

## CHILDHOOD IN LINCOLN'S TIME

- According to the 1830 census, one in three Americans was younger than 10, and the median age for all Americans was 16.
- The rearing and regard for children evolved into a major concern in public forum. Americans approached the issue with exuberant contemporary optimism but also with anxiety what lay ahead in a country already struggling with the issues of slavery, immigration, and expansion.

### Education

- Noah Webster's and William McGuffey's primers contributed to the emergence of a national identity of growth, responsibility, democratic values, and – following the Civil War – unity.
- Although Webster championed education to foster a prepared citizen, in practice education lagged behind ideals.
- Schools typically consisted of a single room, often in a private home.
- Reading, writing, arithmetic, and moral training composed the curriculum.
- Children learned to read primarily to read the Bible.
- Hornbooks inscribed with the alphabet, paired letters (to learn pronunciation), and a scriptural verse or prayer often served as textbooks. These books typically consisted of a piece of paper attached to a paddle and covered over with a thin piece of cow's horn to permit viewing of the protected paper. Children learned their letters and basics of reading by means of such books.
- When local citizens chose to pool their resources and employ a teacher, they usually found a man who might have the barest education himself. He lived in the home of one of the local families and earned very little. Consequently, he frequently farmed or hired himself out to a farmer.

### The Images of Childhood

- Artists and illustrators offered depictions of young rural-dwelling boys characterized by their independence, straightforwardness, and unpretentiousness.
- Girls, on the other hand, represented the domestic virtues of thrift, morality, and patience.
- During Lincoln's lifetime Americans began to view the idea of public education as a right.
- Education held the promise of preserving the nation and its freedoms, the legacy of the Founders.
- Opponents to public education expressed concerns about paying taxes to establish and maintain schools or the expanding governmental authority necessary to administer them.

### Clothing

- Girls wore simple dresses, imitative of the high-waisted English style of decades earlier.
- Even though their fathers continued to wear knee breeches, boys began to wear trousers.

- By the Civil War era, both boys and girls wore dresses, the boys' buttoning in the front, the girls' in the back.

### Toys and Games

- Many games played by children in the first half of the Nineteenth Century had been played in some form or another for centuries – even millennia – and continue to be played by children today. Among these are some very familiar games and toys passed down from child to child or parent to child throughout American history.

Checkers  
Dominoes  
Hopscotch  
Marbles  
Ring Toss

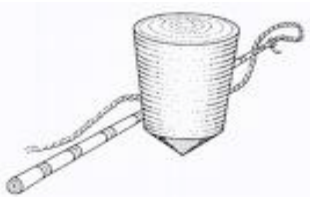
Dolls  
Jacks  
Tops  
Whistles  
Yo-Yos

### **Dolls**

- Dolls with china heads, hands, and feet could be found in the homes of wealthy families in New England and the South.
- Children in poorer homes more likely had a doll with a cloth head. Its face was typically drawn on the cloth.
- Though the McLean family who lived in the home where General Lee surrendered to General Grant at the end of the Civil War belonged to the middle class, one of the daughters left a rag doll in the parlor where the official surrender took place. The doll was taken as a souvenir by Capt. Thomas W. C. Moore, a Union officer under the command of Major General Philip Sheridan, and was not returned by his descendants until 1992.
- Slave children, too, played with dolls, though they might amount to nothing more than a rag tied around a corn cob.

### **Tops**

- The most complicated model was the whipping top. Such a top is made to spin by flicking it with a piece of twine or a thinly cut piece of hide. Operating such a toy took practice and skill.



### **Marbles**

- Most marbles were very likely used clay spheres, small stone, or even nuts instead of the small glass balls familiar to players today.
- The object – as today – was to use one marble to knock others out of a ring drawn in the dirt. The shooter who knocked the most marbles out of the circle was the winner.

### **Hoop and Stick**

- Abraham Lincoln might also have played with a hoop of wood about an inch wide which he caused to move forward on its side by striking it with a stick. Like dolls, the hoop and stick has been found in many ancient dig sites.

### **Jacob's Ladder**

- The name refers to an episode in the Book of Genesis the patriarch Jacob had a vision of angels going up and down on a celestial ladder between the earth and heaven.
- The allusion allowed children to play with it on a Sunday when all other toys were forbidden.
- A "Jacob's Ladder" consisted of a several thin pieces of wood were strung together in such a way that one block seemed inexplicably to flip its way down the "ladder" until held in the opposite manner when it would appear to behave in the same manner, returning to its point of origin.

### **Kick the Can**

The tin can was invented in 1810, one year after Lincoln's birth, and quickly spread from England to the United States. Even if tin cans had not reached Kentucky and Indiana by Lincoln's time, other children in the young country played this game of kicking a can down for the sheer fun of hearing it bang along the ground. Some children even organized a soccer-like game played by groups subject to no formal rules.

### **Discipline**

Childhood was not, however, an idyllic time for youngsters in the early Nineteenth Century. Corporal punishment – which included both whippings and beatings – was typical of parental and institutional discipline in the years of Lincoln's boyhood. However, a movement against its use started soon after the American Revolution with the rise of the ideal of the "self-disciplined child." By 1810, Sunday Schools throughout America had begun to abandon the practice of corporal punishment.

### **Disease**

Infectious diseases were common among children as well as adults at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century.

Prevention and effective treatment were virtually unknown – aside from vaccination against small pox.

The death of children from illness was so common in the nineteenth century that is difficult for the modern reader to grasp.

Cholera, typhoid, and yellow fever frequently reached epidemic proportions. Infant and child mortality rates were high.

Typical of the era's emphasis on moral instruction, the familiarity of death was used to teach pertinent lessons.

Children's books did not shy away from death and its consequences.

Instead, they offered examples of the appropriate way to face death – usually with religious confidence and stoic acceptance.