AXES AND ANCESTRY:
LINCOLN NEVER SAID THAT

By Thomas F. Schwartz
Illinois State Historian

A popular cable show that highlights the skills and dangers of loggers felling tall trees is “Ax Men.” While modern loggers favor power saws over Abraham Lincoln’s traditional ax, this ancient tool still is useful in certain instances. Lincoln’s youth was spent learning how to wield an ax. This skill was necessary to clear land for farming, provide lumber for buildings, and split fence railing to keep livestock either in or out of fields and gardens. Lincoln’s association with the ax continued until a week before his assassination. He entertained troops at the Depot Field Hospital at City Point, Virginia on April 8, 1865, by picking up an ax and chopping a nearby pile of wood. In some accounts, Lincoln allegedly performed a grand finale by taking the ax handle in his right hand and lifting it slowly until it was at a right angle to his body, where he held it for several moments. Lincoln’s New Salem associates often commented on his strength and agility, which he maintained throughout his life.

A very good friend presented me with a gift some years ago, a paperweight with the phrase, “Chop your own wood, and it will warm you twice, A. Lincoln.” Undoubtedly a true sentiment but one not uttered by Abraham Lincoln. Rather, Henry Ford of automobile fame is credited with originating the quote. Two other quotes, however, are widely circulated on the Internet that are attributed to Lincoln but lack any information on when or where he said them:

“Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first 45 minutes sharpening the ax.”

“If I only had an hour to chop down a tree, I would spend the first 45 minutes sharpening my ax.”

Both reflect the same meaning and differ only in the amount of time spent in sharpening the ax. But did Lincoln say either of them?

A recent work of fiction by Seth Grahame-Smith, Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter, provides a whole new definition to Abraham Lincoln’s use of an ax. Instead of chopping down trees, Lincoln uses the ax to kill dreaded vampires who killed his mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln, as well as others. While the novel reflects the current Twilight novel craze of vampires and werewolves, it also underscores a number of spurious quotes attributed to Abraham Lincoln and axes.

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The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln and The Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln fail to contain anything closely related to these quotes. The key words “sharpening” and “ax” are contained in a reminiscence by the sculptor Leonard W. Volk, who recalled Lincoln saying, “It is true that I did split rails, and one day while I was sharpening a wedge on a log, the ax glanced and nearly took my thumb off, and there is the scar, you see.” The key words “six” and “hours” are found in two newspaper accounts of Lincoln’s address to citizens of Lafayette, Indiana, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, both delivered as president-elect en route to Washington, D.C. On February 11, 1861, Lincoln told the good people of Lafayette: “Now only six hours have elapsed since I left my home in Illinois where I was surrounded by a large concourse of my fellow citizens, almost all of whom I could recognize, and I find myself far from home surrounded by the thousands I now see before me, who are strangers to me.” Ten days later, Lincoln indicated to the residents of Philadelphia: “I must now get some refreshment, gentlemen. After that I shall be glad to shake hands with all of you that I can. But there are sufficient people here to keep me shaking hands for six hours.” In both instances, Lincoln uses the “six hours” reference in political terms: time lapsed from departing home to take the oath in Washington; and the political custom of pressing the flesh, or hand shaking. John Hay wrote to John Nicolay on July 19, 1863: “I ran the Tycoon through one hundred
court martial. A steady sitting of six hours.” This reaffirms what we know of Lincoln’s laser focus and durable *sitzfleisch* but says nothing about sharpening axes or chopping trees.

Although Lincoln had mastered the use of an ax, he remained less skilled in knowing his family genealogy. Genealogists still argue over the paternity of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, and at least one website and museum in North Carolina still insists that Abraham Enloe, not Thomas Lincoln, is the biological father of Abraham. Among Lincoln’s papers are letters of inquiry by other individuals named Lincoln if perchance they might be related. Several of Abraham’s replies exist in which he explains his limited knowledge of his ancestors. A widely circulated quote that appears in Frederick Trevor Hill’s *Lincoln the Lawyer* (1906) states (p.3): “I don’t know who my grandfather was, and am much more concerned to know what his grandson will be.” The quotation lacks a source but seems to fit the chapter title “Lincoln’s Mythical Birthright to the Law.” Hill begins the chapter by quoting an unnamed eulogist who claimed: “Lincoln is not a type. He stands alone—no ancestors—no fellow—no successors.” Lincoln, according to Hill, was sui generis, lacking any connection to a biological inheritance but pointing to the future.

Hill was born in 1866, a year after Lincoln’s death, making it impossible for him to have had direct knowledge of Lincoln. When Hill decided to write about Lincoln as a lawyer, he read a sampling of published works and interviewed the small number of living Lincoln associates such as Isaac N. Phillips and Robert R. Hitt. In a *New York Times* article of February 2, 1907, Robert Todd Lincoln indicated that he had nothing to provide Hill about his father’s legal practice. Robert suggested that Hill contact Judge Lawrence Weldon, the last surviving member who traveled the Illinois Eighth Judicial Circuit with Lincoln. Fortunately for Hill, Weldon provided some recollections about the practice of law in Illinois and riding the circuit before he died. Had Weldon been the source of the recollection of the quote, Hill would have noted it since he was fairly consistent in identifying his sources when they can be identified.

If the quote did not originate from someone Hill interviewed, what popular printed sources were readily available that Hill may have consulted in his research? Ida Tarbell with J. McCan Davis published a heavily illustrated book in 1896 entitled *The Early Life of Abraham Lincoln: Containing Many Unpublished Documents And Unpublished Reminiscences of Lincoln’s Early Friends.*

One of Tarbell’s aims was to disprove allegations that Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln were never married, as well as to demonstrate the distinguished lineage of the Lincoln family. Providing a facsimile copy of the marriage certificate of Thomas and Nancy Lincoln signed by the Reverend Jesse Head, Tarbell also provided an appendix containing an interview with centenarian Christopher Columbus Graham who claimed to have witnessed the marriage of Abraham Lincoln’s parents. The interview occurred in 1884. In it, Graham stated, “President Lincoln told James Speed: ‘I don’t know who my grandfather was, and am more concerned to know what his grandson will be.’” Graham ends the thought with “I am not sure that we know, either, perfectly yet.” But Tarbell asterisks the sentence and in a footnote argues: “The memoranda for Lincoln’s genealogy (page 223), and the introduction to this work, as well as the first chapter, show that we do know now, beyond a doubt, who and what Lincoln’s ancestors were.”

The claim that Lincoln told this to James Speed is without a date or context. James Speed published several accounts of his recollections of Abraham Lincoln and none contain the quote or an event when the quote may have been uttered. James Speed’s brother, Joshua Fry Speed, also published recollections of Lincoln but does not use the quote. Graham uses the quote to refer to Thomas Lincoln’s father, suggesting that Lincoln did not know about his namesake. This may be true if Lincoln was referring to his mother’s father. Yet we know from at least four separate letters and his autobiographical notes to John Locke Scripps, that Lincoln knew about his father’s father, particularly his being killed by Indians on the Kentucky frontier.

Another possibility available to Hill was Eleanor Gridley’s *The Story of Abraham Lincoln: Or the Journey from the Log Cabin to the White House* (1900). In Chapter 26, “Recovery of the Lincoln Folk-Lore Stories” (pp. 206-07), John J. Hall, Lincoln’s step-nephew, recounted a bout of Lincoln’s depression. Hall inquired “What’s up, Uncle Abe? Are ye sad ‘cause Ann Rutledge died?” Claiming that was not the cause of his blue mood, Lincoln finally admitted, “I can’t bear to think I don’t know who my grandfather was.” Hall reminded Lincoln that he heard him many times recount the murder of Grandfather Abraham Lincoln by Indians. As Hall described Lincoln: “Abe looked at me solemnly and said, ‘I don’t mean him; I mean my mother’s father.’”

These dueling reminiscences tug in different directions. One is recalled from a 100-year-old man and credited to Lincoln’s last Attorney General who never used it in any of his writings about Lincoln, while the other is simply described as “folk-lore.” The way that both Graham and Hill use the entire quote suggests Lincoln didn’t care about his ancestors, only what the future would hold for his grandchildren. A darker use only cites the first portion of the quote and is used to support Lincoln’s fears about his mother’s alleged illegitimacy. Of note, however, William Herndon and Ward Hill Lamon had already raised this issue in print, so it was already taking on its own existence as legend. Lincoln’s *angst* about his mother’s origins was expressed in private to William Herndon in a buggy ride to the Menard County Court, published in the Herndon/Weik biography of Lincoln. A thorough search of the documentary record about Lincoln and Herndon’s law practice does not comport with Herndon’s recollection of time and place of Lincoln’s revelation. Regardless, the origins of “I don’t know who my grandfather was and am more concerned to know what his grandson will be” remains without a direct observer, date, or context. The quote varies in length and meaning, depending on the source. Much of it is determined by what authors wish to prove by it, either a belief in the future or fear of the past. It is likely that Lincoln’s sharpened ax would have chopped it out of his narrative because of its questionable origins.
Dear ALA Members,

This issue of For The People highlights the donors to the Abraham Lincoln Association Endowment Fund. We are very grateful to everyone who has donated to this Fund since it was established in 1999. Under the leadership and successful management of Robert S. Eckley, the Fund has prospered and been available for the support of the Association’s ongoing operations and special projects. The Association’s purpose in establishing the Endowment Fund was to further the Association’s mission to actively encourage, promote and aid the collection and dissemination of information regarding all phases of Lincoln’s life and career and to insure these activities will continue for the next 100 years.

In June the ALA Board of Directors held an informal meeting in Lincoln, Illinois. After the meeting, we toured Lincoln related sites in the area. We are very grateful to Lincoln College for hosting our meeting and the tour. We would also like to thank the Postville Courthouse for a fascinating tour of their site, which is pictured on the back page of this newsletter. We were pleased to have several of our new Directors attend this meeting, as well as many of our continuing Directors.

Brooks Simpson reports that he and his Sesquicentennial Symposium committee have developed a theme for the Abraham Lincoln Association Symposium as we commemorate the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. For the next 5 years the symposium will be held over two days. Please look on page 7 for complete details of the events planned for February 12, 2011.

Thanks to each of you for your continued support of the Abraham Lincoln Association; without our members we could not exist.

Robert J. Lenz
President

LINCOLN’S WIGWAM NOMINATION COMMEMORATED

On May 18, 2010, the Abraham Lincoln Association joined with the City of Chicago to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the nomination of Abraham Lincoln as a candidate for president at the Wigwam in Chicago. The event was held at the Chicago Cultural Center. Speakers included ALA President Robert J. Lenz, Chicago Alderman Edward Burke, former Senator Adlai Stevenson III, and John Elliff. ALA Board Member Daniel Weinberg was the Master of Ceremonies. The event concluded with a Presidential Press Conference featuring George Buss as President Lincoln, Bob Lenz as Lincoln’s Press Secretary and Chicago television journalist Mike Flannery as the press. A sellout crowd enjoyed the occasion.

WAYNE TOBERMAN, PHOTOGRAPHER

ALA President Robert J. Lenz addresses those gathered at the Chicago Cultural Center to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Lincoln’s nomination as President.
CONTINUE THE LEGACY
CONTRIBUTE TO THE ALA ENDOWMENT

As we have just celebrated the bicentennial of Lincoln’s birth and are approaching a renewed recognition of his leadership during his Presidency and the Civil War, we increasingly encounter his legacy. We can assure the strength of his legacy by imparting a legacy of our own through a contribution to the ALA’s endowment. All contributions are welcome. It can be as simple as a check or can take the form of contributions of stock with the income tax benefit of no recognition of any capital gain, or could take the form of designating on death a part of your taxable retirement benefit or IRA, or maybe even designating the endowment on a part of your life insurance benefits that you took out to assure the kids a college education (and now they’ve long since graduated). Become a part of Lincoln’s Legacy by making a contribution to the ALA endowment. Create your own legacy in Lincoln’s footsteps.

Robert A. Stuart, Jr., Chairman of the Endowment Committee

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(Continued from page 4)
25th Annual Lincoln Colloquium
September 17-18, 2010
LINCOLN BOYHOOD NATIONAL MEMORIAL
Lincoln City, Indiana

“Mary, Mary, we are elected.” With those words Abraham Lincoln announced to his wife that he had been elected the 16th President of the United States. This year marks the 150th anniversary of that historic 1860 election. The country was at a crossroads in that year. The tensions that had been mounting between the North and the South were reaching the breaking point. For many in the south, Lincoln’s election was seen as the last straw. Perceiving his opposition to the extension of slavery into the territories as a threat to the very existence of the institution, they decided that they had no other choice but to secede from the union. South Carolina was the first in December 1860, and was quickly followed by several others. Lincoln refused to acknowledge that secession was constitutional and the die was cast. When hostilities broke out in April 1861, he issued a call for volunteers to put down the rebellion and the civil war that had long been held at bay became a reality. The union that eventually emerged from that long and bloody struggle had been forever changed and the untested president, elected in 1860, had proven worthy of the challenge. The reunited union had experienced, in his words, a “new birth of freedom.”

The Colloquium will address the issues surrounding Lincoln's election in 1860. For information or assistance, please call 812-937-4541 or Email: mike_capps@nps.gov

Speakers:
Bruce Chadwick, author of Lincoln for President
Tim Good, Superintendent, Ulysses S. Grant NHS
Brian Dirck, Anderson University
Tim Townsend, Historian, Lincoln Home NHS
Bill Bartelt, Historian and Author

Telephone Registration: 812/464-1989 or 800/467-8600.

“Lincoln and Race”
8th Annual Lincoln Legacy Lecture Series, University of Illinois Springfield
October 7, 2010 at 7:00 p.m. in Brookens Auditorium at UIS.

In celebration of UIS’s 40th anniversary, two UIS faculty members will give this year’s lectures. Dr. Michael Burlingame, Naomi B. Lynn Chair in Lincoln Studies, will present a lecture titled: “Abraham Lincoln: ‘The White Man’s or the Black Man’s President’?”. Dr. Matthew Holden, Jr., will give a lecture on: “After Lincoln: The Counter-Attack of White Supremacy.” Dr. Cullom Davis, Emeritus Professor of History, will serve as moderator. The event is free and open to the public; no reservation is required. Students and classes are encouraged to attend. Overflow seating will be available in Conference Room C/D of the Public Affairs Center. The lectures will be webcast live at: http://www.uis.edu/technology/uislive.html. The Annual Lincoln Legacy Lecture Series is presented by the UIS Center for State Policy and Leadership. This year’s co-sponsors include the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, ECCE Speaker Series, Illinois Issues, The Illinois State Library, University of Illinois Alumni Association, and WUIS Public Radio. For information: 217-206-6576.

“The Lincoln Legacy and Contemporary Political Science”
The Wepner Symposium
Presented by the University of Illinois Springfield

Presenters will include Fred I. Greenstein (Princeton University) and Stephen Skowronek (Yale University) on the Lincoln legacy and models of leadership; Pinky Wassenberg (UIS) on Presidents and military command; Tim Miller (UIS) and Katrina Miller-Stevens (Old Dominion University) on Abraham Lincoln as political scientist; Joseph Lowndes (University of Oregon); Wilbur Rich (Emeritus, Wellesley) on Lincoln and Obama; Adriana Crocker (UIS) on the Lincoln legacy and legislation on the rights of women; and Jason Pierceson (UIS) on the Lincoln legacy and the issue of same-sex marriage. Other papers are still under consideration.

Presenters will include Rogers M. Smith (University of Pennsylvania) and others on teaching about the Lincoln legacy in higher education and in K-12 education.

Registration information: mhold3@uis.edu
rschw2@uis.edu.

FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC
This coming February, the Abraham Lincoln Association, in conjunction with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum and Library, the University of Illinois at Springfield, the Lincoln Home (National Park Service), and the Old State Capitol (Illinois Historic Preservation Agency), will present the first of five symposia dedicated to examining Abraham Lincoln as president during the American Civil War. Coming at a time when Americans will be observing the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, these symposia will examine Lincoln as president, politician, and commander in chief, as he waged war, dealt with dissent, advocated emancipation, and wrestled with reconstruction.

The schedule of events, a product of joint planning among these five partners, promises to offer a sustained look at the Lincoln presidency. Michael F. Holt will deliver the keynote address for the 2011 symposium at UIS on the evening of February 11. The next day he will be joined by Russell McClintock, Jonathan White, and Jonathan Earle, as all four historians explore Lincoln’s coming to power in 1861.

The format is designed to facilitate communication between scholars and the general public as we embark upon learning more about understanding the crisis of disunion, war, emancipation, and reconstruction that was at the heart of Lincoln’s presidency.

Brooks D. Simpson, Chairman, Sesquicentennial Symposia

**OTHER LINCOLN EVENTS**

**Saturday, February 12, 2011**

8:30-10:30 a.m.
George L. Painter Looking For Lincoln Lectures
Visitor Center, Lincoln Home National Historic Site

Gerry Fraker, Abraham Lincoln and Bloomington, Illinois

Wayne C. Temple, Abraham Lincoln and Pittsfield, Illinois

Staff of Lincoln Log Cabin State Historic Site, Abraham Lincoln and Charleston, Illinois

Sunday, February 13, 2011
First Presbyterian Church
See details at: lincolnschurch.org

Visit our website at www.abrahamlincolnassociation.org
Who is this man?  
See next issue.