The Life of Abraham Lincoln

"The Short and Simple Annals of the Poor"

"He was Born in Kentucky, Raised in Indiana and Lived in Illinois"

Abraham Lincoln's early years were marked by hardship on the American frontier. He was born in 1809 into a world of subsistence farming. His father, Tom Lincoln, struggled to carve out a living for his family in the dense forests of Kentucky. Confused land titles and Kentucky's status as a slave state drove the Lincolns to seek a new home in Indiana territory across the Ohio River just prior to the territory becoming a state in 1816. There, on Pigeon Creek, near the community of Gentryville, Tom Lincoln constructed a crude three-sided shelter until a small one-room cabin could be completed. Young Abraham had an axe placed in his hands at an early age to help his father clear fields for planting.

In 1818, tragedy struck the household when Lincoln's mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, became ill with "milk-sick" fever and died. Also called "the trembles," the disease was transmitted from the milk of cows that had eaten snake root. It produced agonizing gastrointestinal distress before the victims usually lapsed into a coma.

Tom Lincoln remarried in 1819. Sarah Bush Johnston, a widow with three small children, brought order and harmony to the dirty unkempt cabin in the wilderness. Sarah Lincoln encouraged young Abe's interest in reading and learning. The illiterate Tom, however, criticized young Lincoln for wasting time with such activity. It was not unusual for Tom Lincoln to strike Abe a blow when he felt the boy's preoccupation with books or joke telling distracted him from the hard work of farm life. Lincoln did attend so-called "blab schools" during this time and received, all told, about a year of formal education.

In 1828, Lincoln's sister, Sarah, died in childbirth. A year later an outbreak of milk-sick fever again ravaged southern Indiana. Lincoln's cousin, John Hanks, who had lived with the family for a time, sent reports from Illinois of the abundance of available land untainted by the fever. Tom Lincoln disposed of his holdings in Indiana and, in early 1830, the clan of Lincoln-Hanks-Hall families packed their meager belongings on ox carts and journeyed to Macon County, Illinois near the farm of John Hanks' father. There, John and Abe worked splitting fence rails, clearing the land and doing odd jobs for nearby neighbors. The hard winter of 1830-1831 made Tom Lincoln question his decision to come to Illinois, but friends and family convinced him to settle in nearby Coles County. Tom and Sarah Lincoln lived out the remainder of their lives.

Lincoln left his father's home in the spring of 1831. He, John Hanks and stepbrother John D. Johnston were hired by Denton Offutt to take a flatboat of goods down-river to New Orleans. He saw New Salem, Illinois for the first time when their craft became wedged on a milldam on the Sangamon River near the village. He returned to the town that July to work in Offutt's store. In New Salem, Lincoln began his study of law and became active in the Whig Party, created in opposition to the policies of Andrew Jackson, and he represented New Salem for four terms in the Illinois legislature. He also met, and some believe wooed, attractive Ann Rutledge. Friends remembered a tortured and heartbroken Lincoln when the young woman died in August 1835.

He remained in New Salem until 1837, when he moved to Springfield as an attorney. In Springfield, he continued his support of Whigs running for national office. In 1840, 1844, 1848, and 1852, Lincoln ran as an elector for Whig presidential candidates. In 1847, he was elected to the United States Congress on the Whig ticket. He served one term. Retiring from active politics, Lincoln concentrated on his legal practice where one of his biggest clients was the Illinois Central Railroad. In 1854, he re-entered the political arena after passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which permitted slavery in new territories by popular vote. The controversy over slavery led to the birth of the new Republican Party. Lincoln lost his bid for the U.S. Senate in 1854 and again in 1858 - this time as a Republican. The great debates of 1858 against Democrat Stephen Douglas helped establish Lincoln as a national political figure and set the stage for his emergence in 1860 as a presidential candidate.

Lincoln's personal journey from 1830 to 1860 was one of radical change. He was raised on a frontier largely populated by Jacksonian Democrats and Separate Baptists but came to reject the ideologies of his youth. He became a religious maverick and adhered to the political ideals of those whose background often differed from his own. In this age of the "common man," Lincoln grew into a figure who was most uncommon.

And The War Came

Regional differences that had been growing since the founding of the American republic reached the boiling point as a result of the presidential election of 1860. Divided over the issue of expanding slavery, the Democrats split into two factions led by Vice President John C. Breckinridge and Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas. A third candidate, former Whig John C. Bell of Tennessee, formed a new party - the Constitutional Unionists – in an attempt to appeal to border state moderates.

Against this background, the Republicans held their nominating convention in Chicago to select their candidate. In order to improve upon John C. Fremont's showing in the 1856 election, the Republicans decided to broaden their appeal by reducing their strident rhetoric on slavery and advocating proposals such as protective tariffs, a homestead act, and a transcontinental railroad that would appeal to voters in the crucial Midwest swing states. To the surprise of many, Abraham Lincoln secured the nomination on the convention's third ballot.

When the votes were tabulated in November, Lincoln was an overwhelming winner in the Electoral College, despite having received only 39% of the popular vote. To Southerners, the thought of a Lincoln presidency was anathema. His party, derided as the "black Republicans," was on the ballot in only one southern state.

Concerned that Abraham Lincoln's firm opposition to the extension of slavery would ultimately doom their "peculiar institution," seven southern states seceded in the months following his election. Opinion in the North was divided during this crisis. Many felt the South should be allowed to depart in peace. The Confederate firing on Ft. Sumter in April 1861 ended the debate. Lincoln called for volunteers to suppress the rebellion. A conflict ensued that would become the most sanguinary war in American history.