

# LINCOLN LORE

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## ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S EIGHTH YEAR

An autobiographical sketch written by Abraham Lincoln bears this comment on the migration of the family from Kentucky to Indiana: "We reached our new home about the time the state came into the Union." President James Madison signed the bill admitting Indiana to statehood on December 11, 1816. The exact dates of the departure and arrival of the Lincolns not being known, it has been customary to refer to their removal as having taken place sometime between Thanksgiving and Christmas in the year 1816. Abraham at this time was seven years old, or to put it in his own vernacular "in his eighth year."

The Thanksgiving and the Christmas seasons were the terminals of the most fascinating period of the year for the growing boy in America. The amazing stories of the Pilgrims braving the wild and turbulent ocean in their frail wind driven craft; the expressions of gratitude for survival; and eventually, the abundance of food from field and forest contributed to the wonderment of the harvest festival. When Thanksgiving was over Christmas could not be far behind, in fact it appears in this modern day as if December is trying to jostle November out of its rightful place in the calendar. Christmas in primitive America offered the occasion for telling the story of another marvelous journey, this one by land, in the midst of which a child was born in poor surroundings marked by a star. After rich gifts had been presented by learned messengers and angels had sung their praise with divine fervor, the infant was secretly hurried to another country for fear of a jealous king who would destroy the infant. These November and December pageants were high spots which tested the imagination of every child.

So it was between Thanksgiving and Christmas, in his eighth year when the wonder days of youth are at their zenith, that Abraham Lincoln reached his Hoosier home site. He later described the arrival in verse:

"When first my father settled here  
'Twas then the frontier line  
The panther's scream filled night with fear  
and bears preyed on the swine."

The primitive condition of the country in which his father chose to locate is further visualized by Abraham Lincoln in these words, "He settled in an unbroken forest and the clearing away of the surplus wood was the great task ahead." The great seal of the state of Indiana portrays a pioneer with axe in hand attacking the virgin growth of timber.

The immediate occupation which would engage the Lincoln family upon arrival would be the erection of their cabin home. It is impossible to exaggerate the excitement which would be kindled in the seven year old boy by having an opportunity to do some of the more simple tasks in helping to build the house in which they were to live, to literally cut it out of the wilderness and made it habitable. It would not take long with the help of neighboring pioneers to put up the four walls and get a roof over their heads. When the Lincolns moved to Illinois many years later one who helped to build their cabin there recalled that it took but four days to cut the logs and erect the rustic dwelling.

The typical log cabin of the pioneer similar to those occupied by the Lincolns was 18 x 20 feet and eight feet high from floor to rafter. The logs were twelve inches

in diameter, so the heavy timbers needed would total sixteen pieces 20 feet long for the front and back, sixteen pieces 18 feet long for the two ends, plus a few more of various lengths to fill in the gables. Approximately 40 pieces were used for the main structure before the erection of the cabin would begin. Four cornerstones were established and two side logs hewed on one side were placed on these stones. The properly notched logs were then put in place one on top of the other. Smaller poles were utilized for the roof and clapboards three or four feet long split from straight grained cuts were used as a covering and kept in place by weight poles which extended the width of the roof over each succeeding course of clapboards. Spaces for a door, window, and fireplace were cut out of the logs and a stick chimney built and then the family was ready to make such interior improvements as were needed.

An incident occurred not long after the cabin was erected which Abraham never forgot and he thought it was of sufficient importance to include it in a sketch of his life he had written in the third person. He recalled that he "took an early start as a hunter which was never much improved afterward. A few days before the completion of his eighth year, in the absence of his father, a flock of wild turkeys approached the new log cabin and Abraham with rifle-gun, standing inside, shot through a crack and killed one of them." The concluding statement is a confirmation of his introductory words about the episode. "He has never since pulled a trigger on any larger game." The long heavy Kentucky rifle would be a cumbersome instrument for a seven year old boy to handle, but apparently he was able to rest the barrel on the log beneath the crack through which he took aim and fired. As early as his eighth year he had not only helped to build their cabin home but also to provide food for the family.

The logs used to build the cabin represented but a minor part in "the clearing away of the surplus wood" and it is of importance that Abraham followed this statement in his sketch with this affirmation: "Abraham, though very young, was large of his age, and had an axe put in his hands at once." Even if he were "large of his age", seven years is very early for a boy to start handling an axe. It is with some degree of anxiety today that parents present a hatchet to a son of boy scout age.

The removing of the surplus wood was the great task ahead of the pioneer and as the Lincolns arrived late in the year they would be especially pressed to clear enough ground for a crop to be put in the following spring as the planting season came early in southern Indiana. The usual procedure in making a clearing was to leave standing, trees eighteen inches or over in diameter. All those smaller than that would be cut down, trimmed and the brush and logs piled around the upright trees. The undergrowth was dug out by the roots with a grubbing hoe and piled on the great pyramids of newly cut timber. When weather conditions were just right, these great piles of green tree trunks and branches were burned, which in itself was a spectacle worth observing and an exciting adventure for a boy the age of Abe. Taking all things into consideration, the plans for removal to Indiana, the trip itself with the crossing of the mighty Ohio, plus those incidents which occurred shortly after arrival, must have made Abraham Lincoln's eighth year one of the happiest of his life.