

A SPLENDID HOAX:

THE STRANGE CASE OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S BIRTHPLACE CABIN

On September 19, 1948, The Washington Post published a front-page article that announced that Abraham Lincoln's birthplace cabin, [SLIDE #1] enshrined in Hodgenville, Kentucky, and managed by the National Park Service, was a hoax. The article went on to explain that Roy Hays, a Lincoln scholar, believed that the small cabin was not original, and even more startling, that it contained logs from another nineteenth century hoax - the alleged birthplace of none other than Jefferson Davis! Hays quoted a 1919 letter written by Robert Todd Lincoln, the president's son, in which the younger Lincoln stated that the cabin was a "fraud, when represented as the actual home." As for the National Park Service, Hays believed it had never deceived the people about the cabin's authenticity -- "but neither has it told the whole truth."¹

The cabin of which Hays spoke had been presumed by many to be the original when it was placed in a [SLIDE #2] neo-classical pink granite monument in 1911 amid much fanfare and appropriate dedicatory remarks by President William Howard Taft. Governor Augustus Willson quickly accepted the site on behalf of the State of Kentucky, but the Kentucky legislature never gave

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the governor final authority to administer it. Five years later, Congress authorized the War Department to manage Abraham Lincoln National Park; the War Department never questioned the authenticity of the farm or the cabin. In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt transferred management of the site to the National Park Service. And, at least until 1948, the Park Service publicly endorsed a local tradition that the cabin had been moved to an adjacent farm in 1861, intermittently used as a school and tenant house, and eventually purchased and returned to the Lincoln farm in 1895.²

The Hays revelations, however, prompted the National Park Service to rethink its interpretation of the cabin. Based on its own research, the Service concluded that no evidence existed to support the theory that the enshrined cabin witnessed the birth of Lincoln. Indeed, only from 1895 was the its history well documented. But if the cabin at Hodgenville were not the original, what was it -- and what had become of the original cabin?

THE BIRTHPLACE CABIN

Thomas Lincoln purchased the "Sinking Spring" farm in December, 1808. It is not known whether he had moved there and built a cabin prior to then or if he erected his cabin after purchasing the farm. In any event, Abraham Lincoln was born in a small cabin on the farm on February 12 of the following year. However, the Lincolns lived on the Sinking Spring farm for only two and a half years before moving on to the farm on Knob Creek,

about ten miles away. The birthplace cabin apparently survived for several decades, but eventually fell into ruin.³

During the summer of 1860, a local Kentucky legislator visited the farm, cut several walking canes from trees on the property (including one "from the very place in the house where the bed stood when he [Lincoln] was born," and noted that the cabin was no longer there.⁴ John B. Rowbotham visited the farm shortly after Lincoln's assassination with the intention of sketching the birthplace for a Cincinnati publishing firm. He likewise found neither the Lincoln cabin - nor any cabin.⁵ A second correspondent also visited the site in 1865 and found "no vestiges of the Lincoln cabin remaining."⁶ And finally, in 1894, a Major S. P. Gross acquired an option to buy the farm and create a historic site not unlike those already underway at Mount Vernon and Andrew Jackson's Hermitage. Gross's plan never materialized, but it is clear that the birthplace cabin was not a part of his grand design for the farm which strongly suggests that the original cabin no longer existed.⁷ It is most important to note that during the visits of each of these men, local residents were unaware of any Lincoln cabin even in the immediate surrounding area, much less on the farm itself. It is safe to conclude, on the basis of this evidence, that the original birthplace cabin had deteriorated by the time of Lincoln's election in 1860. How then does one explain the magical appearance, thirty-five years later, of "Lincoln's birthplace cabin?" One explanation, and a reasonable one given the peculiar subsequent history of the so-

called birthplace cabin and its owners, is found in the nineteenth century's penchant for humbuggery.

NINETEENTH CENTURY HOAXES

Phineas Taylor (P.T.) Barnum, the self-proclaimed "Prince of Humbugs," was a master at marketing his playful exaggerations to a receptive audience. Born in 1810, he died in 1891, and for sixty of those years explored the heights to which the American public could be taken in by mischievous fabrications. Barnum began his career as a showman in 1835, by purchasing the slave, Joice Heth. [SLIDE #3] Heth's claim to notoriety was that she had attained the improbable age of 161 years and had been in attendance at George Washington's birth. As Barnum described her in one of his many autobiographies, Heth was "a remarkable curiosity, and she looked as if she might have been far older than her age as advertised...her head was covered with a thick bush of grey hair; but she was toothless and totally blind, and her eyes had sunk so deeply in the sockets as to have disappeared altogether." As the slave of Washington's aunt, she "put the first clothes on the infant," and claimed to have raised him.⁹

R.W. Lindsay, a Kentuckian, who formerly owned this wizened centenarian, was able, of course, to produce a bill of sale dated 1727 and signed by Augustine Washington that offered indisputable proof of the former nursemaid's age and history.⁹ Unfortunately, Heth died early in 1836, and an autopsy (to which a large group of spectators attended, paying Barnum a fifty-cent fee) revealed the woman's age as being not over 80 years.¹⁰

It was Barnum's skill at promoting exhibitions such as Joice Heth and later the [SLIDE #4] famed Fejee Mermaid (obtained by sewing the torso of a small monkey to the body of a large fish) that brought him popular renown and incredible wealth. But Barnum was not alone. As one historian of the period has noted, "A variety of evidence attests to the fact that the ancient tradition of slightly deceptive trading had reached something of an art in the American nineteenth century, not least of which is the widespread appearance in fiction and popular humor of the archetypical figure of the confidence man, who elicits a typically mixed response in literature as in life -- horror at the immorality of his chicanery and admiration for the skill with which he carries off the trick."¹¹

Humbuggery in the second half of the century assumed many forms and some, but by no means all, had Barnum associations. On October 16, 1869, workmen digging a well for Stub Newell near Cardiff, New York, discovered [SLIDE #5] a "petrified" stone giant which measured ten and a half feet tall. Newell immediately purchased a tent [SLIDE #6] and began charging admission to the crowds that began arriving from all over the state. The Cardiff Giant, as the stone man became known, in reality, was the creation of George Hull, a cigar manufacturer in Binghamton, New York. After a discussion with a Methodist revival minister about the Biblical phrase "There were giants in the earth in those days," Hull wondered how far people were still willing to believe in giants. So during the summer of

1868, he purchased a large piece of gypsum in Fort Dodge, Iowa and shipped it to Chicago where two marble sculptors created the giant. In November, he took the giant to New York and had it buried on the Newell farm where it remained until the workers found it eleven months later. In November of 1869, the giant was exhumed and [SLIDE #7] moved to Syracuse where George Hull's hoax was revealed. Even so, the curious gypsum giant continued to draw crowds and make money for its proprietors who moved it to Albany and then to New York City.¹²

While the exhibit was in Albany, P.T. Barnum became interested, traveled up the Hudson to visit it, and tried to buy the giant. Unsuccessful, he had a replica made, and when the two hoaxes were displayed only blocks from each other in New York City, Barnum's hoax of a hoax outdrew the original!¹³ Even after George Hull's prank was revealed, the Cardiff Giant continued to attract interest as a number of successive owners [SLIDE #8] exhibited it around the country. The original giant presently resides in peaceful retirement at the Farmers' Museum in Cooperstown, New York.¹⁴ (Barnum apparently decided the petrified giant hoax was worthy of another try, for in 1877 he teamed up with the same George Hull and unearthed the "fossilized" Colorado Giant.)¹⁵

In the 1880s, several enterprising businessmen in New York City decided to play upon the enthusiasm generated by the centennial of the American Revolution by selling "genuine" links

of the famed West Point Chain. During the Revolution, the chain [SLIDE #9] had been stretched across the Hudson at West Point to deny British access to the upper portions of the river. In 1829, however, most of this chain ended up in the West Point Foundry where it was recast into iron cannon rails.¹⁶ [SLIDE #10] With enterprising ingenuity typical of the times, John C.

"Westminster" Abbey, a Manhattan junk dealer, purchased 86 links of late nineteenth century British-made chain, waited a comfortable length of time, and began promoting them during the late 1880s, as newly-discovered links of the real thing. Charles Frederick Gunther acquired [SLIDE #11] most of this chain for his Libby Prison War Museum in Chicago where he also later displayed "Uncle Tom's Original Cabin" and [SLIDE #12] "The Skin of the Snake that tempted Eve."¹⁷

Encouraged by this early success, Westminster Abbey obtained more nineteenth century links and continued to hawk them as pieces of the true chain. A local competitor of Abbey's, Francis Bannerman, bought him out sometime after 1890 and escalated the hoax by publishing a small pamphlet [SLIDE #13] titled "History of the Great Iron Chain Laid Across the Hudson River in 1788, by Order of General George Washington." Bannerman's more extravagant approach to merchandising, which included carving up remaining links into paper weights, allowed him to sell increasingly more chain. Many links can be found today gracing historical societies and museums, including the Chicago Historical Society and the Smithsonian Institution -- although

the Smithsonian later identified its four sections as fraudulent and relegated them to its warehouse in Suitland, Maryland.¹⁸

[SLIDE #14]

Thus, nineteenth century America readily accepted the fraudulent as real. Indeed, it delighted in fakery -- the Barnums, the Hulls, and the Bannermans pervaded the culture of the time. As historian Miles Orvell has observed, "Learning to tell the true from the false, the lie from the truth, learning trust and mistrust, was part of an acculturation process that shows up again and again in nineteenth-century culture."¹⁹ The writings of Poe, Melville (The Confidence Man), James, and Twain are filled with deceit and deception. Hyperbole became commonplace as the American passion for consumer goods led to a world in which the "sham thing was proudly promoted by the manufacturer, and easily accepted by the consumer, as a valid substitute for authenticity."²⁰

THE HOAX BEGINS

Within this context of exaggeration and deception, the promotion of the Lincoln cabin during the 1890s assumes a different complexion. The log cabin that eventually made its way into the memorial building near Hodgenville was, in fact, not identified as the Lincoln birthplace cabin until 1895, eighty-six years after his birth. During the previous year, Alfred W. Dennett, a New York-based entrepreneur, purchased Thomas Lincoln's farm near Hodgenville with plans to develop it into a tourist attraction complete with a large hotel. Dennett

announced to the press that he wanted to attract large numbers of Civil War veterans who would be assembling in Louisville (fifty miles to the north) for a Grand Army of the Republic encampment in the fall of 1895.²¹ The Louisville Courier-Journal article that described Dennett's plans significantly made no mention of a birthplace cabin nor did it suggest that the Lincoln cabin existed elsewhere in the vicinity.²² With the original cabin long since gone, Dennett presumed that some kind of rude cabin would ensure a higher rate of return on his investment, and instructed his agent in Kentucky, the Reverend James W. Bigham, to build a log cabin on the Lincoln farm on the exact spot as the original and with "identical logs that were in the original cabin."²³ Bigham quickly purchased a two-story cabin from a neighboring farm and [SLIDE #15] had the best of its logs re-erected on the Lincoln farm. At Bigham's request, a local photographer named Russell T. Evans made a photograph of the structure which was widely published. Significantly, the photograph became accepted by the public as a picture of the actual cabin in which Lincoln was born.

The Reverend Bigham apparently looked upon the cabin as his ticket to wealth as he reportedly announced that he was "going to make a barrel of money with the cabin."²⁴ His exorbitant admission charge and his "amateur promotional ineptitude," however, prompted few veterans to make the journey from Louisville to Hodgenville.²⁵ Disappointed -- but not deterred -- the two opportunists next laid plans to exhibit what they were

now calling the "Lincoln Birthplace Cabin" [SLIDE #16] at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition in Nashville in 1897. To enhance the exhibit, they purchased another old log cabin claimed to be the birthplace of Jefferson Davis.²⁶ (Davis was born in 1811 near Fairview, Kentucky, roughly 150 miles southwest of Hodgenville.) When the exposition opened, the two cabins were found in the "Vanity Fair" section which devoted itself not to dignified commemoration and displays, but to amusements such as the Giant See Saw, Chinese Village, Phantom Swing, Wild Animal Arena, and the Colorado Gold Mine! The official catalog of the exposition admonished all visitors to see these two "really" historic houses [SLIDE #17] of the West, which for the occasion had been furnished by Dennett with several "authentic" Lincoln chairs.²⁷

While the Nashville Banner expressed a small degree of disbelief, the catalog assured the visitor that Dennett had proof that both cabins were the "genuine and original homes of the two great men."²⁸ (One is reminded of Joice Heth; she too came well documented.) Many years later, a newspaper reporter remembered asking Reverend Bigham about the authenticity of the Hodgenville cabin. Bigham's disingenuous reply was "Lincoln was born in a log cabin, weren't he? Well, one cabin is as good as another."²⁹ Following the fair, Dennett shipped the logs of both cabins to New York City and stored them in the Bowery.

Before his departure from Nashville, Dennett met Frederick Thompson who had built and later managed many of the attractions for the Nashville exposition. (Thompson, [SLIDE #18] in

partnership with Elmer Dundy, was to become one of the leading showmen and theatrical producers in the country and is remembered largely for designing, constructing, and operating [SLIDE #19] Luna Park at Coney Island in 1903 -- at the time, the largest amusement park in the world.)³⁰ Thompson agreed to lease both cabins for the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo.

Designed to foster visions of Pan-American harmony and illustrate the United States' cultural progress during the nineteenth century, the exposition's midway contained ethnographic displays in the form of living "villages" from Africa, Mexico, the Philippines, Alaska, Hawaii, and Japan. Amid its carnival rides of the giant see-saw and the rotating aerocycle and sandwiched between "Bonner-The Educated Horse" and Esau, a well-trained chimpanzee who was promoted as the "Missing Link," was the Old Plantation. Representing the "South be'fo de Wah," this exhibit dissolutely featured "150 ...Old Uncles and Aunties, formerly slaves, living in the genuine [SLIDE #20] cabins in which Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis were born." The meager furnishings added by Dennett for the Nashville fair were dramatically expanded by Thompson and Dundy into complete furnishings for both cabins.³¹ [SLIDE #21]

A privately written and published guide to the Midway declared the Lincoln cabin authentic because the sign next to the door plainly announced that it was. The guide's author was reminded, however, of Mark Twain confronting myriad pieces of the "true cross" in [SLIDE #22] European cathedrals. "He did not

question the authenticity of the relics, for each plainly bore the announcement that it was a part of the real cross from Calvary, but Twain said that after awhile he wondered a little how Christ was able to carry all those pieces in one cross."³²

Shortly after William McKinley's assassination at the Pan-American and the closing of the exposition, Thompson shipped the two cabins to Coney Island where he and Dundy planned on incorporating at least the Lincoln cabin into their Luna Park enterprise. But alas, during the journey to Coney Island the logs of the cabins became intermingled, and when the Lincoln cabin was erected in 1903 for a local benefit it was revealed that the structure contained logs from both the Lincoln and the Davis cabins!!!³³ While the "Lincoln and Davis Cabin" (as it briefly became known), temporarily resided in a shed at Luna Park, Thompson and Dundy apparently decided against its public display. At some point prior to 1906, all 142 pieces (from both cabins) were moved to College Point, Long Island.³⁴

THE FARM PRESERVED

By this time, the Lincoln farm in Hodgenville had passed into the hands of Robert Collier, publisher of Collier's Weekly. Collier [SLIDE #23] created the Lincoln Farm Association to raise funds to clean and protect the farm, move the cabin to the site, and build a museum.³⁵ To provide for the preservation and protection of the birthplace cabin, the Lincoln Farm Association (having among its Board of Directors Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Joseph H. Choate, Samuel L. Clemens, Ida Tarbell, and Clarence H.

McKay) selected John Russell Pope to design a memorial building in which the cabin would be enshrined.³⁶ As one of the premier architects in Washington, D.C., Pope later designed the Jefferson Memorial, National Archives building, and National Gallery of Art.

Having purchased the farm, Collier tracked the Lincoln logs to [SLIDE #24] Long Island, acquired them for \$1,000, and had them hauled by wagon to New York City. [SLIDE #25] (By this time, any connection between the logs and Jefferson Davis had been long forgotten.) There they were loaded on [SLIDE #26] a flatcar decorated with red, white, and blue bunting and a portrait of Lincoln. Guarded by a contingent of the Kentucky militia -- made necessary because of souvenir collectors -- the 142 logs began a triumphant return to Kentucky with stops in major cities.³⁷

As the logs were being readied for their return to Kentucky, the Association engaged a Hodgenville law firm to determine the authenticity of the cabin. The firm took affidavits from twelve local residents, but only four related to the cabin -- and they contradicted one another. (The remaining eight dealt with the farm only.) The testimony of three residents supported the story that a cabin on the former Lincoln farm had been moved to a neighboring farm in 1860 and used there for various purposes until purchased in 1895 by Dennett and returned to its original site. All three testified that at the time of its removal in 1860, the cabin was well known locally as the Lincoln

birthplace.³⁸ The lawyers disregarded the testimony of a local judge who, in addition to being born on a portion of the Lincoln farm in 1836 and selling it to Dennett in 1894, argued that the cabin was relatively new when moved in 1860 and therefore had no association with Abraham Lincoln.³⁹ The law firm transmitted its findings to Collier laden more with patriotism and reverence than with dispassionate analysis: "Many more witnesses could be had testifying substantially to the facts, but this would be merely cumulative and we close the testimony with the submission of the facts to the public, believing that the American people will not be so unreasonable or critical as to demand more conclusive evidence of the birthplace of this great American."⁴⁰

The three affidavits constitute the best evidence linking Dennett and Bigham's 1895 cabin to Abraham Lincoln's birth. But the local residents disagreed not only on the origin of the cabin, but also on its location on the Lincoln farm. And their testimony is not supported by any other piece of evidence. As a whole, with their conflicting stories, second-hand knowledge, and elusive plausibility, the affidavits are justly suspect. If the Lincoln cabin had been removed in 1860, it surely would have been widely known in such a small place as Hodgenville and at least one of those looking for the cabin would have noted its relocation to a neighboring farm.

Shortly thereafter, Robert Collier conveyed the farm and the cabin to the Lincoln Farm Association with a very cautiously worded deed. Collier referred to the cabin as "the log cabin

called the Abraham Lincoln log cabin, and which has been and is now exhibited as such, and which was sold to me...and said to be the log cabin or part of the same in which Abraham Lincoln was born."⁴¹ Collier's wording suggests he may not have been fully convinced of the cabin's authenticity.

Arriving in Louisville in June, 1906, the logs were erected [SLIDE #27] in a local park. But because the Farm Association had unknowingly purchased the logs to two cabins, the structure put up in Louisville's Central Park was oversized. It now had a front and a back door, and two windows instead of the usual one -- but the windows were on the rear of the cabin instead of the front! Nevertheless, the cabin was again so popular that an armed guard had to prevent visitors from chipping off pieces.⁴² After a week, the cabin was dismantled and placed in storage. Three years later, its supporters moved the logs to [SLIDE #28] Hodgenville for the laying of the memorial building's cornerstone.

Concerns about souvenir collectors were well founded. Taking pieces from historic sites had become a popular nineteenth century pastime, and cutting walking canes from such pieces an especially common occurrence. The promoters of Gettysburg battlefield as a memorial had, for instance, encouraged the distribution and sale of canes cut from trees on the battlefield.⁴³ Among National Park Service museum collections are canes made of wood taken from sites associated with Lincoln -- from a front-yard tree of his Springfield home; from the Lincoln-

Berry general store in New Salem, Illinois; and, improbably, from a "black walnut rail split by Lincoln in 1830."⁴⁴

The centennial of Lincoln's birth, February 12, 1909, was marked by celebrations including everything from 26-mile marathon races to the release of the Lincoln penny. With less than a month left in his presidency, [SLIDE #29] Theodore Roosevelt braved raw Kentucky weather to praise Lincoln at the laying of the cornerstone for the memorial building. The President spoke of Lincoln's personal strengths, his lofty ideals, and his "indomitable" resolve. The large crowd, [SLIDE #30] braving occasional wind-driven drizzle, stood patiently throughout the one and three-quarter hour ceremony.⁴⁵ Robert Todd Lincoln, by then a successful railroad executive in his mid-60s, chose not to attend the Hodgenville observance. Instead he joined William Jennings Bryan and the French and British ambassadors at a tribute in Springfield, Illinois, site of his father's home and tomb.⁴⁶

Following the 1909 ceremony, the cabin was yet again dismantled and returned to Louisville to await the completion of John Russell Pope's monument. But the ordeal of the Lincoln logs was not over. When the [SLIDE #31] memorial building was finished in 1911 and the logs returned to Hodgenville, the cabin proved to be too large to allow visitors ease of movement within the monument. Pope's solution was to alter the cabin to fit the memorial. He simply trimmed the logs and reduced the cabin three or four feet in width and one or two feet in length! Thus

miniaturized, [SLIDE #32] the cabin was in proper proportion to the monument's interior dimensions." It was in this reduced state that the cabin passed into the hands of the Governor of Kentucky, then to the War Department, and finally to the National Park Service. Today, the cabin is visited annually by several hundred thousand respectful visitors.

THE CONTROVERSY

Although the National Park Service questioned the authenticity of the cabin shortly after it began administering the site, not until the late 1940s did anyone publicly challenge the cabin's origins.⁴⁸ Roy Hays' 1948 article titled "Is the Lincoln Birthplace Cabin Authentic?" prompted, as might be imagined, a flurry of research activity within the National Park Service. In 1949, the park's historian, Benjamin Davis, produced a detailed study titled "Report of Research on the Traditional Abraham Lincoln Birthplace Cabin." Through deed research that carefully dismantled the local tradition linking the cabin to the Sinking Springs farm, Davis concluded that any connection between the cabin and Lincoln would have to be completely "accidental."⁴⁹ To ensure that every avenue had been explored, the Director of the National Park Service, Newton Drury, asked three Lincoln scholars, Paul Angle, J.G. Randall, and Louis A. Warren, to examine the evidence and offer their opinion on the cabin's authenticity. Angle, of the Chicago Historical Society, and Randall, from the University of Illinois, strongly argued that the enshrined cabin possessed no Lincoln antecedents. Randall

wrote the Director that "I am convinced...that the cabin is not authentic and should not be presented as original. I have nothing to add to his [Hays'] article and no reason to doubt his conclusions. The birthplace site has been absolutely identified, but neither the structure nor the logs that constitute it are original."⁵⁰

Louis Warren, Director of the Lincoln National Life Foundation, naturally thought otherwise. But then, the local tradition for the cabin's authenticity had found its fullest expression in Warren's own 1926 book, Lincoln's Parentage & Childhood: A History of the Kentucky Lincolns Supported by Documentary Evidence. Warren, a Lincoln authority and long-time editor of "Lincoln Lore" a weekly newsletter of the Lincoln National Life Insurance Company passionately wanted the logs to be original, but in fact, based his argument on the patriotic and romantic symbolism of the cabin. [SLIDE #33] "For nearly thirty years," he wrote, "the cabin has made a positive inspirational contribution to an ever increasing number of pilgrims who pay homage at this American shrine....It does not appear to this reviewer that additional evidence of sufficient importance has been presented to prove that no logs in the present structure can be associated with the original birthplace of Abraham Lincoln."⁵¹

Summarizing the issue for Director Drury, Charles Porter, a Washington-based National Park Service historian, discounted Warren's sentimental argument, the Lincoln Farm Association's ambiguous affidavits, and the exaggerated claims of the

"charlatans" Dennett and Bigham. He concluded with what became the Service's official position: "There simply isn't any trustworthy recorded evidence for the authenticity of the cabin. In view of the mountebank character of Dennett and Bigham, the traditions springing from them are certainly not to be trusted."⁵²

THE CABIN MEMORIALIZED

From the early 1950s, the National Park Service has attempted to clarify the issue for visitors by posting several signs within the memorial [SLIDE #34] and referring to the cabin as the "traditional birthplace." The distinction between authentic and traditional, however, is largely lost on a worshipful public eager for a glimpse of the deified president's humble origins. And in spite of the cabin's amusement park beginnings, it remains a powerful symbol of Abraham Lincoln and a popular shrine to his memory. The small National Park Service site is visited by 300,000 tourists annually.

To ensure that the log cabin tradition continued, at least two full-scale replicas of the cabin have been constructed. In 1920, Louis A. Warren, who championed the cabin long after all other Lincoln students had given up on its legitimacy, arranged for the Lincoln National Life Insurance Company to erect and donate to the city of Fort Wayne, Indiana, [SLIDE #35] a copy of the cabin that still stands in Foster Park.⁵³ Four years later, Mary Bowditch Forbes, descendant of Robert Bennet Forbes of China trade fame and fortune, had a replica constructed [SLIDE #36] in her back yard in Milton, Massachusetts.⁵⁴ Both these structures

were replicas of the miniaturized cabin in the memorial building and not of the larger 1895 version or the later Lincoln/Davis cabin.

Unquestionably, the image of Lincoln and his birthplace log cabin have been etched in the consciousness of American children since the 1920s -- especially through the availability of toy "Lincoln Logs." John Lloyd Wright, son of the famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright, thought of the idea while watching his father oversee the construction of Tokyo's Imperial Hotel in 1916. Wright patented the toy logs in 1920 and manufactured them until 1943 when his J. L. Wright Company merged with Playskool which has been producing them ever since. The design book which Wright provided with each set of Lincoln Logs contained, of course, instructions for building a model of the enshrined birthplace cabin. Parenthetically, it also contained designs for Uncle Tom's Cabin.⁵⁵

A product of the "Midway Age," Alfred Dennett's counterfeit cabin outlived its amusement park origins and with the passage of time has become one of the nation's most venerable relics. For the past eighty years [SLIDE #37] the cabin has occupied its pink granite reliquary, a true survivor, not of American antiquity, but of an imaginative humbug that became imbedded in the firmament of the country's mythic and symbolic past. Although not a genuine Lincoln artifact, the cabin is nonetheless significant for its role in perpetuating the image of Lincoln as the martyred president and of his dramatic rise from poverty to

the White House. Our collective heritage is as much memory as fact, as much myth as reality, as much perception as preservation. The public's perception of the Lincoln cabin is important to the nation's image and an indispensable part of the nation's ritualistic public tribute to its humble origins. It is symbolic of a need for an accessible past and a willingness to embrace myths that are too popular to be diminished by the truth.

DWIGHT T. PITCAITHLEY

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

WASHINGTON, D.C.

NOTES

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3. There is no definitive evidence on the fate of the cabin. In 1906, several Hodgenville residents recalled that the Lincoln farm contained the ruins of a small round-log cabin in 1860, but identified a more recent cabin as the one in which Lincoln was born. The conflicting recollections of these individuals, however, makes their testimony suspect. Benjamin H. Davis, "A Report on The Abraham Lincoln Tradition Birthplace Cabin," typescript, Hodgenville, Kentucky: Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site, 1948.
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5. John B. Rowbotham to William H. Herndon, June 24, 1865. Herndon-Weik Collection, Library of Congress. Quoted in Benjamin H. Davis, "Report of Research on the Traditional Abraham Lincoln Birthplace Cabin," typescript, Hodgenville, Kentucky: Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site, 1949, pp. 23-24.
6. Philadelphia The Press, September 1, 1865, p. 1.
7. Roy Hays, "Is the Lincoln Birthplace Cabin Authentic?" The Abraham Lincoln Quarterly, V (September 1948), p. 129.
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12. Barbara Franco, "The Cardiff Giant: A Hundred Year Old Hoax," New York History (October 1969), pp. 421-440.

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14. Franco, "The Cardiff Giant," p. 440.
15. Saxon, P.T. Barnum, p. 269-270.
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17. Clement M. Silvestro, "The Candy Man's Mixed Bag," Chicago History, 11 (Fall 1972).
18. Diamont, Chaining the Hudson, p. 192, 203.
19. Orvell, The Real Thing, p. 58.
20. Orvell, The Real Thing, p. 49.
21. Gloria Peterson, An Administrative History of Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site, Hodgenville, Kentucky, n.p.: National Park Service, 1968, p. 11.
22. Louisville Courier-Journal, March 26, 1894, p. 5.
23. Larue County Herald, August 29, 1895, quoted in Benjamin H. Davis, "Report of Research," p. 1.
24. Davis, "A Report on The Abraham Lincoln Traditional Birthplace Cabin," p. 6.
25. Davis, "Report of Research," p. 3.
26. Roy Hays, "Is The Lincoln Birthplace Cabin Authentic?" pp. 136-137.
27. Official Catalogue, Tennessee Centennial, p. 183.
28. Ibid.; Nashville Banner, May 1, 1897, p. 14.
29. David Rankin Barbee, "Lincoln Cabin Hoax," Washington Post, October 11, 1948, p. 8.
30. New York Times, June 7, 1919, p. 13; The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1967, pp. 105-106.
31. Official Catalogue and Guide Book to the Pan-American Exposition, With Maps of Exposition and Illustrations, Buffalo: Charles Ahrhart, 1901, p. 45.

32. Richard H. Barry, Snap Shots on the Midway of the Pan-Am Expo: Including Characteristic Scenes and Pastimes of Every Country There Represented: The Celebrated Oriental, African, Hawaiian, Mexican and Indian Dancers and Dancing Scenes, the Bull Fight, Camel and Donkey Processions, Indian Battles and the Odd, Novel and Spicy Attractions of this Most Attractive Portion of the Exposition, with Vivid Pen Descriptions, Buffalo: Robert Allan Reid, 1901, pp. 125-128. For an analytical assessment of the fair see, Robert W. Rydell, All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 126-153.
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