

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN NATIVITY LEGENDS

Folklore and tradition have so greatly influenced the stories associated with the birth of Abraham Lincoln that they have become known as the Lincoln Nativity Legends. The reported incidents relating to the infant's natal day and his surroundings have been so greatly misrepresented and exaggerated that even the humble Bethlehem stable scene presents more attractive living conditions. Sources gathered by two authors are primarily responsible for the circulation of the absurd conclusions still being published about Lincoln's birth. William Herndon's recorded interviews with Dennis Hanks and Roger Gore's presentation of Austin Gollaher's reminiscences present the nucleus for much of the legendary data.

Herndon, one of Lincoln's law partners, whose pronouncements have been so widely repudiated in recent years by modern historians, draws a distorted picture of the family group augmented by the addition of a male child on February 12, 1809. He states in the preface of his book that Abraham came from a "stagnant putrid, pool," alleging that both the child and his mother were illegitimate and the putative father a worthless vagabond.

No student of reputation today would question the fact that Abraham was the second child and first son among the three children born to Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln. Nevertheless there is reluctance on the part of most modern writers to eliminate entirely the legendary atmosphere of Lincoln's ancestral heritage. They still cling to the old Herndon buggy ride story in which the junior partner claimed Mr. Lincoln himself mentioned that his maternal grandfather was unknown. Yet, with only the doubtful reminiscence of Herndon to affirm this alleged statement authors completely ignore the testimonials of the kinswomen of Lucy Shipley Hanks, grandmother of the President, who refuted the charge.

Documentary evidence in abundance has forever destroyed the sordid character sketch of Abraham Lincoln's father which was so widely disseminated by the unreliable Herndon. Thomas Lincoln is looked upon today as a worthy hard working pioneer whose economic status compared favorably with other frontiersmen of the Kentucky years. Abraham Lincoln did not begin life in the environment of worthless characters but in — borrowing a term once used by an author in derision — "a frugal Christian home."

Dennis Hanks, Herndon's informant about incidents occurring on the day of the nativity, by his own testimony is disqualified as a witness. He thought Abraham was born at the Knob Creek cabin of the Lincolns where Thomas, Abraham's younger brother, was born. At one time, apparently, Dennis did not know that Abraham was born in the log cabin by the Sinking Spring. Furthermore, there were other children being born in the cabin home of his mother's sister, Polly Hanks Friend, about the same time as Nancy Hanks Lincoln's three children came into the world. Trying to recall the incidents which took place at the time of any one of the half dozen children, after a period of fifty years had elapsed, would be quite a task where a series of births occurred in the same community at about the same time. If Eleanor Atkinson had not interviewed Dennis Hanks and composed a delightfully written book based on the interview, the famous nativity scene originating with Dennis would probably have been forgotten. At one time the editor of *Lincoln Lore* more or less accepted the nativity recital by Dennis, impressively related in the Atkinson book.

When Nicolay and Hay, President Lincoln's secretaries, wrote their monumental *History of Abraham Lincoln*, they were apparently influenced by the earlier nativity legends then in circulation. They concluded that, "In the midst of the most unpromising circumstances that ever witnessed the advent of a hero into this world, Abraham Lincoln was born."

Roger Gore, a one time resident of Hodgenville, Kentucky, has contributed largely to the nativity legend which features the wretched physical surroundings which were supposed to be prevalent when Abraham Lincoln first saw the light of day. He describes a frightful snowstorm which was sweeping over the country and reached the height of its fury on February 12, leaving the impression that the child came on "the wings of the blizzard". He introduces a neighbor who was caught in the storm and who found temporary shelter in the Lincoln home. The unexpected visitor discovered the mother and the new born babe with the "imprint of death" upon its face. The cabin was "miserable, desolate, cold," there was no fuel or food available and the father was away from home.

The reminiscences of Austin Gollaher which are supposed to have served as source material for the nativity scene just portrayed are as valueless as much of Dennis Hanks' memories. We have positive evidence that the Gollaher family whom Gore claims went to the rescue of Mrs. Lincoln on that winter's day did not arrive in Hardin County, Kentucky until three years after Abraham Lincoln was born, and it is also established that there was no snow storm on that second Sunday in February, as alleged.

Yet in face of all this dramatic build-up, Webster, the cartoonist, possibly has given us the most accurate immediate local reaction to the birth of Abraham Lincoln when he portrays two settlers meeting in the vicinity of the Lincoln home. The man from the village inquires, "What' new out here neighbor?" to which the local pioneer replied: "Nuthin' a tall, nuthin' a tall, 'cept fer a new baby down t' Tom Lincoln's, nuthin' ever happens out here."

There is still a tendency, however, to cling to some of the legendary aspects of the place where Abraham Lincoln was born. Even the most recent Lincoln biography presents Abraham's birthplace as a "backwoods cabin". The author admits that the Knob Creek home occupied two years later by the Lincolns was located on the much travelled Louisville to Nashville highway where "pioneers with rumbling waggons . . . pedlars who brought wares from the outside world . . . now and then a coiffe of slaves trudging behind a mounted overseer or slave trader" presented an "eager restless cavalcade" which passed before the door of the Knob Creek cabin. This same old Louisville, Nashville road as then located passed directly by the birthplace cabin, situated at the foot of a hill right beside a famous spring, a natural stopping place for travelers. Abraham never lived on a backwoods road in Kentucky.

The objective approach in history has done much to invalidate the folklore element which at one time predominated in the stories referring to the birth of Lincoln. The cabin in which Lincoln was born was not inferior to thousands of similar log cabins located in Kentucky in the year 1809. Furthermore, there is plenty of evidence supporting the average economic status of the Lincolns, and the respectability of the father and mother. One by one the legends which have made Abraham Lincoln almost a folklore character are observed from the objective view point and the historical rather than the traditional portrait is sure to prevail.