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LINCOLN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD FARM PROBLEMS*

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Lincoln's birthplace, now a national shrine, is about three miles south of Hodgenville in the heart of Kentucky. The rude log hut as it stood at the time of his birth was without a floor except for the ground and its roof was made of rough slabs held in place by poles and stones. A small, square opening, possibly covered with greased paper, served as a window. Inside, at one end was a wide fireplace of stone with a chimney of sticks and clay. The bed in an opposite corner was made of a crotched stick, with poles leading from it to the walls of the cabin, and rough slabs. This cabin stood on the edge of a tract of poor land which had few trees and which was covered with tall, coarse grass. The land itself could hardly be called a farm; it was so unproductive. Lincoln's father had purchased the 300 acres in 1808 for \$200. The chief distinguishing feature of this farm is a spring which supplies water even today to those who journey to this famous historic spot. It flows from a horizontal cave-like channel of rocks in the low hillside immediately in front of the cabin and then drops abruptly into a perpendicular opening of rock where it disappears. Hence, the name Sinking Spring Farm. Here the first four years of Lincoln's life were passed (1).

Lincoln's early boyhood was spent on a somewhat more fertile farm of thirty acres near Knob Creek about ten miles northeast of his birthplace. Because of hills and gullies only 14 acres could be tilled. Here he and his sister attended their first brief period of school. The boy, we are told, went clad in 'a one piece long linsey shirt' without other garments (2).

In the fall of 1816 the Lincoln family moved again, this time across the Ohio River and into the heavily wooded wilderness of southern Indiana. Here they established themselves on a knoll surrounded by marshy land, infested with malaria and without a supply of drinking water within a mile. Although his father acquired an option on 160 acres, to be paid for in instalments at \$2.00 per acre, payments on only one-half this amount were ever completed. His father continued to vary his hunting and farming by working at carpentering. In 1824, seven years after their arrival in Indiana, 10 acres of corn, 5 acres of wheat, and 2 acres of oats was the extent of the tilled land on the Lincoln farm. The result was that the boy was hired out to do ploughing,

* This statement concerning Lincoln is a revision of an article with the same title in Agr. Libr. Notes 6:29-33 (February, 1931). It was originally prepared and presented by the author as a radio talk, delivered through WRC and 39 other radio stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company, Feb. 12, 1931. On Feb. 18, 1932, it was delivered by R. H. Lamb during the Western Farm and Home Hour, through Station KGO and eight other stations associated with the NBC-KGO network, Pacific division, National Broadcasting Company. The numbers in parentheses refer to the bibliographical footnotes at the end of the text.

splitting rails, grubbing, making fences, etc. He also worked as a ferryman on the Ohio River; for this work his father received \$6.00 a month. During the hog packing season, however, he received an additional 31 cents a day (3).

Early in the spring of 1830, the Lincoln family pushed westward once more, this time to the bluffs along the Sangamon River, in Macon County, Illinois (4). Soon afterward, having reached his majority, Lincoln left his family and began life for himself. The facts summarized thus far give us a picture of the life of the farm boy Lincoln of a century ago. The farming he knew in his youth was pioneer exploitation rather than settled cultivation (5), and hardly comparable with farming as we know it today. We can see the influence of this early agricultural environment in his stories and in the choice of illustrations used in his speeches (6). At one time or another Lincoln was the owner of considerable real estate, including farm land; his investments, however, were conservative and comparatively profitable (7).

At twenty-three, Lincoln announced his candidacy for the Illinois legislature. In a long address to the people of Sangamon County, he pointed out the need for internal improvements, - good roads, navigable streams, and canals. He endorsed railroads, then a new means of transportation, and demanded more careful regulation of banks. He referred to education as the "most important" subject of all (8). The dexterity with which he handled the issues in this address is early evidence of his native ability as a political strategist. Although defeated in this first attempt (1832), he won two years later and served four consecutive terms. Later he had one term in the National House of Representatives (1847-1849). As has been said, "Lincoln's early public career can be best understood as that of an ardent champion, promoter, booster of his section, state and locality" (9). His years as a lawyer riding the court circuit added to his political sagacity and also to his knowledge of the problems of the pioneer farmer. The result was that during the 1850's he "came slowly but surely to represent the frontier, the farmer, and the small town democracy...as few other men ever represented a people" (10) and emerged as a logical and formidable candidate for the presidency.

Lincoln's address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, at its annual fair in Milwaukee on September 30, 1859, is the only extended discussion of agriculture which he ever made (11). Even today, it is interesting reading and worthy of being summarized. He emphasizes the value of the social and recreational features of agricultural fairs, but also points out that "the chief use of Agricultural Fairs is to aid in improving the great calling of Agriculture...[and] to make mutual exchange of agricultural discovery, information and knowledge...." He then proceeds to make general suggestions on what he considered practical farm problems. In this connection, his chief concern is the startling reduction in grain yield which he has observed in his travels. To check this, he pleads for more intensive cultivation, not only from the view of economics, but because of the desirable influence upon the farmer himself. He says, "the effect of thorough cultivation upon the farmer's own mind, and, in reaction, through his mind, back upon his business, is perhaps quite equal to any other of its effects. Every man is proud of what he does well and no man is proud of what he does not well." Sensitive to the great changes which were then taking place in agricultural machinery he discusses at considerable length the application of steam power to farm work. He also emphasizes "book learning." On this subject, he says: "A capacity, and taste, for

reading, gives access to whatever has already been discovered by others. It is the key, or one of the keys, to the already solved problems... It gives a relish and facility for successfully pursuing the unsolved ones." In introducing this topic, he uses the famous phrase, now carved over the entrance of the administration building of the United States Department of Agriculture: "No other human occupation opens so wide a field for the profitable and agreeable combination of labor with cultivated thought, as agriculture."

During the first two years of Lincoln's presidency three bills of vast significance to agriculture were passed (12). All were part of the political platform upon which he had been elected. Lincoln signed the organic law establishing the United States Department of Agriculture with a commissioner at its head on May 15, 1862 (13). Five days later he signed the Homestead Act, the law by which approximately 232,000,000 acres have been transferred from the public domain to private hands to form perhaps one and one-third million farms (14). On July 2 of the same year he signed the Agricultural College Land Grant Act. It appropriated the land from the public domain for the endowment of our agricultural colleges, so important to our agriculture and the educational system of today (15). Although these laws were the culmination of movements extending over considerable time, it remained for Lincoln to sign and make them operative.

References

- (1) This description of Lincoln's birthplace follows closely that given in Albert J. Beveridge, Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858, 1:3-4 (New York, 1928). Hereafter this work is cited as Beveridge. See also W. E. Barton, The Life of Abraham Lincoln (Indianapolis, 1925).
- (2) The Knob Creek farm and Lincoln's boyhood there are described in Beveridge, 1:26-31.
- (3) For an account of the moving to Indiana and the years there, see Beveridge, 1:32 ff. For material supplementing this paragraph note particularly p. 32, 47, 60, 65, 84-85.
- (4) For an account of the migration of the Lincoln family from Salem, Mass., to Springfield, Ill., 1637 to 1837, see Louis A. Warren, "Lincoln Lands and Lineage; A Typical American Migration," Ill. State Hist. Soc. Trans. 1927:144-153.
- (5) The best discussion of Lincoln's interest in farm problems is by Professor Earle D. Ross in his article, "Lincoln and Agriculture," Agr. Hist., 3:51-66 (April, 1929). Hereafter this article is cited as Ross.

See also O. C. Stine, "Lincoln and Agriculture," a radio talk delivered through station WRC and 32 other radio stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company, Feb. 12, 1930. Dr. Stine's address also appeared with the same title in Hoard's Dairyman, 76:79, 121 (Feb. 10, 1931).

See also William L. Bailey, "Abraham Lincoln, Countryman," Rural Amer., 4 (2):3, 13 (February, 1926); and Edward N. Wentworth, A Biographical Catalog of the Portrait Gallery of the Saddle and Sirloin Club, 191-194 (Chicago, 1920).

A list of references affording a background for the subject of Lincoln's attitude toward farm problems is provided in "A Bibliography of the History of Agriculture in the United States," by Everett E. Edwards, issued by the U. S. Dept. of Agriculture as Misc. Pub. 84 (November, 1930). Hereafter this bibliography is cited as Edwards.

- (6) This point is emphasized by Ross, 53. He refers to Barton, 2: 220, 311; A. K. McClure, Yarns and Stories of Abraham Lincoln, 23, 34, 58; 90, 99, 132, 153, 247 (Chicago [n.d.]); Ida M. Tarbell, In the Footsteps of the Lincolns, 137 (New York, 1924).
- (7) E. R. Harlan, "Lincoln's Iowa Lands," Annals of Iowa (3d ser.) 15:621-623 (April, 1927). "Lincoln's Land Holdings and Investments," Abraham Lincoln Assoc. Bul. [16], 3 p. (Sept. 1, 1929).
- (8) See Beveridge, 1:114-126, for an analysis of this "address to the people of Sangamon County," and an account of his first campaign. For Lincoln's interest in railroads, see John W. Starr, Lincoln & the Railroads: A Biographical Study (New York, 1927).
- (9) Ross, 55. Cf. Thomas Ewing, "Lincoln and the General Land Office, 1849," Ill. State Hist. Soc. Jour., 25:139-153 (October, 1932).
- (10) Quoted from the Foreword of W. E. Dodd, Lincoln or Lee (New York and London, 1928).
See also V. L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, 2:152-160 (New York, 1927-1930).
- (11) This address was first printed in the Wis. State Agr. Soc. Trans. (1858-59) 5:287-297. It is reprinted with the title, "Lincoln's 1859 Address at Milwaukee," with an introductory note by Joseph Schafer, in the Wis. Mag. Hist., 10:243-258 (March, 1927). With the exception of the last five pages the address is also available as a pamphlet, An Address by Abraham Lincoln before the Wisconsin Agricultural Society, at Milwaukee, Wis., September 30, 1859 (Peoria, Ill., E. J. Jacob, 1929. 17 p., illus.) A paraphrased Spanish translation of portions of the address appears with the title, "Abraham Lincoln y la Agricultura," La Hacienda, 21:41 (February, 1926). See also Daniel Kilham Dodge, "Lincoln's Only Speech on Farming," Country Gent., 90 (6):5, 30 (Feb. 7, 1925); Cyril G. Hopkins, Lincoln's View of Agriculture, 1859... (Urbana, Ill., 1909. 10 p.); Julius E. Olson, "Lincoln in Wisconsin," Wis. Mag. Hist., 4:44-54 (September, 1920).
- (12) Ross, 57-66.
- (13) See C. H. Greathouse, "Historical Sketch of the United States Department of Agriculture," U. S. Dept. Agr. Div. Pubs. Bul. 3. See also H. B. Learned, The President's Cabinet, ch. 11 (New Haven, 1912); W. L. Wanlass, The United States Department of Agriculture, 9-32 (Baltimore, 1920); Edward Wiest, Agricultural Organization in the United States, 21-48 (Lexington, Ky., 1923). See also Ross, 58-59. For additional references, see Edwards, 204-209.
- (14) See B. H. Hibbard, A History of the Public Land Policies, ch. 17-18 (New York, 1924), and especially p. 396-398 for a table of the yearly totals of all final homestead entries from the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862 to June 30, 1923. See also J. T. Du Bois and Gertrude S. Mathews, Galusha A. Grow, the Father of the Homestead Act (Boston and New York, 1917), and Ross, 62-63. For additional references, see Edwards, 53-57.
- (15) See especially p. 88-108 of A. C. True, "A History of Agricultural Education in the United States, 1785-1925," U. S. Dept. Agr. Misc. Pub. 36 (Washington, Govt. Print. Off., 1929). See also W. B. Parker, The Life and Public Services of Justin Smith Morrow, 259-284 (Boston and New York, 1924); E. J. James, Origin of the Land Grant Act of 1862... (Urbana-Champaign, Ill., 1910); and Mrs. Mary (Turner) Carriell, The Life of Jonathan Baldwin Turner (Jacksonville, Ill., 1911). For additional references, see Edwards, 209-214.