

The Kentucky Home

by James Baldwin

Not far from Hodgenville, in Kentucky, there once lived a man whose name was Thomas Lincoln. This man had built for himself a little log cabin by the side of a brook, where there was an ever-flowing spring of water.

There was but one room in this cabin. On the side next to the brook there was a low doorway; and at one end there was a large fireplace, built of rough stones and clay.

The chimney was very broad at the bottom and narrow at the top. It was made of clay, with flat stones and slender sticks laid around the outside to keep it from falling apart.

In the wall, on one side of the fireplace, there was a square hole for a window. But there was no glass in this window. In the summer it was left open all the time. In cold weather a deerskin, or a piece of coarse cloth, was hung over it to keep out the wind and the snow.

At night, or on stormy days, the skin of a bear was hung across the doorway; for there was no door on hinges to be opened and shut.

There was no ceiling to the room. But the inmates of the cabin, by looking up, could see the bare rafters and the rough roof-boards, which Mr. Lincoln himself had split and hewn.

There was no floor, but only the bare ground that had been smoothed and beaten until it was as level and hard as pavement.

For chairs there were only blocks of wood and a rude bench on one side of the fireplace. The bed was a little platform of poles, on which were spread the furry skins of wild animals, and a patchwork quilt of homespun goods.

In this poor cabin, on the 12th of February, 1809, a baby boy was born. There was already one child in the family—a girl, two years old, whose name was Sarah.

The little boy grew and became strong like other babies, and his parents named him Abraham, after his grandfather, who had been killed by the Indians many years before.

When he was old enough to run about, he liked to play under the trees by the cabin door. Sometimes he would go with his little sister into the woods and watch the birds and the squirrels.

He had no playmates. He did not know the meaning of toys or playthings. But he was a happy child and had many pleasant ways.

Thomas Lincoln, the father, was a kind-hearted man, very strong and brave. Sometimes he would take the child on his knee and tell him strange, true stories of the great forest, and of the Indians and the fierce beasts that roamed among the woods and hills.

For Thomas Lincoln had always lived on the wild frontier; and he would rather hunt deer and

other game in the forest than do anything else. Perhaps this is why he was so poor. Perhaps this is why he was content to live in the little log cabin with so few of the comforts of life.

But Nancy Lincoln, the young mother, did not complain. She, too, had grown up among the rude scenes of the backwoods. She had never known better things.

And yet she was by nature refined and gentle; and people who knew her said that she was very handsome. She was a model housekeeper, too; and her poor log cabin was the neatest and best-kept house in all that neighborhood.

No woman could be busier than she. She knew how to spin and weave, and she made all the clothing for her family.

She knew how to wield the ax and the hoe; and she could work on the farm or in the garden when her help was needed.

She had also learned how to shoot with a rifle; and she could bring down a deer or other wild game with as much ease as could her husband. And when the game was brought home, she could dress it, she could cook the flesh for food, and of the skins she could make clothing for her husband and children.

There was still another thing that she could do—she could read; and she read all the books that she could get hold of. She taught her husband the letters of the alphabet; and she showed him how to write his name. For Thomas Lincoln had never gone to school, and he had never learned how to read.

As soon as little Abraham Lincoln was old enough to understand, his mother read stories to him from the Bible. Then, while he was still very young, she taught him to read the stories for himself.

The neighbors thought it a wonderful thing that so small a boy could read. There were very few of them who could do as much. Few of them thought it of any great use to learn how to read.

There were no school-houses in that part of Kentucky in those days, and of course there were no public schools.

One winter a traveling schoolmaster came that way. He got leave to use a cabin not far from Mr. Lincoln's, and gave notice that he would teach school for two or three weeks. The people were too poor to pay him for teaching longer.

The name of this schoolmaster was Zachariah Riney.

The young people for miles around flocked to the school. Most of them were big boys and girls, and a few were grown up young men. The only little child was Abraham Lincoln, and he was not yet five years old.

There was only one book studied at that school, and it was a spelling-book. It had some easy reading lessons at the end, but these were not to be read until after every word in the book had been spelled.

You can imagine how the big boys and girls felt when Abraham Lincoln proved that he could

spell and read better than any of them.

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