the Lincoln community.

A few miles away, but in the same county, lived the family of Austin Lincoln, listed in the census for 1820 with two sons under ten, one between ten and sixteen, also one daughter under 10. There were in Indiana two years earlier than Thomas Lincoln's family.

Thomas Carter, for whom Carter Township was named and who lived close by the Lincolns, was an old Kentucky acquaintance. The day the man took the census Carter's name appeared on the list next to Thomas Lincoln. Carter listed three boys under 10, one between 10 and 16, two girls under 10, and one between 10 and 16. John Carter listed two boys under 10, and two between 10 and 16, also four girls under 10.

Noah Gordon, who was the proprietor of the mill, frequently mentioned in Lincoln history and also a near neighbor, had one son under ten and two between 10 and 16, as well as four daughters under 10 and one between 10 and 16.

Thomas Barrett, another near neighbor listed but one son under 10, but there were three daughters under 10 in his family.

James Gentry, who established the community of "Gentry's Store" about a mile and a half from the Lincolns, listed two boys under 10 and two between 10 and 16, and one of these was Allen, with whom Lincoln went to New Orleans. Another was Matthew, who was the subject of a poem Lincoln wrote in later years upon returning to Gentryville. James Gentry also listed two girls under 10 years of age.

Absolem Roby, father of Ann, listed but one other daughter. William Wood, who has left so many interesting reminiscences about Lincoln, had two sons under 10, and one daughter between 10 and 16.