

# LINCOLN LORE

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## LINCOLN, MISS ROBY, AND ASTRONOMY

Inasmuch as this bulletin is dated on St. Valentine's Day and but two days ago we observed the birthday of both Lincoln and Darwin, it would be especially timely if we could find some subject for this Lincoln monograph that would combine a romantic and a scientific theme. We are able to do this by introducing a young lady by the name of Miss Ann Roby, who is well on the way, from the popular writers' viewpoint, to supplement the other Ann, Miss Rutledge, who has been the darling of Lincoln fiction authors for nearly a century. Ann Roby is also a Herndon discovery and he claims to have interviewed her on his trip to southern Indiana in 1865.

Lamon's *Lincoln*, published in 1872, is apparently the first book to give emphasis to the Lincoln-Roby affair. Commenting on Lincoln's Indiana neighbors Lamon states: "There was among them a Miss Roby, a girl of fifteen years of age whom we must suppose to have been pretty, for evidently Abe was half in love with her." Herndon tells the story with a little more detail, however, in his three volume work and he mentions specific incidents related by her.

According to Herndon the school teacher Crawford had given out in the spelling class the word "defied" and it came Miss Roby's time to spell. She stated "Abe stood on the opposite side of the room and was watching me. I began d-e-f and then stopped, hesitating whether to proceed with an 'i' or a 'y'. Looking up I beheld Abe, a grin covering his face, and pointing with his index finger to his eye. I took the hint and spelled the word with an 'i'."

The second incident recalling her association with Abe has a little more of the romantic atmosphere about it. Herndon claims that Ann "described with self-evident pleasure the delightful experience of an evening's stroll down to the river with him, where they were wont to sit on the bank and watch the moon as it slowly rose over the neighboring hills. Dangling their youthful feet in the water, they gazed on the pale orb of night, as many a fond pair before them had done and will continue to do until the end of the world. One evening, when thus engaged, their conversation and thoughts turned on the movement of the planets. 'I did not suppose that Abe, who had seen so little of the world, would know anything about it, but he proved to my satisfaction that the moon did not go down at all; that it only seemed to; that the earth, revolving from west to east, carried us under, as it were.'" "We do the sinking," he explained; "while to us the moon is comparatively still, the moon's sinking is only an illusion." "I at once dubbed him a fool, but later developments convinced me that I was the fool, not he. He was well acquainted with the general laws of astronomy and the movements of the heavenly bodies, but where he could have learned so much or how to put it so plainly, I never could understand."

Herndon, however, after stating that "there was more or less of an attachment between Miss Roby and Abe" makes this comment, "The lady took pains to assure me they were never in love." It would seem that the unromantic turn which Lincoln gave to the subject of the moon on such an occasion would be proof enough of that. Possibly it is very uncharitable to make a scientific or objective approach to the above riverside incident, but Lamon states that it took place while Allen Gentry and Abe were loading their flatboat for New Orleans. Allen Gentry's father, James Gentry, purchased from Daniel Grass of Rockport on April 16,

1825, a one hundred acre tract bordering on the Ohio River just below the town. About one year later James Gentry sold this same tract to his son Allen on May 10, 1826. It was on this land apparently where two years later Allen and Abe cut the timber for the flatboat which they built at this point on the river which later became known as Gentry's Landing.

Absalom Roby, father of Ann, also bought land at Rockport from Charles Pierce, a justice of the peace, who officiated at the wedding of Allen and Ann on March 20, 1828. The first child of Mr. and Mrs. Allen Gentry was born on December 17, 1828. There are two dates given for the departure of the Gentry-Lincoln flatboat, one in April, and the other in December, 1828. If Abraham and Ann participated in the moon gazing act at the time of the traditional April flatboat loading, she was already a married woman. If the romantic setting occurred preliminary to the more likely December departure of Abe and her husband, she was at that time a mother with an infant son. We trust our ambitious novelists who may have dreams of rekindling an early Lincoln romance by replacing the discarded Ann Rutledge with Ann Roby, will at least give some attention to the marital status of the newly featured potential sweetheart.

Possibly it would be of some interest and certainly more profitable to comment on Lincoln's ability to talk with some degree of authority on the science of astronomy about which Ann Roby claimed he was well posted. One of the members of the Lincoln-Johnston family stated: "Abe read I think Grimshaw's *History of the United States*."

We hope that Abraham did have access to this book by William Grimshaw published in 1821 which consists of 271 pages of interesting historical data and strange to behold for that day, it did have a very good index. This descriptive title page sets forth its contents: "History of the United States from their first settlement as colonies to the cession of Florida in eighteen hundred and twenty-one comprising every important political event with a progressive view of aborigines; population, religion, agriculture, and commerce; of the arts, sciences, and literature; occasional biographies of the most remarkable colonists, writers and philosophers, warriors and statesmen; and a copious alphabetical index."

The very first paragraph in the history exalts the mind which "ranges with delight over the cultivated field of science." The second paragraph recites the accomplishments of the Chaldeans and the Egyptians who "even beyond the most ancient records of authentic history had marked the revolutions of the heavenly bodies, with a degree of industry and success." The third paragraph in this first chapter relates the accomplishments of Pythagoras who taught that "the sun was the center of the universe, that the earth was round." The same paragraph continues with the theory of Philolaus who accepted the doctrines of Pythagoras and proceeded a step further in astronomy and asserted "the annual motion of the earth about the sun." Only a short time elapsed when the earth's "diurnal revolution on its own axis" was promulgated by Hicetas.

This brief dissertation in Grimshaw's *History* might well have been the background of the dissertation on astronomy which Abraham Lincoln propounded to Ann Roby on a certain beautiful moonlight night on the banks of the Ohio, possibly at some time preliminary to her marriage to Allen Gentry.