

Emily Hanks Loomis (1837-1911)

Emily Hanks called Abraham Lincoln “Cousin Abraham.” Emily was born on October 18, 1837 in Macon County, Illinois, after her family settled in Illinois. Her grandfather and Nancy Hanks, Lincoln’s mother, (who had died when he was seven) were brother and sister. The Hanks, like the Lincolns, were from Kentucky. Both families moved to Indiana from Kentucky, and this is where John, Emily’s father, came to know Abraham who was then ten years old.

John married and moved on to Illinois. He wrote to his family, including Thomas Lincoln, Abraham’s father, of the “fine woods and prairies” and telling them that they should “pull up stakes and come to Illinois.” The Lincolns came and stayed that winter in John Hanks’ first cabin on the Sangamon River in Macon County. While there, Abraham Lincoln, who was just 21, worked as a farm hand and split wooden rails for fences with John Hanks. Hanks and Lincoln chopped innumerable cords of wood and divided the profits equally between each other. After a year, Lincoln moved to Sangamon County, but continued working with Hanks splitting rails and making several flat boat trips with him to New Orleans delivering goods.

When Lincoln became a lawyer and had moved to Springfield, he would often visit or stay with the Hanks while court was in session in Decatur. In later years, the Hanks family loved to tell stories about their memories of Lincoln in his younger years. Emily, John Hanks’ daughter, would certainly have remembered Lincoln from his visits and these stories. Years later, she shared these stories with *The Daily Pantagraph*.

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.” Her father had said that Lincoln would also barter for clothing with Hanks women who could weave because he had no money to pay. Especially prized to Lincoln were pants made of linsey-woolsey, a material of flax linen and wool. He would split 400 wooden rails for each yard of this homespun material. Because he was so tall, it would take three yards of linsey-woolsey to make one pair of pants for him.

Emily’s father was particularly proud of the fact that he was the only member of the family invited to Lincoln’s wedding. It was a small wedding in Mary’s sister’s parlor. John Hanks received a letter from Lincoln saying he was to be married “to Miss Todd and I hope you will come over. Be sure to be on deck by early candle light. Yours, A. Lincoln.”

Until the election of 1860, none of the Hanks who were Democrats, ever voted for Lincoln. But when Lincoln announced his candidacy for President, Emily’s father became a Republican. He said it was a decision he never regretted. He attended the State Republican Convention in Decatur which would nominate Lincoln. He arrived carrying a banner between two rails. John Hanks said these rails were ones which he and Lincoln had made during their rail splitting days. The banner proclaimed “Abraham

Lincoln, the Rail Splitter Candidate for President in 1860. The crowd went wild. It was said that Lincoln then stood up and examined the rails. He said, 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.” 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 sold them for \$1 each. Emily always treasured a picture frame she had made from “genuine” Lincoln rail.

Emily also liked to tell the story of her father accompanying Lincoln to his inauguration in 1861. Emily said that Lincoln dressed very plainly overall. John Hanks had just bought a new gray suit. Lincoln saw it and wanted one just like it for himself. He was finally persuaded by Hanks, after some argument, that a black suit would be more fitting for the occasion.

Late the same year Lincoln was elected, Emily married a school teacher from Decatur named Elijah Loomis. They had four children. Loomis, originally from New York, taught in Macon and Livingston Counties for over 25 years. In 1888, the family moved to Bloomington where Elijah went into the Livery business with his son-in-law. While living in Bloomington, Emily shared her memories of Lincoln in interviews in *The Daily Pantagraph*. She became a member of the Congregational Church and was said to be “well known and liked by all in Bloomington.” She died in 1911 at the age of 73.

Discussion Question: What facts or qualities can you learn about Abraham Lincoln from Emily’s stories?