

In the Spotlight: Illinois frontier shaped Lincoln's life

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Human tragedy touched him early in life. He saw an infant brother die. At nine he was at his mother's side when she passed away. And at 14, his 17-year-old sister died in childbirth.

As president, he wrote a letter to a child who had lost her father in the war. "In this sad world of ours, sorrow comes to all; and, to the young, it comes with bitterest agony, because it takes them unawares. ... I have had experience enough to know what I say."

The letter reveals the depth of Lincoln's sympathy and enduring compassion for his fellow man. He learned it in childhood on the American frontier.

Survival in the back woods of America required almost constant physical labor. And so at the age of eight Lincoln started swinging an ax, plowing fields, planting crops and chopping wood. There was little time for school. Consequently, he received less than 12 months of formal education. If he were to be educated, he had to do it on his own.

Determined to improve himself, he mastered reading, spelling and basic numerical operations. Since he didn't have paper, he wrote and practiced on boards, then shaved them off to write again.

But to be knowledgeable and educated without virtue only makes for a wicked man with smarts. Truthfulness, honesty and trustworthiness were what people expected from one another. Their religion dictated it and their prairie culture demanded it. Indeed, their very survival and lives depended upon it. And Lincoln acquired those virtues; they became the core of his character.

After fulfilling his obligations to his father, he left home and took up residence in New Salem at age 21. He arrived penniless, but his wealth was in his character, and his word had become his bond.

Illinois was seething with politics. New Salem served as his political launching pad. And so a new politician entered the arena promising the people the only things he could claim: honest service and hard work.

The rest is history. And that man - known for truthfulness, honesty, and trustworthiness - who remade America was made on the American frontier that we now call Illinois.

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