

Lincoln's Visit to Terre Haute

By MAX EHLMANN

It is of interest that Abraham Lincoln was once a visitor in Terre Haute and a guest at the Prairie House, a pioneer hotel that stood on the same site (Wabash Avenue and Seventh Street) now occupied by the Terre Haute House.¹ I have always believed the story as I was told that it was true by acquaintances and friends, but I could not find sufficient evidence to prove it until recently. Among those who told me of the visit were Thomas H. Nelson, William E. McClain and William Fairbanks, all of them colonels in the Civil War. Colonel Nelson was appointed Minister to Chili by President Lincoln and later became Minister to Mexico. Colonel McClain became Deputy Commissioner of Pensions under President Cleveland. Colonel Fairbanks, a much beloved man and brother of Crawford Fairbanks, moved to Joplin, Missouri, where he became a man of affairs just as his brother did in Terre Haute.

I lived at the old Terre Haute House which replaced the Prairie House, with these three men. The building and site of the Prairie House were owned by Chauncey Rose, another of Terre Haute's beloved philanthropists. The Prairie House was regarded as almost out in the country, and the proprietors of the hostelry ran a bus from what is now the court-house square (south of Wabash Avenue, between Third and Second) which was then the stage-coach stopping place and center of early Terre Haute business activities.

But to return to Lincoln's visit, the following passage is found in *Lincoln the Man*, by Edgar Lee Masters: "He [Lincoln] believed in the mad stone; and one of his sisters-in-law related that Lincoln took one of his boys to Terre Haute, Indiana, to have the stone applied to a wound inflicted by a dog on the boy."² The discovery of this information, based on the statement of a sister of Mrs. Lincoln, delighted me because it agreed with what Colonels Nelson, McClain, and Fairbanks had all told me when they related that they had heard of Mr. Lincoln's visit to Terre Haute and that he was a guest at the Prairie House.

¹ On the basis of an interview with the author, the substance of what appears in this article was written up by Mr. Curtis O. Bridwell and appeared in the *Terre Haute Sunday Tribune-Star* of December 8, 1935.

² Masters, *Lincoln the Man* (New York, 1931), 148.

I have never been able to discover who owned the mad-stone. It was a woman, so the story runs. The belief was most general at the time that this stone would heal and prevent madness whenever a person had been bitten by a mad-dog. As a matter of fact it did cure bites, not by the magical qualities with which rumor had endowed it, but to my way of thinking because it was a porous stone. When placed on a wound it would by capillary attraction draw out the moisture, blood, and probably the poison.

By the way, there is another Lincoln incident that is recorded in history which shows that he went through Terre Haute in the spring of 1849. This involves Col. Thomas H. Nelson, one of the three colonels already mentioned. The incident is related in Herndon's *Life of Lincoln*, the author, William Herndon, being aided by a newspaper man of Greencastle, Indiana, Jesse W. Weik, in the preparation of the manuscript for the publisher. Referring to this work, one finds that Colonel Nelson and Judge Abram Hammond (later Governor of Indiana) arranged to go from Terre Haute to Indianapolis by stage. As they climbed on the stage, but let's quote from the book—Nelson is giving the description:

By daybreak the stage had arrived in Terre Haute from the west, and as we stepped in we discovered that the entire back seat was occupied by a long, lank individual, whose head seemed to protrude from one end of the coach and his feet from the other. He was the sole occupant, and was sleeping soundly. Hammond slapped him familiarly on the shoulder and asked him if he had chartered the stage for the day. The stranger, now wide awake, responded, "Certainly not," and at once took the front seat, politely surrendering to us the place of honor and comfort. We took in our travelling companion at a glance. A queer odd looking fellow he was, dressed in a well worn and ill-fitting suit of bombazine, without vest or cravat, and a twenty-five cent palm hat on the back of his head. His very prominent features in repose seemed dull and expressionless. . . .³

Upon arrival in Indianapolis, Colonel Nelson and Judge Hammond found that the man was Abraham Lincoln, center of attraction at the meeting they had gone to Indianapolis to attend. The three men afterwards became staunch friends.

The story that Mr. Lincoln visited Terre Haute in order that the mad-stone might be applied to his son's wound and that he stopped at the Prairie House is surely authentic. Mr. Lincoln has often been credited with the characteristic of be-

³ Herndon's *Lincoln* (Springfield, 1888, reprint of 1921), II, 303-304.

ing more or less superstitious, and this story seems to bear out that view of him.⁴ Some advanced college student may well do a piece of research on this question.

⁴The belief in the efficacy of the mad-stone was wide spread. The effects of the bite of a mad-dog were so serious, that any father, in that period, whether superstitious or not, might well be excused for resorting to the use of the mad-stone in the hope of saving a beloved son from rabies.