

THE BOYHOOD OF LINCOLN

Elbridge S. Brooks

The future president of the United States was eight years old when he spent the winter with his father, mother, and sister in the "half-faced camp" on Little Pigeon Creek. It was indeed rough living in the Lincoln home on Little Pigeon Creek. When he was "good and ready," the father, Thomas Lincoln, set about building a better shelter for his family than the forlorn "half-faced camp." The new building was not such a great improvement, but it was more like a house. It was a rough cabin of logs, without door, window, or floor. But it seemed so much better than the shanty in which they had been living that Abraham felt quite princely.

His life was lonely enough in that wilderness; but, before many months, he had company. His Uncle and Aunt Sparrow and his boy cousin, Dennis Hanks came from Kentucky to try their luck in Indiana. Abraham's father gave them the old "half-faced camp" as a home, and so the Lincolns had near neighbors.



But before the winter set in, there came sad days to both houses. A terrible sickness--what we call an epidemic--visited that section of Indiana. Many people died from it, and among these were first, Uncle and Aunt Sparrow, and then Mrs. Lincoln, the mother of Abraham.

It was a poor kind of housekeeping they had in that shiftless home on Little Pigeon Creek after the mother of the home had been taken away. Sarah, the eldest child, was only twelve; Abraham was but ten, and little Dennis Hanks was eight. Sarah tried to keep house; and her father, in his careless way, tried to help her. But about all they could do was to keep from going hungry. Deer-meat broiled on the coals of the wood-fire, ash-cakes made of cornmeal, with now and then a slab of pork, was their only bill of fare. About all the pleasure Abraham found when he was not trying to keep from being cold and hungry, was in his books.

How many do you think he had? Just three: the Bible, Aesop's Fables, and The Pilgrim's Progress. Think of that, you boys and girls who have more books than you can read, and for whom the printing presses are always hard at work. The boy knew these three books almost by heart. He could repeat whole chapters of the Bible, many parts of The Pilgrim's Progress, and every one of Aesop's Fables; and he never forgot them.

Thomas Lincoln knew that the uncomfortable state of affairs in his log cabin could not long continue, or his home, such as it was, would go to ruin. So one day he bade the children good-by and told them he was going back to Kentucky on a visit. He was away for three weeks; but when he returned from his Kentucky visit in December, 1819, he brought back a new wife to look after his home and be a mother to his motherless children.

Mrs. Lincoln seemed to take an especial liking to the little ten-year-old Abraham. She saw something in the boy that made her feel sure that a little guidance would do wonders for him. Having first made him clean and comfortable, she next made him intelligent, bright, and good. She managed to send him to school for a few months. The little log schoolhouse, close to the meeting-house, to which the traveling schoolmaster would come to give four weeks' schooling, was scarcely high enough for a man to stand straight in; it had holes for windows and greased paper to take the place of glass. But in such a place Abraham Lincoln "got his schooling" for a few weeks only in "reading, writing, and ciphering"; here he was again and again head of his class; and here he "spelled down" all the big boys and girls in the exciting contests called "spelling matches."

He became a great reader. He read every book and newspaper he could get hold of, and if he came across anything in his reading that he wished to remember, he would copy it on a shingle, because writing paper was scarce, and either learn it by heart or hide the shingle away until he could get some paper to copy it on.

Lamps and candles were almost unknown in his home, and Abraham, flat on his stomach, would often do his reading, writing, and ciphering in the firelight, as it flashed and flickered on the big hearth of his log-cabin home.

One day Abraham found that a man for whom he sometimes worked owned a copy of Weems's Life of Washington. This was a famous book in its day. Abraham borrowed it at once. When he was not reading it, he put it away on a shelf--a clapboard resting on wooden pins. There was a big crack between the log behind the shelf, and one rainy day the Life of Washington fell into the crack and was soaked almost into pulp. Young Abraham went at once to the owner of the book and, after telling him of the accident promised to "work the book out."

The old farmer kept him so strictly to his promise that he made him "pull fodder" for the cattle three days as payment for the book. And that is the way that Abraham Lincoln bought his first book. For he dried the Life of Washington and put it in his "library." What boy or girl of today would like to buy books at such a price?



NOTES AND QUESTIONS

Biography

Elbridge S. Brooks (1846-1902) was a native of Massachusetts. He was always interested in stories of history, for his mother descended from the Monroes, who fought bravely at Lexington. He was for a time one of the editors of St. Nicholas.



Discussion

1. What were the hardships suffered by the young Lincoln in the Indiana wilderness?

2. What do you learn about Lincoln's reading? About his school life?

3. What was the first book Lincoln owned, and how did he get it?

4. What do you suppose Lincoln learned from the life of Washington?



Name _____ Date _____

5. How did Lincoln fix in his memory things that he wished to remember?

6. What characteristics of the boy help to explain why he afterwards became such a great man?

7. You will enjoy reading The True Story of Lincoln, from which this selection is taken.

8. Find in the Glossary the meaning of:

forlorn - _____

shanty - _____

princely - _____

wilderness - _____

epidemic - _____

shiftless - _____

ash-cakes - _____

slab - _____

guidance - _____

ciphering - _____

clapboard - _____

pulp - _____

9. Pronounce: Aesop; bade.

Phrases for Study

1. half-faced camp _____ _____
2. spelled down _____ _____
3. uncomfortable state _____ _____
4. work the book out _____ _____
5. traveling schoolmaster _____ _____
6. pull fodder _____ _____

