

## School and Books

by James Baldwin

Not very long after this, the people of the neighborhood made up their minds that they must have a school-house. And so, one day after harvest, the men met together and chopped down trees, and built a little low-roofed log cabin to serve for that purpose.

If you could see that cabin you would think it a queer kind of school-house. There was no floor. There was only one window, and in it were strips of greased paper pasted across, instead of glass. There were no desks, but only rough benches made of logs split in halves. In one end of the room was a huge fireplace; at the other end was the low doorway.

The first teacher was a man whose name was Azel Dorsey. The term of school was very short; for the settlers could not afford to pay him much. It was in mid-winter, for then there was no work for the big boys to do at home.

And the big boys, as well as the girls and the smaller boys, for miles around, came in to learn what they could from Azel Dorsey. The most of the children studied only spelling; but some of the larger ones learned reading and writing and arithmetic.

There were not very many scholars, for the houses in that new settlement were few and far apart. School began at an early hour in the morning, and did not close until the sun was down.

Just how Abraham Lincoln stood in his classes I do not know; but I must believe that he studied hard and did everything as well as he could. In the arithmetic which he used, he wrote these lines:

"Abraham Lincoln,  
His hand and pen,  
He will be good,  
But God knows when."

In a few weeks, Azel Dorsey's school came to a close; and Abraham Lincoln was again as busy as ever about his father's farm. After that he attended school only two or three short terms. If all his school-days were put together they would not make a twelve-month.

But he kept on reading and studying at home. His step-mother said of him: "He read everything he could lay his hands on. When he came across a passage that struck him, he would write it down on boards, if he had no paper, and keep it until he had got paper. Then he would copy it, look at it, commit it to memory, and repeat it."

Among the books that he read were the Bible, the *Pilgrims Progress*, and the poems of Robert Burns. One day he walked a long distance to borrow a book of a farmer. This book was Weems's *Life of Washington*. He read as much as he could while walking home.

By that time it was dark, and so he sat down by the chimney and read by firelight until bedtime. Then he took the book to bed with him in the loft, and read by the light of a tallow candle.

In an hour the candle burned out. He laid the book in a crevice between two of the logs of the cabin, so that he might begin reading again as soon as it was daylight.

But in the night a storm came up. The rain was blown in, and the book was wet through and through.

In the morning, when Abraham awoke, he saw what had happened. He dried the leaves as well as he could, and then finished reading the book.

As soon as he had eaten his breakfast, he hurried to carry the book to its owner. He explained how the accident had happened.

"Mr. Crawford," he said, "I am willing to pay you for the book. I have no money; but, if you will let me, I will work for you until I have made its price."

Mr. Crawford thought that the book was worth seventy-five cents, and that Abraham's work would be worth about twenty-five cents a day. And so the lad helped the farmer gather corn for three days, and thus became the owner of the delightful book.

He read the story of Washington many times over. He carried the book with him to the field, and read it while he was following the plow.

From that time, Washington was the one great hero whom he admired. Why could not he model his own life after that of Washington? Why could not he also be a doer of great things for his country?

## Life in the Backwoods

by James Baldwin

Abraham Lincoln now set to work with a will to educate himself. His father thought that he did not need to learn anything more. He did not see that there was any good in book-learning. If a man could read and write and cipher, what more was needed?

But the good step-mother thought differently; and when another short term of school began in the little log school-house, all six of the children from the Lincoln cabin were among the scholars.

In a few weeks, however, the school had closed; and the three boys were again hard at work, chopping and grubbing in Mr. Lincoln's clearings. They were good-natured, jolly young fellows, and they lightened their labor with many a joke and playful prank.

Many were the droll stories with which Abraham amused his two companions. Many were the puzzling questions that he asked. Sometimes in the evening, with the other five children around him, he would declaim some piece that he had learned; or he would deliver a speech of his own on some subject of common interest.

If you could see him as he then appeared, you would hardly think that such a boy would ever become one of the most famous men of history. On his head he wore a cap made from the skin of a squirrel or a raccoon. Instead of trousers of cloth, he wore buckskin breeches, the legs of which were many inches too short. His shirt was of deerskin in the winter, and of homespun tow in the summer. Stockings he had none. His shoes were of heavy cowhide, and were worn only on Sundays or in very cold weather.

The family lived in such a way as to need very little money. Their bread was made of corn meal. Their meat was chiefly the flesh of wild game found in the forest.

Pewter plates and wooden trenchers were used on the table. The tea and coffee cups were of painted tin. There was no stove, and all the cooking was done on the hearth of the big fireplace.

But poverty was no hindrance to Abraham Lincoln. He kept on with his reading and his studies as best he could. Sometimes he would go to the little village of Gentryville, near by, to spend an evening. He would tell so many jokes and so many funny stories, that all the people would gather round him to listen.

When he was sixteen years old he went one day to Booneville, fifteen miles away, to attend a trial in court. He had never been in court before. He listened with great attention to all that was said. When the lawyer for the defense made his speech, the youth was so full of delight that he could not contain himself.

He arose from his seat, walked across the courtroom, and shook hands with the lawyer. "That was the best speech I ever heard," he said.

He was tall and very slim; he was dressed in a jeans coat and buckskin trousers; his feet were bare. It must have been a strange sight to see him thus complimenting an old and practiced lawyer.

From that time, one ambition seemed to fill his mind. He wanted to be a lawyer and make great speeches in court. He walked twelve miles barefooted, to borrow a copy of the laws of Indiana. Day and night he read and studied.

"Some day I shall be President of the United States," he said to some of his young friends. And this he said not as a joke, but in the firm belief that it would prove to be true.

Source:

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