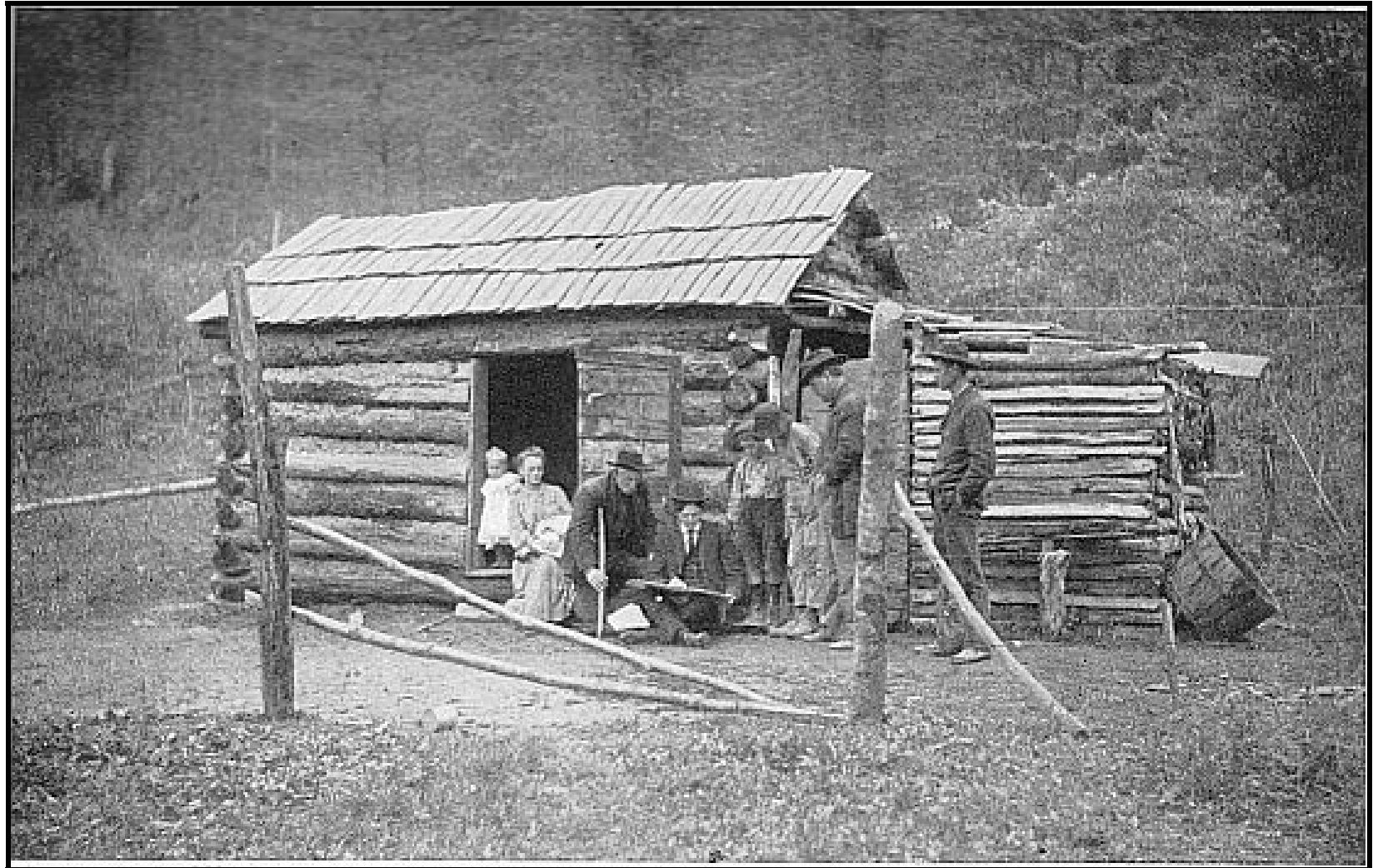


Western Farmers



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Western Farmers

Even before the American Revolutionary War ended and the British prohibition against crossing the Appalachian Mountains was removed, thousands of pioneer families moved west. Most were seeking new land on which to carve out farms for their families. Others wanted to slice into the lucrative fur trade that the French had exploited for so many years. Improved economic opportunity was part of every pioneer's motivation.

The Lincolns were one such pioneer family, moving from Virginia to Kentucky (1782), then on to Indiana (1816) and finally settling permanently in Illinois (1830). Life in the west was anything but easy. There were few maintained roads, towns were few and far between, the largest being Cincinnati near the southwest corner of Ohio and New Orleans about 120 miles from the mouth of the Mississippi River. Frontier families moved themselves and their possessions with wagons along dirt paths or floated down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers until they reached their desired location. By 1820, 2 million people lived west of the Appalachian Mountains.

As more Americans flowed west, wilderness areas became US territories and territories became states. Westerners were a unique mix of northern and southern cultures and attitudes. Most western farmers living north of the Ohio River believed in hard work and free labor; they wanted the new territories and states to be closed to slavery. Most supported Henry Clay's Whig Party as it called on the Federal government to fund

"internal improvements" such as canals and roads. Getting one's products to markets in the east was an economic necessity for folks in the west. Westerners were in favor of high protective tariffs and many were "War Hawks" during the War of 1812. Removing the British from forts around the Great Lakes and subduing Indians who were friendly with the British seemed logical to them.

Danger seemed everywhere. As each successive wave of migrants moved further west, confrontations with Native Americans grew more contentious; Lincoln's own grandfather was killed by Indians in Kentucky before Abraham was born. Disease and the lack of competent medical care was an unfortunate, commonplace threat. Lincoln's mother died in 1818 of "milk sickness," his sister died in 1828 giving birth, and his fiancée died of "brain fever" in 1835. Lincoln himself was kicked in the head by a horse when he was nine years old.

Life in the west was difficult; log houses, dirt floors, and hard work around the farm. Most young people did not attend school. Abraham Lincoln attended three different schools, never attending for more than a few months. Horse racing and wrestling were popular sporting events. Church meetings, quilting bees, and cornhuskings were reasons to gather with friends and family. Few families had the comforts and luxuries Americans had back east. This was the life that Abraham Lincoln knew all too well.