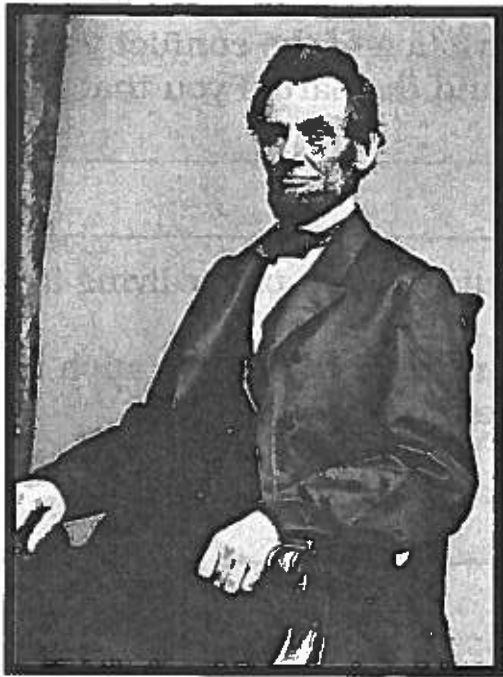


A Backwoods Boy

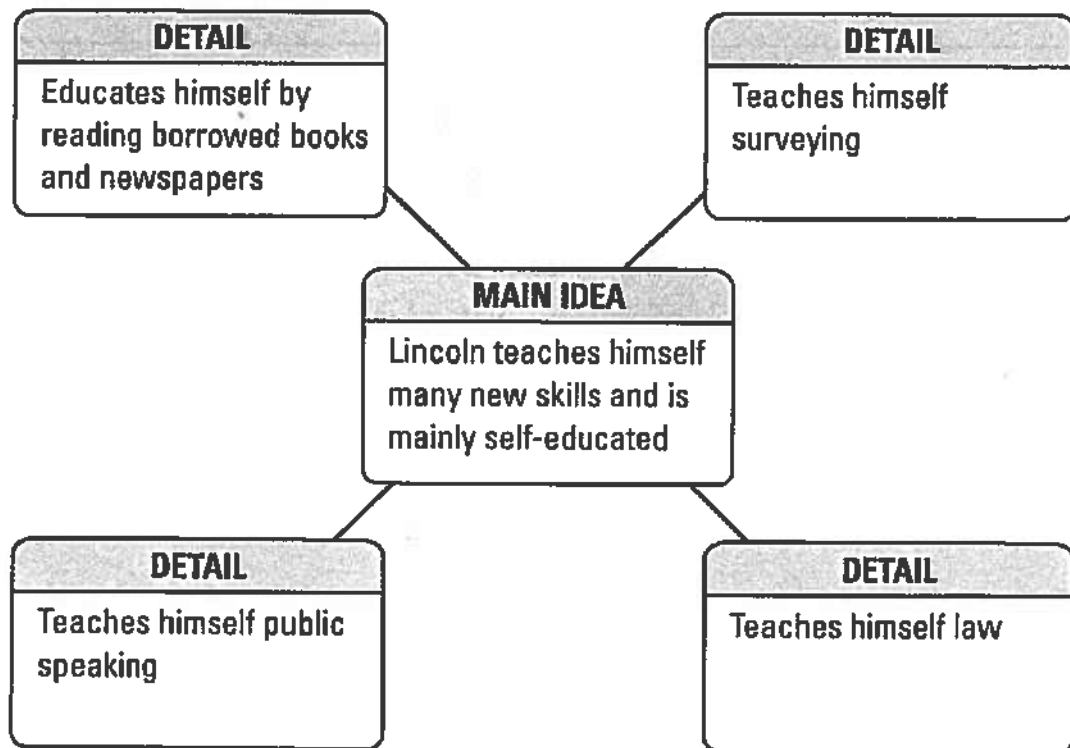
Russell Freedman



Summary

"A Backwoods Boy" is a factual historical account of Abraham Lincoln's youth. It follows Lincoln's family as they move from home to home. It tells about Lincoln's lack of formal education. Poor but hardworking, Lincoln tries and fails at many different jobs before going into politics. He even loses his first election. Lincoln continues to better himself, always reading and teaching himself new skills. He teaches himself law so he will have a paying career once he does get elected to the Illinois legislature. By the end of this historical account, Lincoln has been elected to a second term in the legislature. He has also accepted a job as junior partner in a law office.

Visual Summary



PREPARE TO READ

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Historical Account

A historical account tells about real people and events of the past.

A historical account presents facts. Read the following passage from "A Backwoods Boy." Then, write four facts on the lines below:

Lincoln arrived in New Salem in July 1831 wearing a faded cotton shirt and blue jeans too short for his long legs—a "friendless, uneducated, penniless boy," as he later described himself. He tended the counter at Denton Offutt's store and slept in a room at the back.

FACT 1: _____

FACT 2: _____

FACT 3: _____

FACT 4: _____

READING STRATEGY

Determining Main Ideas

The main ideas are the core of a piece of writing. To determine main ideas, look at how the details work together to point to a big idea. For example, read the following paragraph. Notice that the first sentence seems to express the main idea of the paragraph. Identify other details and write them on the lines below:

With his gifts for swapping stories and making friends, Lincoln fit easily into the life of the village. He showed off his skill with an ax, competed in footraces, and got along with everyone from Mentor Graham, the schoolmaster, to Jack Armstrong, the leader of a rowdy gang called the Clary's Grove boys.

MAIN IDEA: Lincoln fit easily into the life of the village.

DETAIL: _____

DETAIL: _____

DETAIL: _____

◆ Culture Note

Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) was the 16th president of the United States. He led the nation during the Civil War (1861–1865). Under his leadership, the North successfully fought to preserve the Union after the Southern states had formed the Confederacy and seceded (quit the Union). In 1863, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which ended slavery in the Southern states. Shortly after the end of the war in 1865, Lincoln was assassinated.

◆ Literary Analysis

Underline the sentences in the bracketed paragraph that state facts.



A Backwoods Boy

Russell Freedman

Most people at some time have had the experience of trying hard to accomplish something and not succeeding at it. Even Abraham Lincoln, one of America's greatest presidents, tried and failed at many different jobs before going into politics. And even then, he lost his first election. But Lincoln worked hard to overcome difficulties. Although he had little formal education while growing up, he was always reading and learning new skills.

The story begins with a description of Lincoln's early childhood years in the Kentucky wilderness.

◆ ◆ ◆

Abraham Lincoln never liked to talk much about his early life. A poor backwoods farm boy, he grew up swinging an ax on frontier homesteads in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois.

He was born near Hodgenville, Kentucky, on February 12, 1809, in a log cabin with one window, one door, a chimney, and a hard-packed dirt floor. His parents named him after his pioneer grandfather. The first Abraham Lincoln had been shot dead by hostile Indians in 1786, while planting a field of corn in the Kentucky wilderness.

◆ ◆ ◆

When young Abraham is still a toddler, his family moves to another log cabin a few miles north, on Knob Creek. He remembers running and playing there as a barefoot boy.

◆ ◆ ◆

Vocabulary Development

homestead (HOHM sted) *n.* place where a family makes its home, including the land, house, and outbuildings

Lincoln never forgot the names of his first teachers—Zachariah Riney followed by Caleb Hazel—who ran a windowless log schoolhouse two miles away. It was called a “blab school.” Pupils of all ages sat on rough wooden benches and bawled out their lessons aloud. Abraham went there with his sister Sarah, who was two years older, when they could be spared from their chores at home. Holding hands, they would walk through scrub trees and across creek bottoms to the schoolhouse door. They learned their numbers from one to ten, and a smattering of reading, writing, and spelling.

♦ ♦ ♦

Abraham’s parents cannot read or write. His mother, Nancy, likes to recite prayers and Bible stories she has memorized. Abraham’s father, Thomas, supports his family by farming his own land. In 1816, when Abraham is seven, Thomas moves the family north to Indiana.

♦ ♦ ♦

The family set out on a cold morning in December, loading all their possessions on two horses. They crossed the Ohio River on a makeshift ferry, traveled through towering forests, then hacked a path through tangled underbrush until they reached their new homesite near the backwoods community of Little Pigeon Creek.

♦ ♦ ♦

Thomas builds a temporary shelter. It is a three-sided lean-to. He keeps a fire burning at the open end to keep the family warm and to scare off the wild animals.

♦ ♦ ♦

Vocabulary Development

makeshift (MAYK shift) *adj.* crude; thing that will do for a while

◆ Reading Strategy

What is the **main idea** about Lincoln’s schooling? Circle the letter of the correct answer.

- (a) He did not go to school much and he was glad.
- (b) He did not go to school much, but it was important to him.
- (c) He attended school regularly, but he did not like it.

◆ Reading Check

Underline the things Lincoln learned in school.



◆ Read Fluently

Read the bracketed paragraph aloud. Pause at the commas, but do not drop your voice. Practice until you can read the paragraph smoothly.

◆ Literary Analysis

Write three facts from the first paragraph.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

◆ Reading Strategy

What is the **main idea** of this paragraph? Circle the letter of the correct answer.

- (a) Thomas Lincoln took a trip.
- (b) Sarah Bush Johnston was nice.
- (c) Thomas Lincoln found himself a new wife.
- (d) Sarah Bush Johnston had three children.

◆ Literary Analysis

How much schooling did Lincoln have altogether?

Abraham passed his eighth birthday in the lean-to. He was big for his age, "a tall spider of a boy," and old enough to handle an ax. He helped his father clear the land. They planted corn and pumpkin seeds between the tree stumps. And they built a new log cabin, the biggest one yet, where Abraham climbed a ladder and slept in a loft beneath the roof.

◆ ◆ ◆

Soon Nancy's aunt and uncle and their adopted son Dennis move in with the Lincolns. Dennis Hanks becomes a big brother to Abraham. A year later, the aunt and uncle die from a disease caused by the poisonous white snake root plant. Nancy catches the disease and also dies.

◆ ◆ ◆

Thomas Lincoln waited for a year. Then he went back to Kentucky to find himself a new wife. He returned in a four-horse wagon with a widow named Sarah Bush Johnston, her three children, and all her household goods. Abraham and his sister were fortunate, for their stepmother was a warm and loving person. She took the motherless children to her heart and raised them as her own.

◆ ◆ ◆

Abraham becomes an expert with the ax. He works alongside his father, who also hires him out to work for others.

◆ ◆ ◆

Meanwhile, he went to school "by littles," a few weeks one winter, maybe a month the next. Lincoln said later that all his schooling together "did not amount to one year."

◆ ◆ ◆

Mostly, Abraham educates himself by borrowing books and newspapers. He especially likes *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Arabian Nights*. He reads them over and over again.

He also is thrilled by a biography of George Washington, and he likes poetry.

♦ ♦ ♦

"I never saw Abe after he was twelve that he didn't have a book in his hand or in his pocket," Dennis Hanks remembered.

♦ ♦ ♦

By the time he is sixteen, Abraham is six feet tall. He is one of the best wrestlers and runners around. He is also becoming known as a comic and storyteller. He practices public speaking before his friends, doing imitations of preachers and politicians.

At the age of seventeen, Abraham works as a ferryman's helper on the Ohio River. He is eighteen in 1828 when his sister Sarah dies while giving birth to her first child.

That spring, James Gentry, a local merchant hires Abraham to accompany his son Allen on a twelve-hundred-mile flatboat voyage to New Orleans. Their job is to deliver a cargo of country produce.

In 1830, Thomas Lincoln moves his family to Illinois. Twenty-one-year-old Abraham helps his father build a cabin and start a new farm. At the age of twenty-two, Abraham moves to New Salem, Illinois, to take a job in a general store.

Lincoln arrives as a "friendless, uneducated, penniless boy." He works and lives in the store.

♦ ♦ ♦

With his gifts for swapping stories and making friends, Lincoln fit easily into the life of the village. He showed off his skill with an ax, competed in footraces, and got along with everyone from Mentor Graham, the schoolmaster, to Jack Armstrong, the leader of a rowdy gang called the Clary's Grove boys.

♦ ♦ ♦

♦ Literary Analysis

Write a fact about Lincoln for each of the following ages.

twelve: _____

sixteen: _____

seventeen: _____

♦ Reading Check

Did Lincoln like to read?

How do you know?

♦ Literary Analysis

What historical facts does this paragraph present?

♦ Reading Strategy

Underline the main idea in the bracketed paragraph.



◆ Reading Check

How does Mentor Graham change Lincoln's life?

◆ Literary Analysis

Complete the sentences with information from the bracketed paragraph.

1. In 1832, Lincoln _____

2. Lincoln decides to _____

3. He is in favor of _____

Lincoln joins the New Salem Debating Society. "He was already a fine speaker," one debater recalls. But Lincoln is self-conscious about his poor education and is eager to improve himself.

◆ ◆ ◆

Mentor Graham, the schoolmaster and a fellow debater, took a liking to the young man, lent him books, and offered to coach him in the fine points of English grammar. Lincoln had plenty of time to study. There wasn't much business at Offutt's store, so he could spend long hours reading as he sat behind the counter.

◆ ◆ ◆

In 1832 the store fails. Lincoln has to find something else to do. At age twenty-three, he decides to run for the Illinois legislature. He is very popular in town, and he is rapidly gaining confidence as a public speaker. Lincoln announces his candidacy and his political platform. He is in favor of local improvements, like better roads and canals.

Before he can start his campaign, an Indian war flares up in northern Illinois. Chief Black Hawk threatens to take back land from the white settlers. For three months Lincoln serves as captain of a company of volunteer militia. The troops drill and march but never see any hostile Indians.

◆ ◆ ◆

By the time he returned to New Salem, election day was just two weeks off. He jumped into the campaign—pitching horseshoes with

Vocabulary Development

militia (muh LISH uh) *n.* citizens organized for military service

voters, speaking at barbecues, chatting with farmers in the fields, joking with customers at country stores. He lost, finishing eighth in a field of thirteen. But in his own precinct¹ where folks knew him, he received 227 votes out of 300 cast.

♦ ♦ ♦

After his defeat in politics, Lincoln operates a general store with a partner named William Berry. They are unsuccessful businessmen and the store closes. After Berry dies, Lincoln alone has a debt of \$1,000.

♦ ♦ ♦

Lincoln called it "the National Debt," but he vowed to repay every cent. He spent the next fifteen years doing so.

♦ ♦ ♦

Lincoln supports himself by working at all sorts of odd jobs. He works as a farm-hand, at a gristmill,² and splits fence rails. Then he gets a part-time job as postmaster of New Salem. He also gets a job assisting the local surveyor.³ Lincoln buys books on surveying and teaches himself enough to begin doing the job. He travels around the county, delivering the mail and making land surveys.

In 1834, Lincoln is finally successful in politics. He is elected to the Illinois House of Representatives.

♦ ♦ ♦

♦ Literary Analysis

Underline the information the author includes to make Lincoln's loss seem less important.



♦ Literary Analysis

List the jobs that Lincoln has to earn money to repay his debt.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

1. precinct (PREE sinkt) *n.* election district.

2. gristmill (GRIST mill) *n.* place where grain is ground into flour.

3. surveyor (suhr VAY er) *n.* person who determines the boundaries of land.

◆ Culture Note

The legislature is the group of persons with the duty and power to make laws for a state or country. It includes the House of Representatives to which Lincoln was elected.

◆ Reading Check

Why does Lincoln buy his first suit?

◆ Reading Strategy

The main ideas in the two bracketed paragraphs are very similar. Identify the main idea.

◆ Stop to Reflect

What is the most interesting thing you learned about Lincoln in this historical account?

In November, wearing a sixty-dollar tailor-made suit he had bought on credit, the first suit he had ever owned, the twenty-five-year-old legislator climbed into a stagecoach and set out for the state capital in Vandalia.

◆ ◆ ◆

Lincoln still has to find a way to make a living. Lawmakers are only paid three dollars a day, and only while the legislature is in session. The young attorney John Todd Stuart, a fellow legislator, urges Lincoln to study the law.

In fact, Lincoln has been thinking of becoming a lawyer for a long time. For years he has watched country lawyers in action. He has sat on juries, appeared as a witness, and drawn up legal documents for his neighbors. He has even argued a few cases before the local justice of the peace.

◆ ◆ ◆

Yes, the law intrigued him. It would give him a chance to rise in the world, to earn a respected place in the community, to live by his wits instead of by hard physical labor.

◆ ◆ ◆

Lincoln studies law on his own for three years before passing his exams. He is admitted to practice on March 1, 1837. By now, Lincoln has been elected to a second term in the legislature, which has moved from Vandalia to Springfield, the new capital of Illinois. Lincoln has also accepted a job as junior partner in John Todd Stuart's law office in Springfield.

Vocabulary Development

intrigued (IN treegd) v. fascinated

REVIEW AND ASSESS

1. What are two ways eight-year-old Abraham Lincoln helped his family?

1. _____
2. _____

2. Name three of Abraham Lincoln's activities at the age of sixteen.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

3. What advice did John Todd Stuart give to Lincoln?

4. **Literary Analysis:** Write *T* for true and *F* for false in front of each of the following statements about Abraham Lincoln.

- _____ Lincoln became a lawyer.
- _____ He went to Harvard Law School.
- _____ Lincoln was born in Kentucky.
- _____ Lincoln grew up in a rich family.
- _____ Lincoln's parents could not read or write.
- _____ Lincoln and a partner owned a general store.

5. **Reading Strategy:** Find three sentences to support this main idea:
Lincoln wanted to become a lawyer.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

(Continued)

Writing

Persuasive Paragraph

Russell Freedman, the author of "A Backwoods Boy," wrote a historical account about Abraham Lincoln because he admired him. Write a persuasive piece in which you convince others to admire Lincoln.

- Use the details you learned in the historical account that guide readers to your point of view. Emphasize Lincoln's admirable qualities. List those details here. For example, choose those details that show that Lincoln was hard-working, honest, smart, and ambitious.

- State your main idea clearly.

Write your persuasive piece showing why people should admire Lincoln.