

America's Greatest President

OF COURSE IT WAS Abraham Lincoln. He was born and lived a third of his life in a twenty-foot square log cabin that had one window and a floor of packed earth. The window wasn't open much because either cold winter air blew in, or summer bugs flew in!

Almost as soon as little Abe was able to walk, he had to start helping his parents. He would carry water to the cabin—a mile each way. That was just a hop-skip-and-a-jump compared to the walk to his first school—four miles each way, in all kinds of weather; and he never knew what animals he'd meet on the road.

A few months after Abe started school, the Lincoln family moved from Kentucky to Indiana. Abe's dad loaded the family belongings on a flatboat he had built, which turned over when it hit something. They raised it, but of course most of their belongings were ruined.

In Indiana Abe and his sister had to walk nine miles to school, and then nine miles home. Abe studied hard, more than he was required to. He borrowed books from many people. Once he said he had read every book within fifty miles. His parents encouraged him by saying if he worked hard and studied hard and lived a clean, upright life, he could make something of himself.

One time he went hunting with some friends and shot a bird, but at once regretted it. He was kind to animals even when others scoffed at him. He grew to be very tall, six foot four, and because he was also very strong he was called "Prairie Panther," but he was also gentle and considerate to all.

The most exciting thing that happened to him



An ancient Greek named Diogenes carried a light to help him find an honest man. He found one (above) in "Honest Abe."

while living in Indiana was navigating down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans on a flatboat he had helped build. What impressed Abe most was something that caused him deep sadness—seeing people in the market being sold as slaves and their families being broken up. Young Abe, just nineteen, vowed then and there, "If I ever get a chance to hit that thing, I'll hit it hard." He did.

Shortly after his return from New Orleans, the Lincolns moved to Illinois. This time they traveled by wagon. Abe's little dog jumped or fell off, landing in an icy river. Without a thought for himself Abe dove in after him. He got cold and wet, but he didn't mind. He cared deeply for all living creatures and did what he could to help them.

Abe was about to turn twenty-one. That meant that legally he could be on his own. He had no trade, profession, formal education, or money, having given all he earned to his parents. What he

did have was strength, a desire to work and learn—and honesty. He wrapped all his belongings in a handkerchief, tied it to a stick which he propped against his shoulder, and set out for New Salem, Illinois, where he was to work in the general store of Mr. Denton Offutt. Trouble was the store hadn't yet been built, so when he arrived he helped build it.

Abe won many friends because of his honesty. Once he took 6 1/4 cents too much from a customer. That evening he walked three miles to give it back. Another time he discovered he had short-changed a customer by four ounces. Guess what he did that evening? Any wonder the "Prairie Panther" was now called "Honest Abe"? And he was still as studious as ever. Folks began to say he knew more facts about more things than anybody around.

So he began to think about public service. But war broke out on the frontier, whereupon he was elected captain in the army; he was that popular. The fighting ended before he got to the front. He was glad he didn't have to shoot anyone. The fact that he had been chosen captain strengthened his resolve to serve in the legislature, but he narrowly lost the election.

This wasn't his greatest loss. That was losing a lot of money due to business dealings with dishonest people. He found himself \$1,100 in debt; an amount worth maybe a hundred times then what it is today. Back then, on the frontier, when people owed money they often just ran away, changed their names, and left no forwarding address. But not Honest Abe. Though as a land surveyor he was making only \$3 a day, he went to all the people to whom he owed money and promised to pay them everything, plus interest—which would take fifteen years. But one man refused to wait; he wanted everything Abe owed him and he wanted it at once. Of course Abe couldn't pay. So the man went to court, which decided to take away Abe's horse, saddle, and surveying instruments.

Can you see what a mess Abe was in now? But a friend stepped in, bought back the horse and saddle and surveying instruments from the grumpy man for \$120 and gave it all to Abe. Don't you just know that Abe was extra glad now that he had always been honest and won so many good friends? And mainly because of so many of them,

and the noble way he had handled his debt, he was elected to the Illinois state legislature and moved to Springfield in 1834. He also studied law and became a lawyer, quickly earning a far-flung reputation for his honesty. They even called him "the most honest lawyer in all the West."

He would do things other lawyers didn't do. For instance, when he argued a case, and the lawyer who was working against him forgot to say something that would strengthen his case, Mr. Lincoln graciously reminded him of it. Of course that may have weakened his own position, but he didn't mind. More than all else, he wanted the truth to come out, regardless of the results. Can't you just guess what one result was going to be? That's right, he won even more friends!

But some things Abe did also made people laugh at him. Like the time he was traveling with a group of lawyers and stopped to put back some little birds who had fallen out of their nests. Abe didn't mind his companions' ridicule; he knew he had done what is right; that's all that mattered to him.

In 1835 Abe received a major shock. He had been engaged to marry a beautiful girl, Ann Rutledge. But there was an epidemic of what was called "bilious fever" and Ann died. Abe mourned for seven long years, then he married Mary Todd. They had four boys: Edward, who died in infancy; William, who died at eleven; Thomas, who died six years after his father at 18; and Robert, the oldest, who made it into ripe old age.

For about six years the Lincolns lived in Springfield. Then they moved to Washington, D. C. when Abe won a seat in the House of Representatives. But he was still a son of the frontier, where he'd lived all his life, and in a way this was a drawback. For as a Congressman he had to attend a great many social functions; much of the actual decision-making process of the Congress was done at banquets. And poor Abe—he just didn't know how to hold a knife, fork, and spoon and do all the other customary things one expects at social functions. But this time people didn't laugh at him. They respected him for his honesty. He always said and did what he sincerely believed was best for his country, not for himself

At this time Abe patented an invention that would help a great many people—how to lift ships out of shoals. All in all, he enjoyed his term in

Congress far more than he thought he would, even aside from the fact that he now was able to payoff the last of his debt! So why didn't he make any effort at all to get re-elected to a second term, as so many of his peers were doing? You guessed it, because he was "Honest Abe"! When he had campaigned for his seat in the Congress, he had told people he felt it was proper to take only one two-year term. Now that he had served it, he believed, as he had all his life, in the principle: "turn about is fair play." This meant that someone else should now have the same opportunity he had been given; so the Lincolns moved back to Springfield.

The 1850s could have been a happy time for them raising a family, being respected members of the community and Abe a successful lawyer. But America was moving toward a crisis on slavery that threatened to break up the Union. So, in 1858, he was urged to run for the Senate, which he did. The people supported him in great numbers, but in those days senators were elected by state legislatures. And because Mr. Lincoln had been out of public service but his opponent had not, he had no supporters in the state legislature. But Mr. Lincoln kept on speaking out about his ideas every chance he got, even though he did not make it into the Senate.

Two years later, 1860, was a Presidential election year, and Lincoln's friends from all over America urged him to run for President, even though he had served only two years as a Congressman. Why? Though he had lost his 1858 bid to the Senate, in seven debates he had defeated the best orator of the time, Steven A. Douglas, called, at five foot six, the "Little Giant"—compared to Lincoln at six foot four. The nation now realized he was not only a giant in size, but also in spirit. They learned how he had come from a humble log cabin, had overcome hardships and handicaps with the firm belief such things are vital lessons for the future. They knew of his amazing honesty, love of people and all things living, and his simple but yet profound wisdom. Could there



Engraving, A.H. Ritchie, based on the painting by Francis B. Carpenter now hanging in the Capitol, Washington D.C.

President Lincoln is shown reading the document he had written before members of his Cabinet in midsummer, 1862. It became, in 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation, which said that all persons held as slaves shall be forever free.

possibly be a man better suited to save America in its hour of greatest peril than lawyer Lincoln from Illinois?

Perhaps at no other time in American history had a candidate for the White House seemed in every possible way the right man for the job at the right time!

In school you may have already learned how Abraham Lincoln led America during the terrible Civil War, and how he grieved when his son Willy died while many other things were also going badly. You may know that he spent much time on his knees in prayer because he knew of no other place to turn but to God.

But you may not have learned that President Lincoln was informed that Jimmy Smart was having big problems out in California after leaving Illinois. Who was Jimmy Smart? He was the friend who had retrieved Honest Abe's horse, saddle, and surveying equipment when impatient Mr. Van Berge wouldn't wait for his money. Lincoln never forgot a friend, especially one who had done him a favor, and despite all his other duties and burdens of office, he took time to help him. Can you now see why Abe Lincoln, who grew up a poor clodhopper from the beautiful Bluegrass State, became President of the United States of America? He had given the world his very best, and now it came back to him—abundantly, with interest! □

—A Probationer