

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## A Stepmother's Recollection

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*Sarah Bush Lincoln (1788–1869), the second wife of Thomas Lincoln, was much beloved by her stepson, Abraham. Although illiterate herself, she encouraged his education and supported him in his love of books and learning. One of the last things Lincoln did before leaving Illinois for the White House was to visit “mama,” as he always called her. This recollection of Lincoln is taken from an interview Lincoln’s Springfield law partner William Herndon (1818–91) conducted with Sarah on September 8, 1865, at her home eight miles south of Charleston, Illinois. It was later included in his 1889 biography, Herndon’s Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life, coauthored with Jesse W. Weik (1857–1930).*

Page | 1

*Compare this recollection with Baldwin’s story above. How are they similar? How are they different? What was Lincoln like as a stepson, student, and friend, according to Sarah? What things did he care for most?*

Abe was about nine years of age when I landed in Indiana. The country was wild, and desolate. Abe was a good boy; he didn’t like physical labor, was diligent for knowledge, wished to know, and if pains and labor would get it, he was sure to get it. He was the best boy I ever saw. He read all the books he could lay his hands on. I can’t remember dates nor names, am about seventy-five years of age; Abe read the Bible some, though not as much as said; he sought more congenial books suitable for his age. I think newspapers were had in Indiana as early as 1824 and up to 1830 when we moved to Illinois. Abe was a constant reader of them. I am sure of this for the years of 1827-28-29-30. The name of the *Louisville Journal* seems to sound like one.

Abe read history papers and other books, can’t name any one, have forgotten. Abe had no particular religion, didn’t think of that question at that time, if he ever did. He never talked about it. He read diligently, studied in the daytime, didn’t after night much, went to bed early, got up early, and then read, eat his breakfast, got to work in the field with the men. Abe read all the books he could lay his hands on, and when he came across a passage that struck him, he would write it down on boards if he had no paper and keep it there till he did get paper, then he would rewrite it, look at it, repeat it. He had a copybook, a kind of scrapbook, in which he put down all things and then preserved them. He ciphered on boards when he had no paper or no slate, and when the board would get

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too black, he would shave it off with a drawing knife and go on again. When he had paper, he put his lines down on it. His copybook is here now or was lately.

Abe, when old folks were at our house, was a silent and attentive observer, never speaking or asking questions till they were gone, and then he must understand everything, even to the smallest thing, minutely and exactly; he would then repeat it over to himself again and again, sometimes in one form and then in another, and when it was fixed in his mind to suit him, he became easy and he never lost that fact or his understanding of it. Sometimes he seemed perturbed to give expression to his ideas and got mad, almost, as one who couldn't explain plainly what he wanted to convey.

Page | 2

He would hear sermons preached, come home, take the children out, get on a stump or log, and almost repeat it word for word. He made other speeches, such as interested him and the children. His father had to make him quit sometimes, as he quit his own work to speak and made the other children as well as the men quit their work. As a usual thing Mr. Lincoln never made Abe quit reading to do anything if he could avoid it. He would do it himself first. Mr. Lincoln could read a little and could scarcely write his name; hence he wanted, as he himself felt the uses and necessities of educating, his boy Abraham to learn, and he encouraged him to do it in all ways he could.

Abe was a good boy, and I can say what scarcely one woman, a mother, can say in a thousand and it is this: Abe never gave me a cross word or look and never refused in fact, or even in appearance, to do anything I requested him. I never gave him a cross word in all my life. He was kind to everybody and to everything and always accommodated others if he could, would do so willingly if he could. His mind and mine, what little I had, seemed to run together, more in the same channel. Abe could easily learn and long remember, and when he did learn anything he learned it well and thoroughly.

What he thus learned he stored away in his memory, which was extremely good. What he learned and stored away was well defined in his own mind, repeated over and over again and again, till it was so defined and fixed firmly and permanently in his memory. He rose early, went to bed early, not reading much after night. Abe was a moderate eater, and I now have no remembrance of his special dish; he sat down and ate what was set before him, making no complaint; he seemed careless about this. I cooked his meals for nearly fifteen years. He always had good health, never was sick, was very careful of his person, was tolerably neat and clean only, cared nothing for clothes, so that they were clean and neat, further cut no figure with him, nor color, new stuff, nor



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material; was careless about these things. He was more fleshy in Indiana than ever in Illinois.

I saw him every year or two. He was here after he was elected President of the United States. As company would come to our house Abe was a silent listener, wouldn't speak, would sometimes take a book and retire aloft, go to the stable or field or woods, and read. Abe was always fond of fun, sport, wit, and jokes. He was sometimes very witty indeed. He never drank whisky or other strong drink, was temperate in all things, too much so, I thought sometimes. He never told me a lie in his life, never evaded, never quarreled, never dodged nor turned a corner to avoid any chastisement or other responsibility. He never swore or used profane language in my presence nor in others' that I now remember of. He duly revered old age, loved those best about his own age, played with those under his age; he listened to the aged, argued with his equals, but played with the children. He loved animals generally and treated them kindly; he loved children well, very well. There seemed to be nothing unusual in his love for animals or his own kind, though he treated everybody and everything kindly, humanely.

Page | 3

Abe didn't care much for crowds of people; he chose his own company, which was always good. He was not very fond of girls, as he seemed to me. He sometimes attended church. He would repeat the sermon over again to the children. The sight of such a thing amused all and did especially tickle the children. When Abe was reading, my husband took particular care not to disturb him, would let him read on and on till Abe quit of his own accord. He was dutiful to me always; he loved me truly, I think. I had a son John who was raised with Abe. Both were good boys, but I must say, both now being dead, that Abe was the best boy I ever saw or ever expect to see. I wish I had died when my husband did.

I did not want Abe to run for President, did not want him elected, was afraid somehow or other, felt it in my heart that something would happen to him, and when he came down to see me after he was elected President I still felt that something told me that something would befall Abe and that I should see him no more. Abe and his father are in Heaven, I have no doubt, and I want to go to them, go where they are. God bless Abraham.