
William Herndon's Indiana Oral History Project, 1865

Rodney O. Davis*

The most important event in William Herndon's life, it has been said without too much exaggeration, was the death of Abraham Lincoln.¹ The national apotheosis of Lincoln that followed his assassination was an event in which Herndon shared. As Lincoln's last and by far longest-tenured law partner in Springfield, Illinois, Herndon was immediately perceived as having a special authority that derived from long and close association with him. Almost immediately upon Lincoln's assassination, Herndon was approached by writers and interviewers as one with special knowledge about the martyred president's life and career. Herndon responded as best he could but of course knew that there were many questions that he could not answer, for his close contact with Lincoln dated only from the late 1830s in Springfield. Encouraged by such friends as Horace White of the *Chicago Tribune* and by the example of early biographers such as Josiah Holland and Joseph Barrett, Herndon seems to have concluded before Lincoln was two months in his grave to write his own memories of Lincoln. He would fortify those recollections with interviews of Lincoln's associates in Springfield and elsewhere and perhaps with some investigation into Lincoln's early life through correspondence with those who had known Lincoln in his earlier homes in Kentucky and Indiana. In the process he conducted what Charles B. Strozier has called one of the first oral history projects in America.²

* Rodney O. Davis is a professor of history at Knox College, Galesburg, Illinois. With Professor Douglas Wilson, he is presently co-editing the Herndon-Weik informant materials.

¹ David Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon* (New York, 1948), 167.

² Charles B. Strozier, *Lincoln's Quest for Union: Public and Private Meanings* (New York, 1981), xvi. Though historians have a particularly acute understanding of memory and its pitfalls, they also in recent years have accommodated that understanding to a growing appreciation of the evidence of oral history, which, as in the case of the reminiscences that Herndon collected, frequently provides information that is otherwise irretrievable. See Ronald J. Grele, "On Using Oral History Collections: An Introduction," *Journal of American History*, LXXIV (September, 1987), 570-78; David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *ibid.*, LXXV (March, 1989), 1117-29; David M. Oshinsky, "Oral History: Playing by the Rules," *ibid.*, LXXVII (September, 1990), 609-614.

In fact, Herndon never wrote the biography to which he had finally committed himself, but he contributed significantly to two books that were heavily based on the materials he collected in preparation for it.³ And those materials have been invaluable for Lincoln researchers ever since. That this is especially true for the formative period of Lincoln's life which was spent in Spencer County, Indiana, has long been acknowledged by Lincoln scholars, either overtly or through frequent citation.⁴

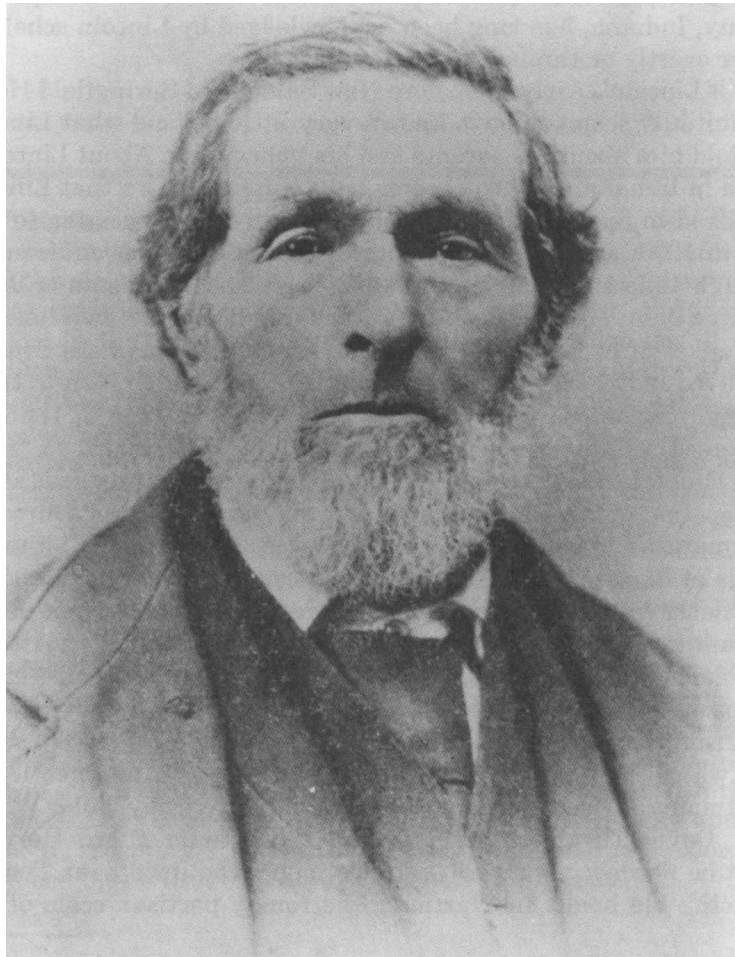
Of Lincoln's early life before New Salem and Springfield Herndon initially seems to have known very little beyond what Lincoln had told him about his parents and his upbringing. About Lincoln's youth in Indiana, Herndon seems only to have known that Lincoln had lived in Spencer County with his family before coming to Illinois in 1830, and even that information could have been acquired through Lincoln's campaign autobiographical statements to Jesse Fell and John Locke Scripps as well as from Lincoln's own lips.⁵ At the outset of his quest Herndon had no clue as to where Lincoln had lived in Spencer County, nor did he know who to turn to there for information. Early in his data gathering, on June 5, 1865, he addressed a letter, essentially in the blind, to Rockport, to "some good Union lawyer," apparently inquiring at the county seat about the location of the Lincoln home and the names of good sources of information on that period of Lincoln's life. That letter fell into the hands of James W. Wartmann, an attorney, who responded three days later to tell Herndon of the recent deaths of two men of significant influence on the young Lincoln, that in the field at Atlanta of Colonel William Jones, "for whom Mr Lincoln *clerked*," and of the passing only a few weeks earlier of Josiah Crawford, erstwhile owner of a famous copy of Mason Locke Weems's *Life of Washington*, which Lincoln had borrowed.⁶ Soon after, in another letter, Wartmann advised Herndon that Nathaniel Grigsby, John W. Lamar, David Turnham, and William Wood could afford Herndon what he needed; they were "reliable men" who lived near Thomas Lincoln's old home. In Wartmann's strongly partisan scale of pri-

³ Ward Hill Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Boston, 1872); William H. Herndon and Jesse Weik, *Abraham Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life* (Chicago, 1889).

⁴ Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1858* (2 vols., Boston, 1928), I, vii, 38-99; James G. Randall, *Lincoln the President* (3 vols., New York, 1945), I, 6-7n; Louis A. Warren, *Lincoln's Youth* (Indianapolis, 1959), *passim*.

⁵ Abraham Lincoln to Jesse Fell, Enclosing Autobiography, December 20, 1859, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, comp. Roy P. Basler (8 vols., New Brunswick, N.J., 1953), III, 511-12; Autobiography written for John L. Scripps, [June, 1860], *ibid.*, IV, 60-67.

⁶ James W. Wartmann to Herndon, June 8, 1865, ms. 2158, Herndon-Weik Collection (Library of Congress). For further information on Wartmann, see *History of Vanderburgh County, Indiana* (Madison, Wisc., 1889), 198; *Evansville Journal News*, July 2, 1917; *Evansville Courier*, July 3, 1917.



WILLIAM HERNDON

Courtesy Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois.

orities, to be “reliable” was to be Republican in politics, which these men were.⁷ By this time, late in June, Herndon was also in touch with John B. Rowbotham, a Cincinnati artist who had been commissioned to produce drawings for Barrett’s Lincoln biography. Rowbotham had already visited Indiana and Kentucky, and he gave Herndon some more Spencer County names; however, these were not always accurately rendered nor of people still living.⁸ By July, probably on account of the Wartmann connection, Herndon was in contact by letter with his first actual Indiana informant who had known Lincoln, Nathaniel Grigsby, brother of Aaron Grigsby who had married Lincoln’s sister Sarah.⁹

Eventually Herndon decided to see this early Lincoln country himself, but not until early autumn of 1865 was he able to find time to make the trip to Spencer County. He had discovered that Lincoln’s stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln, still lived in Coles County, Illinois, as did Dennis Hanks, Lincoln’s second cousin, who had already told Herndon a good bit of what *he* remembered about the Lincolns in both Indiana and Kentucky.¹⁰ Herndon proposed then to combine a trip to southern Indiana with one to eastern Illinois. On the road at last, on September 8 in Coles County he interviewed Dennis Hanks again and then elicited a memorable and to the contemporary reader still moving statement from Mrs. Lincoln.¹¹ He then set out for Spencer County, on a less than 300-mile trip that seems to have required three days to accomplish. Probably most of it was by rail. A route from Charleston to Terre Haute to Evansville was feasible by that time, with the last lap after Evansville undoubtedly the hardest; one would presume by Ohio River steamer to Rockport, and then overland to Gentryville.¹² There is reason to believe that Herndon was ill part of the time he was in Spencer County for the second day of his visit he conducted no interviews at all, and he seems to have left for Illinois before he had intended to on account of illness. Yet his trip to Spencer County afforded Herndon some of the most memorable moments of all his Lincoln researches; he kept a veritable log of his interviews, and they provided him with invaluable information

⁷ Wartmann to Herndon, June 19, 1865, ms. 2192, Herndon-Weik Collection. I derived this insight from William Bartelt, historian at the Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial, Lincoln City, Indiana, in conversation on February 9, 1992.

⁸ J.B. Rowbotham to Herndon, June 24, June 26, 1865, mss. 2205-06, 2214, Herndon-Weik Collection.

⁹ Wartmann to Herndon, July 21, 1865, mss. 2256-59, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Herndon interview with Dennis Hanks at the Chicago Sanitary Fair, June 13, 1865, mss. 2184-88, *ibid.*; Hanks to Herndon, June 15, August 2, 1865, mss. 2189, 2271, *ibid.*

¹¹ Herndon interviews with Hanks and Sarah Bush Lincoln, near Charleston, Illinois, September 8, 1865, mss. 2309-16, 2279-2300, *ibid.*

¹² George Rogers Taylor and Irene D. Neu, *The American Railroad Network, 1861-1890* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), Map II.

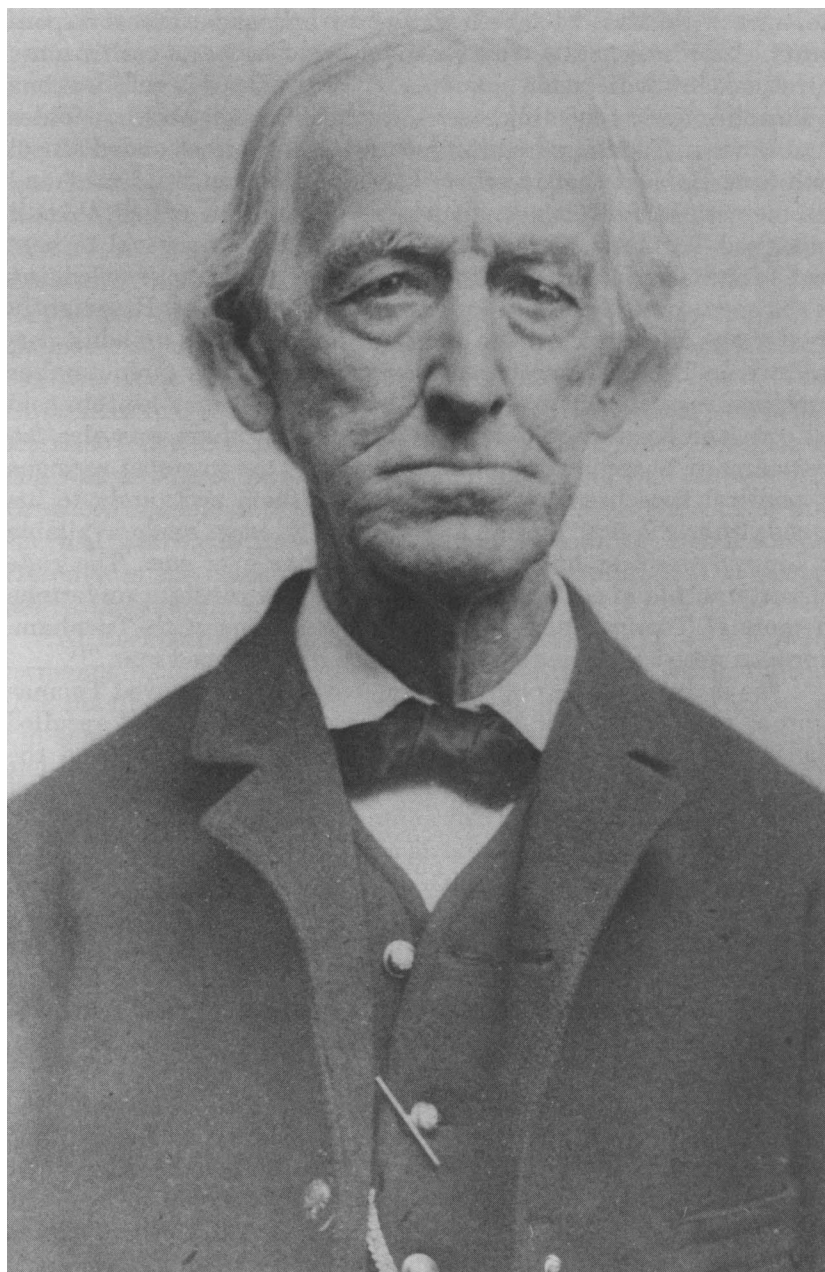
and some impressions of the young Lincoln and his background that were to become indelible, and important to the books that would rely on those interviews.

Herndon's first full day in Spencer County was Monday, September 12. It was spent in Gentryville where he talked at length with Nathaniel Grigsby, who was to be his "old guide and companion," on most of his Spencer County travels. Indeed Herndon seems to have stayed at Grigsby's home. Obviously flattered by the attention paid to his Lincoln connection, Grigsby could be nothing but laudatory of the young Abraham Lincoln, in spite of the bitterness that had reportedly existed between the Lincoln and Grigsby families. Grigsby certainly was authoritative; he had attended school with Abraham and Sarah Lincoln and clearly remembered lessons learned and books read there, and Abraham Lincoln's studious habits. His recollections of both Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln were quite detailed, and his inclination was to compare one to the other; he considered Nancy Hanks the superior of the parents, known "for the extraordinary strength of her mind," while Thomas Lincoln was "always doing but doing nothing great. . . ."

Grigsby was the first of three Indiana informants to insist that the young Lincoln "did drink his dram as well as all others did, preachers and christians included," in the Spencer County wilderness, and he was the first of several to maintain that in his Indiana youth Lincoln leaned toward Jacksonian Democracy. He was also the first to tell Herndon of the "Chronicles of Reuben," a rather acerbic satire written in Old Testament language, which Lincoln had aimed at Grigsby's own family, and over which a fight had taken place between William Grigsby and Lincoln's stepbrother John D. Johnston. "It hurt us then, but its all over now," said Nathaniel Grigsby to Herndon. Grigsby might as well have owned up to knowing about the Chronicles, for they were well remembered all over the neighborhood, "better than the Bible—better than Watts's hymns," as Joseph Richardson would later tell Herndon. This was far from the last time that Herndon would hear about them. But in spite of the chronicles, "There is now no family in the broad land who after this loved Lincoln so well and who now look upon him as so great a man," said Grigsby. "We all voted for him—all that could. . . ."¹³

Grigsby escorted Herndon to the Lincoln farm and its environs on the 14th and to interviews with David Turnham and the aged

¹³ Nathaniel Grigsby interview, Gentryville, Indiana, September 12, 1865, mss. 2320-28, Herndon-Weik Collection; Joseph Richardson interview, Gentryville, Indiana, undated, ms. 2333, *ibid.* That Lincoln and the Grigsbys were eventually reconciled is evident from Grigsby's later account of Lincoln's return to Spencer County in 1844 to campaign for Henry Clay. Grigsby interview, Gentryville, Indiana, September 16, 1865, mss. 2357-2358, *ibid.*



NATHANIEL GRIGSBY AS HE APPEARED LATE IN LIFE

Courtesy of the National Park Service, Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial.

William Wood the next day. On the 16th Herndon spent a profitable time with Mrs. Elizabeth Crawford and some other respondents. Turnham, like Nat Grigsby, was to be a continuous correspondent of Herndon's, and as with Grigsby, his recollections of Lincoln's early schooling were valuable. Though six years older than Lincoln, Turnham had hunted and fished and attended school with him. He said that in school Lincoln "soon outstript me," and the memory of Lincoln's studiousness, in and out of school, still impressed Turnham. Indeed Turnham was one of several to note that Lincoln preferred studying to physical work, acknowledging at the same time that Lincoln was a diligent student. His slightly greater age allowed Turnham to have something like an adult perspective on Thomas Lincoln, whose competence as a cabinetmaker Turnham respected. It was to Turnham that Thomas Lincoln sold his corn and hogs when moving to Illinois. Turnham was also the first of many to recall young Lincoln's ability to remember sermons or political speeches so well as to repeat them accurately to his friends after the fact, and he also claimed to have made available to Lincoln the first law book that the latter ever saw. The rude character of life in early Spencer County was a constant undertone in most of Turnham's recollection. After dining with Turnham, Herndon noted of the experience: "good dinner, good man."¹⁴

The eighty-two-year-old William Wood had employed Thomas Lincoln to do carpenter and cabinet work for him and recalled Nancy Hanks Lincoln as intelligent and strong-minded and the source of Abraham Lincoln's "mind and fixed morals." But most notably Wood remembered Abraham Lincoln as a well-informed young reader of newspapers and as an essayist, on politics and temperance. Wood claimed that some early articles written by Lincoln had impressed local clergymen and attorneys and had been published in newspapers in Indiana and Ohio. The memory of the young Lincoln's great physical strength also continued to impress Wood, as did Lincoln's intellectual and moral maturity. "Abe was always a man though a boy," said he. "I thought more of Abe than any boy I ever saw. . . ."¹⁵

After seeing to his dinner on the 16th, Mrs. Crawford told Herndon the famous story of the Weems book which Lincoln had borrowed from her husband and which he then had accidentally allowed to get wet. Josiah Crawford allowed Lincoln to keep the book, in return for Lincoln's pulling fodder for a day or two for the Crawfords. It should be noted that others of Herndon's respondents thought that Lincoln had resented the penalty prescribed by Craw-

¹⁴ David Turnham interview, Elizabeth (now Dale), Indiana, September 15, 1865, mss. 2353-56, *ibid.*

¹⁵ William Wood interview, Gentryville, Indiana, September 15, 1865, mss. 2332, 2335-37, 2339, *ibid.*

ford, but it appeared from Mrs. Crawford's testimony that Lincoln had often subsequently worked for her husband for twenty-five cents a day, sometimes staying overnight at the Crawfords' house and studying their books by the fireside. Mrs. Crawford clearly remembered Lincoln's ambition. "He said that he would be Presdt of the US told my husband so often—Said it jokingly—yet with a smack of deep Earnestness in his Eye and tone," she told Herndon. It was Mrs. Crawford who eventually provided Herndon with a version of the *Chronicles of Reuben*. She recited a few lines to Herndon during his visit, then went no further on account of the poem's smuttiness. She promised to observe propriety by giving the rest of the poem to her daughter-in-law, who would in turn tell it to her son who then would write it to Herndon. An actual copy of the *Chronicles* had recently been discovered in Gentryville, just before Herndon's trip to Indiana. As he told Jesse Weik much later, Herndon was unable to buy that copy at the time he was there.¹⁶ Mrs. Crawford concluded the interview by giving Herndon a cane that she had had made from a rail split by Lincoln for her husband. Herndon in his notes paid her the supreme compliment of calling her "a Lady of the Ky. stamp—"¹⁷

At Rockport on Sunday the 17th, Herndon spoke with four informants, including the widow of Allen Gentry with whom Lincoln took his first flatboat trip to New Orleans in 1828. Mrs. Gentry, of the same age as Lincoln, also had fond school memories of him, and a strong recollection of how uniquely well-informed the teen-aged Lincoln was for his time and place. When Lincoln had tried to explain the relative movements of the earth and the moon to her, she out of her ignorance called him a fool, but to Herndon she said, "I know now that I was the fool—not Lincoln . . . he was the learned boy among us unlearned folks."¹⁸ John Dougherty and Dr. Hougland of Rockport both spoke of the influence on Lincoln of William Jones, an astute and well-read Gentryville merchant and sometime employer of Lincoln. Jones was later to be a Whig politician in Spencer County, a member of the Indiana General Assembly, and colonel of a locally raised Union regiment. There was agreement among these informants and others that Jones was significant in interesting Lincoln in public affairs, in lending him books and newspapers, and perhaps in turning Lincoln toward an anti-Jackson affiliation in politics. Jones was also remembered to

¹⁶ John W. Lamar to James W. Wartmann, June 3, 1887, mss. 4593-94, *ibid.*; Herndon to Weik, December 22, 1886, in *The Hidden Lincoln*, comp. Emanuel Hertz (New York, 1938), 150-51.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Crawford interview, Gentryville, Indiana, September 16, 1865, mss. 2338, 2340-41, 2343, 2346, *ibid.*

¹⁸ Mrs. Allen Gentry interview, Rockport, Indiana, September 17, 1865, mss. 2362-64, *ibid.*

have said "that Mr. Lincoln laid the foundation of his character in Spencer Co. Indiana."¹⁹

But the most memorable day of Herndon's visit seems to have been the previous Wednesday, September 14, when early in the morning Nat Grigsby took him to see the Lincoln farm and the grave of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, and then to Little Pigeon Meeting House, where Aaron and Sarah Lincoln Grigsby were buried. Near the church he drank from a spring, "out of which Abe had kneeled and drank a thousand times." With a romantic's sensitivity to the particulars of nature, Herndon filled his account of the trip with descriptions of the look of the area, of its hills, its timber, its springs and streams. "All is a dense forest—wild and grand," he wrote at one point. At Lincoln's mother's gravesite, the normally freethinking Herndon seems almost to have been transfigured. A sentimental man in a sentimental time, he nonetheless was never again to record having been so moved during his researches. "God bless her if I could breathe life into her again I would do it," he wrote of the experience: "Could I only whisper in her Ear—'Your son was Presdt—of the U.S. from 1861 to 186[5], I would be satisfied. I have heard much of this blessed, good woman. I stood bare headed in reverence at her grave. I can't say why—yet I felt in the presence of the living woman translated to another world. 'God bless her,' said her Son to me once and I repeat that which Echoes audibly in my soul—'God bless her.'" Curious and somewhat aggrieved that not only was Nancy Hanks Lincoln's grave not marked but also that there was disagreement over which grave in the small plot was actually hers, Herndon nonetheless felt personally privileged to have visited the site. He wrote, "After looking at the grave and Contemplating in silence the mutations of things—death—immortality—God, I left, I hope, the grave, a better man—at least if but for one moment."²⁰

Herndon never returned to Spencer County, but he remained in contact with Turnham, Grigsby, and Mrs. Crawford, all of whom are cited in both the Lincoln biographies that were written primarily from the materials that Herndon had collected, those compiled over the name of Ward Hill Lamon and by Jesse Weik. Mrs. Crawford continued to be a particularly fruitful source. Indeed these three, once they were known as sources on Lincoln's early life, were to be interviewed by still others later.²¹

Also cited by Lamon and Weik are other informants from this trip such as Green B. Taylor, for whose father Lincoln had kept a

¹⁹ John Dougherty and Dr. Hougland interviews, Rockport, Indiana, September 17, 1865, mss. 2366-67, 2360, *ibid.* The quotation is from the Hougland interview.

²⁰ Herndon statement headed "Lincoln Farm," September 14, 1865, mss. 2344-45, 2347-50, *ibid.*

²¹ See Bess V. Ehrmann, *The Missing Chapter in the Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Chicago, 1938), 69-70.

ferry over the Ohio, Joseph Richardson, and John Romine.²² Richardson was a little younger than Lincoln and had looked up to him as a kind of preceptor. He remembered Lincoln's great strength, maintaining that he could carry "what 3 ordinary men would grunt & sweat at." But more impressive was Lincoln's studiousness. Richardson recalled that in his copy book, young Abraham had written:

"Good boys who to their books apply
"Will make great men by & by."

Though Richardson never forgot the advice, to Romine such a sentiment was unimpressive. Never denying Lincoln's physical prowess, Romine is nonetheless responsible for a celebrated description of Lincoln's aversion to work: he "was awful lazy; he worked for me—was always reading and thinking . . . didn't love to work but did dearly love his pay," which can certainly be taken as an expression of the premium generally placed on physical rather than mental achievement on this and most other frontiers.²³

Herndon doubtless could have ranged even further than he did in finding informants. With the exception of Romine, his interviewees tended to be laudatory toward Lincoln and proud of their association with him. Herndon was probably too reliant on Wartmann in making initial contacts, and Wartmann's inclination to refer him to Republicans seems to have kept him away from male members of the numerous Gentry clan, Jacksonian Democrats who nonetheless knew Lincoln well and whose perspectives might have been at variance with much of what he collected. Nat Grigsby's outspoken partisanship might also have been a limiting influence.

Nevertheless, the major payoff from the journey was a wealth of previously unknown information about Lincoln's essentially undocumented early life. Furthermore, Herndon's developing strong impression of the primitive and frequently violent character of Lincoln's early social environment must also have been affected by the still undeveloped nature of the Spencer County that he saw, a region, as David Donald has said, "almost as backwoods as in 1865 as when the Lincolns had migrated from Kentucky."²⁴ Even then it must have smacked of the southern Indiana described by Edward Eggleston. The population was rough and mostly semi-literate at best, but Abraham Lincoln had been able to thrive in it partly because he could take care of himself physically. In spite of strong

²² Taylor interview, Troy, Indiana, September 16, 1865, ms. 2361, Herndon-Weik Collection.

²³ Richardson and Romine interviews, Gentryville, Indiana, September 14, 1865, mss. 2330, 2350-52, *ibid.*; Donald F. Tingley, "Anti-Intellectualism on the Early Illinois Frontier," in *Essays in Illinois History in Honor of Glenn Huron Seymour*, ed. Donald F. Tingley (Carbondale, Ill., 1967), 3-17.

²⁴ Donald, *Lincoln's Herndon*, 183.

influences to the contrary he had been able to prepare himself well enough to appear "thoroughly posted in Politics" by the time he moved to Illinois.²⁵ And of comparable importance, it is likely that the essentially positive, if limited, view that the reader gets of Nancy Hanks Lincoln from the Lamon and Herndon-Weik biographies is also an important dividend of this trip; indeed, Herndon admitted as much, much later.²⁶ Nancy Hanks was not remembered well in Spencer County, but insofar as she was remembered, it was as an intelligent and hard-working woman, as a good mother, and as a victim of frontier hardship. Since the little that Lincoln had said to Herndon about his mother was also strongly favorable, this was the impression that Herndon and the authors who drew on him retained and perpetuated, rather than some definitely negative ones that he had collected from Kentucky informants.

Douglas Wilson has recently asserted that without William Herndon we would be largely in the dark about Lincoln's early life even well into the 1830s, for "without Herndon's material there is precious little else."²⁷ One can only agree. However much Herndon has been accused of mythmaking, with only partial justification at the most, without his success in discovering Spencer County residents who were willing to talk and write to him about these vitally formative years in the life of Abraham Lincoln, we would be poor indeed.

²⁵ Herndon note, September 17, 1865, ms. 2367, Herndon-Weik Collection.

²⁶ Herndon to Jesse Weik, October 10, 1888, in Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*, 218-20.

²⁷ Douglas L. Wilson, "Herndon and His Lincoln Informants," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, XIV (1993), 23.