

Emily Hanks Loomis (1837-1911)

Emily Hanks Loomis was born October 18, 1837 on a farm in Hickory Point Township, four miles northwest of Decatur, Illinois in Macon County. She was the fifth of eight children born to John Hanks and Susan Wilson Hanks. Emily, like her father, was a cousin of Abraham Lincoln. They were related to Lincoln through his real mother, Nancy Hanks Lincoln.

The Hanks', like the Lincolns, were from Kentucky. Emily's father moved his wife and two children from Kentucky to Illinois in the fall of 1828. They first settled along the Sangamon River. However, he was unable to "break the thick prairie sod with the ox or horse power at hand" and was forced to move to land that was easier to farm.¹ So in 1829, he chose nearby Hickory Point Township for their new home. After building a cabin and settling on this new land, John wrote to his relatives back in Indiana telling them that they should come to Illinois. In this letter he told his family about the "fine woods and prairies," encouraging them to "pull up stakes and come to Illinois."² One of those relatives he wrote to was Lincoln's father, Thomas.

John had lived near or with the Lincolns in Spencer County, Indiana when he moved there in 1822. This is how John got to know the young Abraham Lincoln who was just ten years old when John came to Indiana. John spent four years total in Indiana, working as a farm hand, doing odd jobs, and also as a rail splitter. Some of this work he did with young Abe. Then in 1826 he moved back to Kentucky where he married his wife Susan. In 1828 John and his family moved to Illinois by way of Spencer County, Indiana. Thomas Lincoln told John to write to him and let him know what kind of "country he found and if it was better than Indiana." If it was, then he and his family would move to Illinois.³ John's letter did entice Thomas and his family to come. So in March of 1830 Thomas Lincoln and twelve other members of his family loaded their wagons and began the journey to Illinois. It took them two weeks to travel 225 miles to Macon County. Lincoln had just turned 21 at this time.

Lincoln and his family settled about 10 miles southwest of Decatur in Macon County. They lived in John Hanks's first cabin, located on the Sangamon River, until they could build their own. During the time that Lincoln lived in Macon County he worked as a farm hand and split wooden rails with John Hanks. Hanks and Lincoln chopped innumerable cords of wood and divided the profits equally between them.⁴ After a year, Lincoln moved to Sangamon County but continued working with Hanks splitting rails and also made several flat boat trips to New Orleans with Hanks to deliver goods.

Emily was not born yet when Lincoln lived in Macon County. However, while Lincoln was a lawyer on the Eighth Judicial Circuit, he would often visit or stay with the Hanks' while he was in Decatur when court was in session. Emily would have gotten to know Lincoln when he visited or stayed with her family during his days traveling the Circuit. Emily also would have grown up hearing her father, aunts, and uncles telling

¹ Edwin David Davis. *The Lincolns, The Hanks, and Macon County*. (Springfield: Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society, 1932) 133-134

² Edwin Davis. *The Lincolns, The Hanks, and Macon County*, 65

³ "Death of Uncle Johnny Hanks," *Decatur Weekly Republican*, July 4, 1889.

⁴ Michael Burlingame. *Abraham Lincoln: A Life, Volume 1*. (Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 2008) 49

stories about Lincoln over the years. The Hanks family loved to pass down stories about their association with Lincoln in his younger years. Where as some members of the Hanks family may have been guilty of embellishment, Emily's father, John, was considered to be generally truthful in his reminiscences of Lincoln.

In her later years, Emily would recount some of the stories she grew up hearing from her father. On one occasion, she was interviewed by *The Daily Pantagraph* in Bloomington in February of 1909. During that interview she told some of her favorite stories from her childhood about Lincoln. One such story was about Lincoln's clothing. She remembered that when he was a young man, "he was not one of the five best dressed in the country. One article of his clothing consisted of suspenders made from bed ticking and fastened to his trousers with wooden pegs."⁵ Her father also loved to tell another story about how Lincoln would barter for clothing with Hanks women who could weave because he had no money to pay for new clothing.⁶ Especially prized to Lincoln were pants called jeans made of a material called linsey-woolsey (flax linen and wool). He would split 400 wooden rails for each yard of this homespun material. It would take 3 yards of linsey-woolsey to make one pair of pants for him. The Hanks' often called him "Long Legged Abe" because of this.

Another story Emily's father was fond of telling was about the fact that he was the only family member invited to Lincoln's wedding, (which is thought to be genuinely true). In October of 1842 Hanks received a letter from Lincoln inviting him to his wedding on November fourth of that same year. In the letter Lincoln said that he was to be married to "Miss [Mary] Todd and I hope you will come over. Be sure to be on deck by early candle light. Yours, A. Lincoln."⁷

Emily was also proud of the fact that her father was the only Hanks family member who voted for Lincoln in the presidential election of 1860. Up until that point, all Hanks family members including John had voted against Lincoln in prior elections. However when Lincoln announced his candidacy for President in the election of 1860, Emily's father left the Democratic Party to vote for Lincoln as a Republican. For the rest of his life, he said this was a decision he never regretted.

John Hanks was a staunch supporter of Lincoln particularly when Lincoln was seeking the nomination of his party in early 1860. Hanks attended the Illinois State Republican Convention in Decatur and when he arrived at the hall, he carried in a banner between two rails. He said that these rails were ones which he and Lincoln had made during their rail splitting days. On the banner, it stated that "Abraham Lincoln, the Rail Splitter candidate for President in 1860. Two rails from a lot of 3,000 made in 1830 by John Hanks and Abe Lincoln."⁸ The crowd went wild. It was said that Lincoln then stood up and examined the rails. Lincoln stated he knew nothing about this, but added in a jocular tone that his "dear old friend, John Hanks, will remember I used to shirk splitting all the hard cuts. But if those two are honey locust rails, I have no doubt I cut and split them."⁹ The crowd went wild again and thus the rail splitter image of Lincoln was born. Hanks also made "genuine" Lincoln canes out of more rail fence pieces made by Lincoln and

⁵ "Second Cousin of Lincoln: Mrs. E.I. Loomis Recollections." *The Daily Pantagraph*, February 6, 1909.

⁶ Burlingame, 49

⁷ Davis, 135

⁸ Davis, 136

⁹ Burlingame, 598

sold them for \$1.00 each. Emily herself also had a piece of a “genuine” Lincoln split rail which was her most prized possession. It was a picture frame made out of one of those rails.

One final story which Emily was fond of telling was about her father accompanying Lincoln to his inauguration in 1861. Emily said that the way Lincoln dressed was very plain overall. Hanks had just gotten a “brand new suit of [grey] jeans.”¹⁰ Lincoln saw this suit and wanted one just like it for himself. Lincoln was finally persuaded, after some argument, to get a black suit that would be more befitting for such an occasion.¹¹

On December 28, 1860 the same year which Lincoln had been elected President of the United States, Emily married a school teacher from Decatur by the name of Elijah I. Loomis. Elijah was born in Herkimez County, New York on July 26, 1832. After living in both Michigan and Ohio, he came to Decatur where he took up teaching school, a career which spanned twenty-five years. He taught in both Macon and Livingston counties. Emily and her family returned to Decatur in 1880, (after living in Livingston County for about ten years) and lived there until they moved to Bloomington, Illinois in 1888. There, her husband went into the Livery business with their son-in-law, William Mahaffey, (who had married their only daughter, Minnie). While living in Bloomington, Elijah was also a township tax collector. The couple also had three sons: Alexandria, Jesse, (who died at a young age), and John, who died of tuberculosis in 1910.

Emily led a relatively quiet life other than the occasional interview by *The Daily Pantagraph* about her family memories about Abraham Lincoln. One such interview was published on February 6, 1909 around the time of Lincoln’s birthday. Emily was also a member of the Congregational Church and was well known and liked by all in Bloomington.

Sadly, on Sunday, February 12, 1911 at the age of 73, Emily died quietly at her home located at 707 E. Douglas Street in Bloomington. For the past year, she had been in failing health, but it was said that she did not let that keep her down remaining active in her home regardless of her illnesses. She was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery. Less than a year later, her husband Elijah would follow her in death and was buried next to her.

By: Candace Summers, 2009

¹⁰ Davis, *The Lincolns, The Hanks, and Macon County*, 138

¹¹ “Second Cousin of Lincoln: Mrs. E.I. Loomis Recollections.”