

# Abe Lincoln in Illinois

USA | 1940 | 110 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	John Cromwell
<b>Screenplay</b>	Robert E. Sherwood, Grover Jones
<b>Photography</b>	James Wong Howe
<b>Music</b>	Roy Webb

## Cast

<b>Abe Lincoln</b>	Raymond Massey
<b>Stephen Douglas</b>	Gene Lockhart
<b>Mary Todd Lincoln</b>	Ruth Gordon
<b>Ann Rutledge</b>	Mary Howard

## In Brief

An alternative view of Lincoln, from his early days in backwoods Kentucky to his election as President. After a time running livestock to New Orleans, he settles in New Salem where he meets and falls in love with Ann Rutledge who is already engaged to someone. Abe makes a home for himself in New Salem, eventually running a store and becoming the postmaster. He's popular with the locals and is eventually elected to the State legislature but afterward established himself in the practice of law. He eventually meets Mary Todd who would become his wife and is sent to Washington as a Congressman before he is elected president.

Abe Lincoln in Illinois traces the personal and political life of the 16th President of the United States, beginning when he is a 22-year-old on his parent's farm in frontier Illinois and ending with him pulling away from Illinois on a train to Washington on the day of his inauguration. This film not only gives the high points of Lincoln's life up to that point that we have all learned in grade school, but it also presents him in a way we don't often see him, as a husband, father, and friend. We see a more human side of Lincoln, a man with a love for learning, a passion for what is right, and an aversion to politics -- although he cannot help but be sucked into it by his ambitious wife and do-gooder friends.

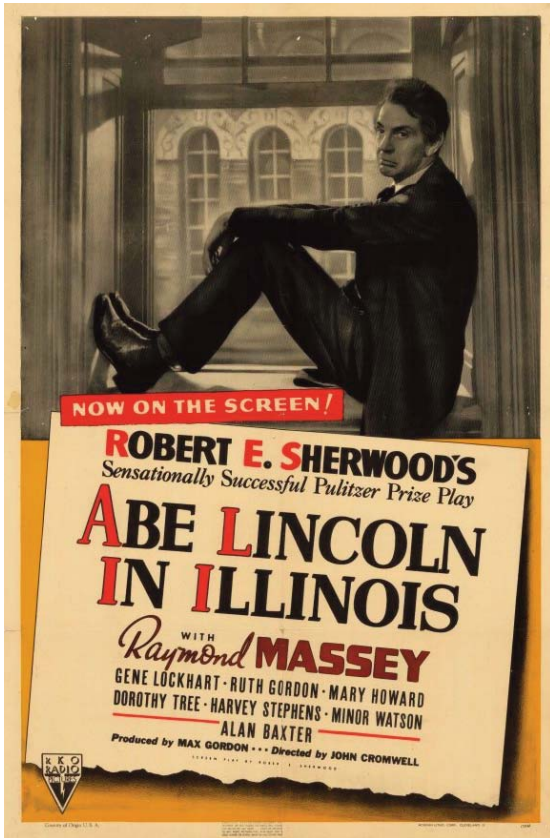
The film begins with young Abe on the Illinois family farm about to embark on a new job. This employment takes him to the town of New Salem, where he soon finds himself fighting the town bullies and falling in love with Ann Rutledge. Abe quickly moves up the ranks in the town, from shopkeeper to postmaster, earning the respect of the townspeople, until he is running for a seat in the state legislature. Unfortunately, tragedy overshadows Abe's success when Ann dies. After his tenure in the legislature, Abe moves to Springfield to become a lawyer, where he begins an on-again off-again courtship with Mary Todd, a wealthy and ambitious socialite. Abe marries Mary and begins his family.

The film fast forwards in Abe's life to the time when he is caught in an epic race for the senate seat for Illinois with the illustrious Stephen Douglas. This election sets the stage for a debate and a speech that will put him on the national political map. Abe is soon considered by his party for the nomination for the Presidency. But Abe is hesitant -- South Carolina is already threatening to secede from the Union if he is elected, and the rest of the Confederacy promises to follow. Mary's deteriorating mental state leads to angst between the pair, but Abe wins the election. As he makes one final speech to the people of Springfield, the train to Washington pulls away to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," and the rest is left up to history.

The screenplay for Abe Lincoln in Illinois was written by Robert Sherwood. Sherwood originally wrote the play for the stage, and it was adapted for the screen shortly after. Sherwood fought in World War I for Canada and, after he returned, was highly anti-war. This value can be seen in his work both as a film critic and in his own works, such as *The Road to Rome* and *Idiot's Delight*. At the dawn of World War II, Sherwood became a propagandist and a speech writer for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, as well as the Director for the Office of War Information. Abe Lincoln in Illinois was written around the same time as the war was beginning to take shape in Europe and reflects the idea that what is right and just must be done no matter the cost, as we can see in Lincoln's debates about slavery. Here, we can begin to see Sherwood's politics change to be more interventionist in nature. After the war, Sherwood continued to write, and wrote films such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* about the effect of the war on returning servicemen, for which he won an award for Best Screenplay.

The film Abe Lincoln in Illinois is based on the play of the same name, both written by Sherwood. The film stays true to the book, beginning at the beginning of Lincoln's life in Illinois and ending as he is about to be inaugurated as the sixteenth President. It focuses on Lincoln as a character and the road that led him to the Presidency, including his love for Anne Rutledge, his marriage to Mary Todd, and his friendships and law practice in Springfield, Illinois. Both works show the Lincoln vs. Douglas rivalry, including one of their debates, and their battles for both the Legislature, the Senate, and the Presidency. Although the film does not mimic the play verbatim, the over-arching themes and message of the story remains intact, a feat achieved by Sherwood's preeminence in both genres.





Like every other American kid, I grew up with certain images of America instilled in me through elementary school projects and Saturday morning cartoons. The Statue of Liberty, Uncle Sam, and George Washington were all part of the enigma of America that came through in children's books and holiday decorations. The most pervasive of these images through every grade, from kindergarten through high school, was Honest Abe's long beard and tall hat. We all know the image, the Kentucky-born frontiersman who worked his way through the ranks to become the greatest President our country had ever seen, saving the Union and freeing the slaves, all the while remaining humble and loyal to his ideals. However, beyond that, all Abraham Lincoln really meant was an excuse to have a day off from school in February. But this year, with the inauguration of Barack Obama and Lincoln's 200th birthday, America took notice once again. With a slew of new books about Lincoln hitting the shelves and a new biopic being undertaken by Steven Spielberg, looking deeper into the Lincoln enigma seems to be somewhat inevitable. Knowing what I do about the shaping of history and how the images from the past we are presented with usually serve a purpose for the present, I can't help but wonder where the image of The Great Emancipator came from.

That question isn't one that is hard to answer once you start to look. Shortly after his death, Lincoln began to be viewed as a humble savior who worked his way up from nothing to the highest office possible. He was immensely popular after his death, if only in the north. Southerners didn't exactly feel the same way, and Lincoln's body had to be guarded from angry grave robbers. But that is beside the point. Northern newspapers began printing tales about Lincoln and his homespun ways, his unavoidable destiny, from that point. His long-time legal practice partner William Herndon began writing about Lincoln and collecting letters and interviews about him only a few years after his death. Historians began in-depth research on

Lincoln, and the long regarded preeminent work on his life was written by Carl Sandburg in the 1920's, only fifty years after his death. Soon to follow were Norman Rockwell paintings depicting Lincoln as "The Rail Splitter," reading and doing hard labor with his tall frame.

In 1930, during the dawn of the movies, D.W. Griffith's Abraham Lincoln was a success, portraying the quiet and melancholy President for the first time on screen. Young Mr. Lincoln and Abe Lincoln in Illinois, regarded as the most important and best films on Lincoln, appeared within a year of each other that same decade. And the mystique was only solidified further from there. Lincoln, in all these media, was depicted as slow talking, loyal, somewhat sad, but likable and funny. Lincoln is beloved, the man who single handedly saved the United States from deteriorating. He is the most popular President ever, even today, despite the fact that most Americans know nothing about his politics besides the war, nothing about his ideas on immigration and public land sales that would undoubtedly be very unpopular in 2009. I didn't because I was never taught. I was only taught about the Lincoln of myth, the Lincoln that is the most featured President in the movies and on television, even appearing in comedies such as Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure.

The questions of what and how are easy enough to answer. The more difficult and important question is why? Why is Lincoln the most popular President of all time? Why is he the most mythologized? Surely he did do great things for the country. But greater things than George Washington or Franklin D. Roosevelt? Was he better than Wilson, who helped us through World War I, or better than Grant, who cleaned up after Lincoln? Maybe yes. But maybe not. All have done important and honorable things. How, then, has Abraham Lincoln become so popular and important for American culture and shared history?

I am not sure I know the answer to that question. I think that there are several answers, that there are complex and subtle reasons that this is the case. There are layers upon layers of different reasons why, over time, Americans have come to idolize Abraham Lincoln. The first Abraham Lincoln film was created fifty years after Lincoln was killed. Of course there weren't movies in Lincoln's time; I can't help but wonder if there were, what they would have said about him. Oliver Stone released W. while George W. Bush was still in office. W. did not do for Bush what Abe Lincoln in Illinois did for Lincoln. W., while doing some softening of Bush's image, mostly made him look proud and stupid. Lincoln's films do exactly the opposite; he comes off as humble and intelligent. Of course, Bush wasn't the most popular President we have ever had. But if we are honest with ourselves, neither was Lincoln at the time of his Presidency. In the north, Lincoln was revered for preserving the nation. The losing South, however, did not feel the same way. South Carolina seceded from the Union as soon as Lincoln was announced the winner of the campaign. So, no, Lincoln was not the most popular President at the time of his death. In fact, half the nation was not in approval of him at all. Much like Lincoln, Bush had spear-headed a war that would, in its own way, tear his country in half. So, while they are different, they are still similar. Why is it that Lincoln gets pomp and





circumstance and Bush gets made to look like a fool? Time is one answer. Time will tell if history smiles on Bush, the way that it has on Lincoln. Something tells me fifty years from now we will not be reminiscing about the good old times when George Bush ran the United States.

While Abe Lincoln in Illinois did not create the myth of Abraham Lincoln, it certainly solidified it. The film took the already circulating ideas of Abe Lincoln and put them together into one solid, cohesive picture that remains until this day. Why, though, did Lincoln become such a popular figure at the time, with two films about him in as many years? There are many thoughts. Many critics see Abe Lincoln in Illinois as an allegory for the state of the world at the time. Abe Lincoln was facing a war that could end things as Americans knew them. The American public was doing the same as Europe plunged into what would be The Second World War. Lincoln wanted to emancipate the country from the injustices of slavery, a message that America needed to free the world from the tyranny of the Axis powers. Robert Sherwood, author of the play on which the film was based as well as writer of the film, was moving from isolationist antiwar advocate to head of the Information for the War Department. The country was moving from isolation towards war. The country needed a hero, a figure to inspire hope in a dark time. Lincoln did that. And the more grassroots he was, the more people could relate to him -- the more he could, in fact, be an allegory for the trying times ahead. The idea has also been floated that the Republicans pushed the production of the films to try to ride Lincoln's seventy-five-year-old coat tails to victory over FDR. Although this cannot be proven, it would prove to be ironic if true, since Sherwood later became a speech writer for Roosevelt.



These reasons are a big part of the reason. If we consider Sherwood's politics, they are congruent to the major themes in the play. Sherwood fought in a Canadian infantry in World War I, surviving with a very isolationist and antiwar mentality. Many of his early works reflect his opinion about the pointlessness of war and the tragic toll it took on both the winners and the losers. However, he did have a deep commitment to justice and the American ideals of liberty and freedom. That is why, as World War II approached, Sherwood slowly but surely came to support the war; the war was necessary based on the evil of the axis powers of Germany and Japan and the US's power to help stop them. Americans' war tolerance changed in much the same way that Sherwood's did. It makes a lot of sense, then, that first a play and then a film about Lincoln, a person who, at least by Sherwood's presentation, put aside his distaste for war to do what was necessary for liberty. In the film, Lincoln doesn't want to fight in the Black Hawk War; he just wants to leave the Indians to their land. He doesn't want to get involved in the Civil War at all but thinks that it is necessary to preserve the Union and free the slaves. Looking at the film, the themes of freedom and Lincoln extolling the values of equality and liberty in his speeches against Douglas, it is easy to see why FDR would slate Sherwood as one of his top propagandists.

It also makes some sense to me that if Sherwood was using Lincoln as an allegory for the situation of Americans at the dawn of WWII, that he wouldn't include the President's term in office. That was the hard part, the part where war destroyed the man the movie builds us up to love. The war tore apart the country, killed millions, ravaged thousands of square miles, and ruined Abraham Lincoln. It drove him into deep self-loathing and depression. It was, regardless of the side that won or lost, a disaster. It preserved the Union and freed the slaves but at a very high price. Filmgoers have come to love Abe by the time he is elected President; we sympathize with him, and we relate to him. If we were to see him through his darkest times, it would not inspire the audience to seek freedom for all those oppressed. In fact, it would do just the opposite. The film is a very highly praised, far reaching form of propaganda.

Lincoln outshines all the other Presidents in myth and legend. In my research I have read many things that are interesting and outrageous. I have read that Lincoln freed the slaves because a psychic medium told him to and levitated a piano to prove her self. I



read that he was a homosexual, that he never had sex with his wife, that Mary Todd was crazy, and that Lincoln told very dirty jokes. There is extensive research on Lincoln, and everyone knows a crazy fact about him. What do you know about Chester Arthur? Or President Harrison or Cleveland? Why does Lincoln have this mystique that warrants these films? I think it does have to do with people wanting a hero that can lead them through trying times and show them that they will come out on the other side. But modern scholars want to know why Americans are so quick to overlook Lincoln's faults. He had serious bouts of depression, some so deep he was on suicide watch. He had a romantic relationship with Ann Rutledge, a woman already engaged to someone else. While not quite adultery, stealing another man's fiancé is certainly scandalous, especially 175 years ago. Abe Lincoln in Illinois doesn't raise an eyebrow at this. Instead, we feel sorry for Lincoln. We look at him as the good guy who is finishing last in the ladies department. Why is it we overlook this in Lincoln,

his premarital affairs and the supposed gay affairs while he was married to Mary Todd? Why do we excuse his marriage, look at him as the victim in his relationship to Mary, a do-gooder caught in a bad situation? It is not just Lincoln that we look at this way. We overlook Kennedy's dalliances but not Clinton's. Maybe it has to do with what is taboo at the time. But maybe it is because we want to see these men as scot-free, because we need something else from them.

That is the bottom line. Even in this day and age, when we are jaded and hardened against the evils of the world, we still want a hero. Abraham Lincoln is a hero for every age. He did the right thing, despite the consequences, despite the hardships. He went against the conventional ideas of the backwoods man and became educated. He did what was right, not what was popular. Even if this isn't true, that is what we need. That was what we needed in 1865 at the dawn of the Civil War, in 1938 at the dawn of World War II, and that is what we need now, when humanity faces disease, global warming, worldwide economic recession, and terror. We chose Lincoln because he is like us, because he is everyday, because he is tortured. He wasn't always happy, and he didn't always know what was best for him. That is how we feel, as people. And that is why I think that the American people have embraced Lincoln the way we have. The film highlights these points, and although it may overlook some other important details, this is still important. History doesn't always tell the truth, especially not when it is used for entertainment. But out of everything that I have learned about Lincoln, I think the most important thing I have learned is that history can make a new truth, if that's what people need. It is important to know that we have that to fall back on, just as it is important to know the most objective truth we can. Abe Lincoln in Illinois gives people hope. We all need hope.

This is even more evident with the recent resurgence of Lincoln idolatry. Of course, with Obama's inauguration, Lincoln's values have come full circle. Emancipation has finally made its way to acceptance, and in our nation, for the first time in a long time, we have hope for the future on a large scale. We hope that things can be different, that things will be better. Steven Spielberg, a highly acclaimed director, is cashing in. These plans were there before Obama, however, when we needed hope the most recently. Bush was President, and the nation didn't like that; we are losing two wars overseas, and the economy is bad. We needed hope. Obama gave us more, but in many ways we are the Americans of 1938: financial crisis, unemployment, violence overseas, and possibly more daunting wars to come. I hope for our sake that we can find Lincoln in the same way that Sherwood's America did. I hope that we can find in him a symbol of righteousness and the sense that sometimes you have to go through hard times to get to better ones. Although this time I hope we see a more truthful version of history, it would be tragedy if the Lincoln of 2010 doesn't have the same homespun earnestness that inspires real hope in us as the Lincoln of Abe Lincoln in Illinois does. In the meantime, someone should put this film back on DVD. It is not just important for history, it is important for culture, a culture of hope that everyone talks about so much these days.

*Lauren Korzeniewski, Reel American History*

EDINBURGH  
FILM  
GUILD

Mr President