

BOOKS AND THINGS

By LEWIS GANNETT

BERRY AND LINCOLN: The Store That "Winked Out," by Zarel C. Spears and Robert S. Barton. *Stratford House (52 Vanderbilt Avenue). 140 pages. \$3.75.*

IF EVERY detail in the life of Abraham Lincoln is important, then "Berry and Lincoln" is another precious drop. This book is a conscientious effort to rehabilitate the reputation of the boy who was Lincoln's business partner in New Salem, Ill., 115 years ago.

They were two G. I.'s, home from the Black Hawk War—that singularly gay and bloodless berry-picking war in which Lincoln was a captain and Berry a corporal. Neither of them had much except hope to invest in the business, but business didn't require much investment in those days. Berry was twenty-two, Abe Lincoln, twenty-four.

The Sad History of Berry and Lincoln

In June of 1832 Berry bought out James Herndon's interest in one of New Salem's (population 100) three stores. In August Lincoln, coming home later from the war, bought out Rowan Herndon's interest, and what had been "Herndon Brothers" became "Berry and Lincoln." Lincoln signed a note for his share in the store. In October, to help out his friend, the captain of the good ship *Talisman*, which had stuck on the New Salem dam, Lincoln signed another note. In January, 1833, the partners jointly signed still other notes, to buy out a rival store. In March they took out a license (cost, \$7) to sell liquor at retail (sample prices: French brandy, 25 cents a half-pint; Holland gin, 18¾ cents; domestic, 12½ cents; rum, 18¾ cents; whisky, 12½ cents).

By April, 1833, the boys were in trouble. Berry mortgaged a building he owned to pay their joint debts, and in July he lost the building. In May Lincoln took on the town postmastership as a sideline. In October Berry went off to Illinois College to get a bit of education, and in January, 1834, Lincoln took up surveying as an additional sideline. Some time thereafter Lincoln bought a horse on credit, but various judgments were entered against the partners in the course of 1834, and by one of them Lincoln lost his horse and surveying instruments, which a good friend bought back for him at the auction.

In November, 1834, when the partnership was finally dissolved, Berry was sick with malaria, and Lincoln was on his way to the State Legislature. On Jan. 10, 1835, Berry died, in the house of his parson-father, peacefully unaware that his rocky partnership was destined to give him a tiny niche in history. Berry was two days more than twenty-four years old, Lincoln not quite twenty-six.

When, a quarter century later, Lincoln was nominated for the Presidency, his campaign biographers

were shocked to hear of the sad record of Berry and Lincoln, and naturally threw all the blame on Berry, who was dead. William Dean Howells wrote in 1860 that "Berry was a thriftless soul and after a while the store winked out." Howells also first printed the story that Lincoln was paying off Berry's debts for years after Berry died. Nicolay and Hay embellished this story in 1890, writing that "Berry expired, extinguished in rum. Lincoln was left loaded with debt." By 1947 Stefan Lorant was telling the story thus: "William F. Berry drank himself to death and left Lincoln with a debt of \$1,100 which it took him fifteen years to repay." Other biographers have picked up a similar yarn.

Berry, Messrs. Spears and Barton conclude after examination of the records, is "the most maligned man in the whole Lincoln saga." There is no evidence that Berry drank too much—not even a rumor of it until a quarter century after his death. He didn't leave Lincoln burdened with debt. Lincoln's debts were his own; Berry had even sacrificed his house to bail out the partnership. Up to his death Berry was solvent, even if the inventory of his estate was small. ("One saddle and blanket, \$12," is the largest item on it; "one holster pistols, \$8," comes next; "one bedstead, \$5.50," ranks third; clothes, including shoes and hats, account for almost half the total of \$84.12½.) The doctors' and undertaker's bills swallowed up all Bill Berry's estate and left a deficit, but Lincoln was not held responsible for that. If he was still paying back debts when he was in Congress, that was his own, not Berry's fault.

Not So Alma Mater

Even Berry's alma mater, Illinois College, accepts the libel. The only record of Berry in its files is a card—typewritten, presumably in this century—reading,

William Berry
 Attended Illinois College one year, 1833-34.
 Died 1835.
 Served in Black Hawk War—Lincoln's company; returned in fall of 1832.
 Father's name, John Mc. Berry—founded the Cumberland Presbyterian Presbytery:
 Partner of Lincoln at Salem, 1832-33.
 Rumor says that he died a drunkard, and that his father said at his grave that "he was in hell."

The Union of Historians, Abraham Lincoln Local No. 1, may regard Messrs. Spears and Barton as amateurs and scabs and resent their findings. They sometimes foolishly attempt to create period atmosphere by inventing fictitious conversations, which is properly against trade-union rules. But they seem to have established a point that the regular historians had overlooked. There was nothing much wrong with Bill Berry.