THE LINCOLN INQUIRY

By BESS V. EH RMANN, Rockport

For the meeting of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society, Lincoln Park, October 14th, 1924

In the year 1920, a short time after Mr. John E. Iglehart, of Evansville, had founded the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society, he coined the phrase “The Lincoln Inquiry”. Knowing that Lincoln was the Southwestern's greatest asset, he warned the members against letting that inquiry overshadow their other work. In an annual address a year later, published in Bulletin 16, he said he had changed his mind and he now saw no inconsistency between the two kinds of work, for the reason that the missing chapter in Lincoln's life could not be written until the missing chapter in the life of the people in this section of the state where Lincoln found his environment was written. To this view Ida Tarbell, who has spent more time and investigation and labor probably than any other historian upon the subject of Lincoln's life in Indiana, has given her fullest assent and she recognizes that in the work this society has done and is doing will be found the solution of the problem as Mr. Iglehart has defined it.

Since the organization of this society, however, the “Inquiry” has grown to such proportions that much publicity has been given the Southwestern and many papers have been written about the people whom Lincoln knew while a resident of Spencer county and the influence they undoubtedly had on his early life.

After all it is the people who live near the scenes of Lincoln's early life who are best able to interpret its environment. They are intimately acquainted with the descendants of his boyhood friends, have heard the stories of his life as related by their elders and therefore ought to be in a position to write more understandingly of those early days and those pioneer people.
It took our own able historian, Mr. John E. Iglehart, to realize that the missing chapter in Lincoln's life could never be written by outsiders who would perhaps spend a few days or a few hours in investigation in Spencer county, but it must be written by the children and grandchildren of those people who knew Lincoln in his boyhood days. This inspiration of Mr. Iglehart is going to mean much to the historians of the future because this historical material must be preserved by this generation or much will be lost that can never be supplied by a later generation.

It is a very strange but true fact that of the many histories written about Lincoln little is told of his boyhood days or of those friends and acquaintances in Spencer county and yet he lived here fourteen years and we will all agree that those years were the formative ones in Lincoln's life.

The people with whom he came in contact must have helped to mold his character and give him the desire to make something of himself.

I have always deeply resented the impression given by many historians and writers that those early pioneers in Spencer county were uncouth, illiterate people. True there were some such, as there were in all other states, but the brave men who came to make their homes in what was then a vast wilderness were often men of culture and education, many from the aristocratic families of the Virginias, Carolinas and Massachussets who have left to their children and children's children heirlooms of linen, silver, furniture, books, historical documents and pictures which prove their ancestry and education.

Now those pioneers' children, of whom we speak as the next generation, were not well educated because of the lack of proper schools but there were many men in Spencer and adjoining counties whom Lincoln knew, such as Pitcher and Brackenridge, that possessed the most brilliant minds that Indiana has ever claimed.

Having been born in Spencer county and lived here practically all my life, I have known intimately the children and grandchildren of those early people. My mother told me much of the lives and histories of Spencer county pioneers, as her
father, Thomas P. Britton, was one of those who came from Virginia about the year 1825 and my mother was born in one of the few log houses that made up the then little village of Rockport.

Among the men who lived in Spencer county between 1816 and 1830 and were upstanding men of the county and many of them men whom Lincoln no doubt knew well are the following, all of whom, with two exceptions, have descendants still living here and whom I know intimately, the Grasses, Gentrys, Richardsons, Jones, Crawfords, Brittons, Garretts, Medcalfs, Barnettts, Snyders, Bunnerns, Wrights, Berrys, Nanereys, Proctors, Grahams, Lamars, Rays, Hammonds, Browns, Logsdons, Montogomerys, Boyds, Mattinglys, Deweeses, Hacklemans, Whittinghills, Langfords, Turnhams, Haskins, Crooks, Kellams, Grigsbys, Cottons, Roberts, Romines, Taylors, Greathouse, Carters, Lindseys, Huffs, Wilkinsonsons, Huffmans, Morgans, Veatchs, Pitchers, Dorseyse, Lucars, Parkers, Meeks, Gwaltneys and many others. But these I mention especially as being men of public office, ministers, farmers, lawyers, doctors, teachers, judges and business men with whom Lincoln would perhaps come in contact in his own locality and also when he would come to the county seat at Rockport as he frequently did. These men were all the type that would be an inspiration to a young boy and so their biographies are important to the "Inquiry".

My grandmother and mother were delightful conversationists and we children interested listeners and so the stories of those pioneer days in Spencer county and Rockport were told and retold until we were all as familiar with the names and lives of those early settlers as with our own.

The settlement at New Harmony was a subject of frequent discussion among the older people and no doubt much of this reached Lincoln and he may have journeyed there to see and hear for himself.

In the State University library at Bloomington are something like one hundred and fifty histories of Lincoln and many others elsewhere, yet it was not until Mr. Iglehart started the "Inquiry" in the Pocket counties, that any special thought or study was given to the lives of those men who lived near the
Lincolns during their residence in Spencer county. In these past four years, however, the following papers have been written and inquiries made by those who are realizing the importance of the work:


   It is the personal recollection of Mrs. Mary J. Scott, whom I remember quite well. She is a niece of Joe Richardson who was a clerk in the store of William Jones of Gentryville where the Lincolns traded. Mrs. Scott said Thomas Lincoln was not in favor of book learning and often hid or threw away the books with which Abe "was foolin' away his time". He often found fault with Abe for thus using time that he thought might have been better employed at other things, but that one day he gave good evidence of the value of his learning.

   One autumn Abe was cutting corn for a Mr. Carter at the wage of ten cents a day and his employer and Thomas Lincoln bargained to transfer a portion of the Lincoln farm. Carter wrote the deed and presented it to Lincoln for his signature. Abe looked over the deed before his father affixed his signature and said, "If you sign that deed, you have sold the farm". The bargain was for a certain field and not the whole farm. Thomas Lincoln looked Carter in the eye and said, "Somebody lied and 'tain't Abe". As was the custom in those days, a fist fight followed. After this event Thomas Lincoln never found fault with Abe for reading books.


   I knew Rev. Bunner who died the past year at the age of ninety-two years. His paper was the story of the borrowed book that belonged to Crawford which has often been told before. Rev. Bunner's article was published in the Grandview Monitor of August 26th, 1920.

3. A copy of Abraham Lincoln's letter to Mr. David Turnham, dated October 23rd, 1860, and which was presented to the Southwestern Historical Society on June 15th, 1923.
4. Paper by Helen Rhoades on “Life of James Gentry”, written in May, 1922, and filed with the curator in Evansville.

This paper relates the friendship of the Gentrys and Lincolns and mentions many incidents in the life of Lincoln. It also records the history of the Gentry family in Spencer county. The Gentrys no doubt had a great influence on Lincoln during his boyhood days and the writer of this paper is a great granddaughter of James Gentry.

5. Copy of “Remarks of Honorable Charles Lieb in the House of Representatives on June 28th, 1916, on Sarah Lincoln Grigsby.” This was presented to me in 1920.

These remarks include the dedication ceremonies held at the grave when the marker at Sarah Lincoln Grigsby’s grave was dedicated, a poem by Max Ehrman, entitled “Sarah Lincoln”, and a paper by Mrs. Nancy Grigsby Inco, daughter of James Grigsby, and a paper by the late Captain J. W. Wartman on “The Lincoln Family”. In this paper Captain Wartman makes the statement that Lincoln was no doubt influenced by the example and conversation of his neighbor pioneers such as Turnham, Jones, Crawford, Gentrys, Taylors and Grigsbys.


In Mrs. Hanby’s paper she dwells on the thought that the fourteen years Lincoln dwelt in Indiana determined his character and that he went forth to Illinois in 1830 almost if not entirely equipped mentally for the great future that lay before him.

Mrs. Hanby proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that Pitcher loaned Lincoln books. She saw herself the two volumes of Blackstone in which Lincoln had written his name.

I quote the following from Mrs. Hanby’s paper:

However the present inquiry may end as to individual claims, it will beyond doubt settle some very important questions. It will determine the debt Lincoln owes his Hoosier environment and the world’s debt to those generous-hearted lenders of books in Indiana. Too it will silence forever that cry of illiteracy which we hate and which we know to be false.

In her paper Mrs. Raleigh, besides telling of the Brackenridges, tells of Lincoln being an occasional visitor at the Brackenridge home and also of his walking to Boonville to hear John Brackenridge in his law cases and to borrow his books.


This is the Grigsby family history and gives Mrs. Nancy Grigsby Inco’s assertion that the first law books Lincoln ever read were two that belonged to Aaron Grigsby.

9. Copy of a letter presented by Mrs. Inco to the Southwestern, written by Abraham Lincoln to Nathaniel Grigsby. Also a picture of James Grigsby for the Spencer County Museum.


11. Some historical pictures of granddaughter and great grandson of Rev. David Elkins taken at Nancy Hanks Lincoln’s grave. Rev. Elkins was the minister who preached the belated funeral services of Nancy Hanks Lincoln.

12. Newspaper article of February 20, 1915, “Road Travelled by the Lincolns to Illinois”, which was written by Cicero Fellinger of Winslow, Indiana.

13. I consider Mr. William L. Barker’s paper on Ratliff Boone, written in 1922 and read at the Historical Society, January 31, 1922, and published in Bulletin No. 16, to belong to the Lincoln Inquiry although he does not mention Lincoln's name. Boone was one of those men who by his leadership no doubt drew the attention of the young Lincoln and no doubt helped to influence and mold his opinions.

14. “Lincoln’s Boyhood Days in Indiana”, written by Judge Roscoe Kiper of Boonville and read by him before the
This paper mentions the names of a number of pioneer families, one of such is Daniel Grass, who no doubt had a great influence on the young Lincoln and it is also his belief that the New Harmony settlement and their ideas were realized by Lincoln and that he could have come under the influence of prominent educators connected with the Owen movement.

15. Paper on Daniel Grass, written by his great granddaughter, Laura Mercy Wright, and read before the Historical Society at Poseyville, September 28, 1920, and filed with papers in charge of the curator in Evansville. Judge Grass's political life began in 1812 as justice of the peace. In 1813 he was an associate judge for Warrick county. More than half of what is now Spencer county was then in Warrick. Grass was a delegate to the constitutional convention at Corydon and was later a senator in the first Indiana state legislature from Warrick, Perry and Posey counties.

16. Visit of Miss Ida Tarbell in 1922 to Spencer county and Rockport in search of material for her new history, *In the Footsteps of Lincoln*. Miss Tarbell expressed herself to me as being much interested in the "Lincoln Inquiry".

17. Paper by Ida D. Armstrong on "The Lincolns in Spencer County", read by her at the meeting in Evansville.

In this paper we are told that Joseph D. Armstrong was the first man to notice the neglected condition of Lincoln's mother's grave and through his efforts and that of Alfred Yates of Rockport and a few business men of Rockport the first marker was placed at her grave in 1874 with the simple inscription "Nancy Hanks Lincoln". A few years later the present stone marker was erected by the Studebakers and the donation and work of Alfred Yates and W. H. Sarver of Cincinnati.

Joseph D. Armstrong was one of Spencer county's earliest historians and in fact the only one that I know who has had his material published. He collected the first historical material in 1874 and published a small pamphlet called *Spencer*
County and its Prominent Citizens, or "Extracts from Armstrong's History of Spencer County which is now being written and will be published the present year 1874". I have seen a copy of this first pamphlet history of Spencer county which is in possession of his daughter, Mrs. Mina Cook. Much of this history he used in the Spencer County Atlas which was published in 1879. His manuscripts were also used by the publishers of the Warrick, Spencer and Perry Counties History published in 1885.

Having been a school teacher Mr. Armstrong wrote much on the early schools and of Lincoln's schooling, what little he received. He made a pencil drawing of the Lincoln home in the back of one of his books, which book is a cherished possession of his children. He also published a vivid word picture of Lincoln's mother, the color of her eyes and hair, complexion and general appearance.

In his first published history of the Lincolns he states that the first teachers, who "boarded round" and taught Abe, said he could read well at the age of eight years.

I knew Mr. Armstrong and remember well his interesting personality and conversation. He was always deeply interested in all Lincoln history and I have in my possession a copy of a letter written February 18, 1901, a short time before Mr. Armstrong's death, showing his interest in the Nancy Hanks Memorial Association. The letter is written on stationery of the General Assembly of the state of Indiana.

J. D. ARMSTRONG.

SIR AND COMRADE:

Yours at hand and in reply must say that you surely are truly loyal to the memory of Mrs. Lincoln. I have received a number of petitions and yours contains the greatest number of names sent in by any one person. Now as to your help on the committee will say I do not know of any committee appointed or elected in any way. The appropriation, if obtained, will be made to the Nancy Hanks Memorial Association Commission, consisting of the Governor and two other parties whose names I do not now remember. This commission was organized nearly a year ago.

Respectfully,

B. B. JOHN.
18. Visit of Rev. Warren to Spencer county in 1923 in the interest of Lincoln facts for his history of Lincoln which I understand is now in the publishers' hands.

19. Very interesting talk on “Lincoln” by Rev. John Edward Murr, made at the meeting of the Southwestern in Evansville, February 12, 1924, in which he stated that he had known eleven of Lincoln's boyhood associates.

20. Letter of inquiry from a Mrs. Alfred Beach in Casper, Wyoming, asking for information concerning the Hall family who went to Illinois with the Lincolns. The specific information asked I could not give and so answered and later had some historic data from Mrs. Beach concerning the Hall and Hanks family.


John Morgan was the first clerk and first recorder of Spencer county and was a man of education and culture. The Lincolns would perhaps have come in contact with John Morgan every time they came to Rockport, therefore his biography belongs to the “Inquiry”.

22. “Pocket Periscope”, article published February 12, 1921, in the Evansville Courier and written by Mr. Thomas J. de la Hunt of Cannelton. Mr. de la Hunt reviews quite a bit of late information concerning Lincoln, part of which is the recollections of Mrs. Mary J. Scott, whom I have mentioned elsewhere. Mr. de la Hunt quotes Mrs. Scott as saying, “If more children of today were as ambitious for an education today as was Abraham Lincoln there would be many more college graduates”.

23. Newspaper article “Rockport Tavern Where Lincoln Stopped”, published in the Rockport Journal and filed in Spencer County History Book. The tavern was known as the “Sargent House” and Squire J. L. Stewart, a former native resident of Rockport, tells his recollections of Abe Lincoln. Squire Stewart was an errand boy at the tavern when Lincoln stayed there in 1844, his first visit to his old home after moving to Illinois.

This paper is one of the ablest papers ever delivered before our society and belongs to the "Lincoln Inquiry", because it deals with the question of slavery at the beginning of the state, a matter of vital interest to the Lincolns, particularly Abraham. General Johnson was perhaps more generally known than any other man who lived in southwestern Indiana from 1820 to 1830, and so the Lincolns must have known a great deal about Johnson and could have had access to General Johnson's report on the slavery question.


Mr. Wilson says "If you wish a good historical vision of a city you must know the history of the county; if you wish a good vision of a county, it is well to have the vision of a state; and, if you wish a knowledge of a state it is well to know the history of a nation and so on". I think this is necessary when we study the history of a man and so the "Lincoln Inquiry" is concerned with "The Birth of a State".

26. George Wilson's article on Judge James Lockhart, written for the Southwestern Historical Society and published by the Indiana State Historical Society, Publication 8, No. 1, deals with the early period of Indiana a little after the Lincolns left, but should belong to the "Inquiry".

27. Another paper by Mr. George Wilson which should be included in this list is one on George H. Proffitt and which was published in the Indiana Magazine of History. This is a history of Proffitt's life in the thirties after Lincoln left Indiana, but it deals to some extent with that period.

28. Paper by Mrs. Samuel Orr on the Casselberry family and read before this society, February 12, 1924, and published in the Bulletin of that date.

This paper shows that one of the large prominent families of the early period lived both on the east and west of Abraham
Lincoln, and that a creek in Perry county was named after one of Mrs. Orr's ancestors.


Judge William Prince filled a large place in southern Indiana history and had so much to do in public affairs that the Lincolns undoubtedly came under his influence.

31. A paper on “Materia Medica of Pioneer Indiana”, by Mrs. H. C. Knapp, and read before the society, June 10, 1924, might be linked with the “Lincoln Inquiry” because a part of the life of every community in pioneer days was the pioneer doctor.

In the town of Rockport is an old desk owned by Mrs. Mary Garlinghouse which was made by Thomas Lincoln for Dr. Crooks, Spencer county's first doctor.

32. In Thomas J. de la Hunt's History of Perry County is a chapter devoted to the Lincolns and although this history was written in 1916, four years before the Southwestern was founded, I feel that this should belong to the Southwestern as Mr. de la Hunt has given us much pioneer history.

33. In the third volume of Esarey's Indiana History which is marked “Vanderburgh County, by John E. Iglehart”, are two features of interest in original research, which belong to the “Inquiry”.

First. Something over one hundred pages of original matter by Mr. Iglehart on Early Evansville, and, second, beginning at page 119 at the bottom and continuing for about eighteen pages is an abstract of the Evansville Gazette, a weekly newspaper published in Evansville from 1821 to 1825. Undoubtedly the Evansville Gazette files are a very valuable research source. They throw a searchlight for three and one-half years in the early twenties nowhere else to be found.

Thomas J. Evans was a brother of Robert M. Evans, who lived in Evansville except the year 1827 when he lived at New
Harmony, and a brother of the Evans at Princeton who was a wool carder and who advertised in the *Evansville Gazette.* Thomas J. Evans advertised that he was living in Rockport and was doing law business generally in the district. There is independent testimony settled beyond controversy that Lincoln used to go once a year to Evans at Princeton to have his wool carded. So you have Lincoln in touch with the Evans family, one of the leading families in southern Indiana, the family which gave Evansville its name.

Lincoln was doing his wool carding in Princeton where he had to remain several days each time he went and the man with whom he transacted business was a brother to Robert M. Evans, who was a contributor to the weekly papers then published in New Harmony. These facts are an illustration of how this newspaper throws light on the environment of Lincoln.

34. Mr. Iglehart's address on "Correspondence Between Lincoln Historians and This Society" delivered in Evansville on February 28, 1923, and published in *Bulletin No. 18.* In this address Mr. Iglehart states that soon after the publication of *Bulletin No. 16* of the Indiana Historical Commission which contained the proceedings of the annual meeting of the Southwestern held in Evansville, February 28, 1922, there appeared an editorial in the *Indianapolis Star* written in the form of a review of the work done by the Southwestern up to that time and especially that of the "Lincoln Inquiry". This editorial closes with the following:

The purpose of the "Lincoln Inquiry" is to collect from many new sources information concerning Lincoln from 1816 to 1830. Mr. Iglehart considers it "one of the chief assets of the Society". If it is carried on with the energy which has characterized the other work of the society, it also will be one of the chief assets of the State.

This newspaper article brought a letter of inquiry to Mr. Iglehart from Senator Beveridge who is engaged in writing a history of Lincoln. Senator Beveridge expressed a deep interest in the work of the Southwestern and desires to become more intimately acquainted with it.
Miss Ida Tarbell wrote Mr. Iglehart in 1922 in which she sought to obtain information concerning Lincoln for her newest work *In the Footseps of the Lincolns*, not then issued. In later correspondence Miss Tarbell states:

I do not believe that Lincoln can be understood without understanding better than I do, at least, Southwestern Indiana. What that country was, what its people thought and did, had, I am convinced, a deep influence on the young Lincoln.

On retiring from the office of president, refusing to stand for re-election, after which he was chosen president emeritus, Mr. Iglehart in his address stated as definitely as the subject permitted, the sources of evidence and inquiry in original research, open to investigators in pursuing the Lincoln Inquiry, in which field he seemed to think there was ample evidence to justify the conclusions at which he had arrived. On account of absence of historical record, this is largely circumstantial evidence furnished from many well established facts, making clear the opportunities which Lincoln had, and if he had them there is no doubt that he availed himself of them.

Being unable, as Mr. Iglehart stated, on account of time required in the work and his advanced age, to follow this inquiry in the future, as he had sought to aid in doing through the channels of this society work in the past, he submitted a summary of the sources of information in such research, relating largely to the opportunities of Lincoln while he lived in Indiana.

Of the first importance on this subject, he quoted the statement of Leonard Swett, that Lincoln said to him that he had read through every book he had ever heard of in that country for a circuit of fifty miles from the farm upon which he lived. The limit of this radius included Vincennes, Princeton, Evansville, Boonville, Rockport, Corydon, the capital of the territory and of the state until 1825, and a center of culture for a much longer period, also close to, if not actually including, New Harmony, and part of northwestern Kentucky, including Henderson, the county seat of Henderson county, where some of the descendants of the three
Hart brothers (of Richard Henderson & Company) lived, and were men of much influence (David Hart, an able man, one of such descendants, was judge of the Spencer circuit court in 1818), and Mr. Iglehart evidently thinks it probable that the Lincolns knew very well the story of the Hart brothers and of Richard Henderson & Company, so important in the first settlement of Kentucky where Abraham Lincoln was born and where Thomas Lincoln lived till he moved to Indiana.

After summarizing many sources of information, too numerous to be mentioned here, which should be investigated in our future work, and through which opportunities were then open to a man of Abraham Lincoln's ability and habits of inquiry, and showing in that address, as well as in other of his published papers and addresses (with reference to reliable historical authority) the means of reasonably easy communication for those days, both north and south, and east and west, in southwestern Indiana, particularly the eight counties embraced within the territory of this society, which were then embraced in a single congressional and judicial district, Mr. Iglehart gave his conclusions as to the opportunities of Lincoln within the radius of fifty miles mentioned. That conclusion was that Lincoln had availed himself of all the opportunities existing in pioneer life in this section when he lived in Indiana, and that Lincoln knew many of the people who lived within a reasonable distance of his home, which for that time might reasonably be considered a distance of fifty miles, and that he knew about all worth knowing of them, and that in 1830 Abraham Lincoln knew pretty well all that was worth knowing in his locality, and within that radius, which could be learned by reading the papers, intelligent inquiry, and personal acquaintance with the better class of people whose history has not (with honorable exceptions) been properly recorded up to the time of the organization of this society.

He further said that he believes that his conclusion is the correct explanation of the equipment of the man Lincoln, as he is found in Illinois in 1830 and later, and that such an interpretation would furnish the method of solving the prob-
lem underlying "The Lincoln Inquiry", none other having been furnished by the historians.

This now, as nearly as I am able to tell, completes the work done on the "Lincoln Inquiry" up to the present time, by the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society. I feel that this material being collected is going to be of great future worth.

All that has been done along this line is due to the energy and perseverance of John E. Iglehart and this is but a beginning in a great work, and what more the next four years will bring I am not prepared to state, but Mr. Iglehart has begun the investigation that will no doubt grow in importance with each year.

Gathered here near Lincoln's mother's grave, let us today pay tribute to the woman who gave to the world the mightiest man America has produced.