

Journal Divided – “Railsplitter”

Excerpt from Chapter 14 of Michael Burlingame’s *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (pgs 1633-1637)

Link to full Chapter Fourteen

<http://www.knox.edu/documents/pdfs/LincolnStudies/Burlingame,%20Vol%201,%20Chap%2014.pdf>

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(Another witness recalled Lincoln’s words slightly differently: “My old friend here, John Hanks, will remember I used to shirk splitting all the hard cuts. But if those two are honey locust rails, I have no doubt I cut and split them.”)¹ Once again the crowd cheered Lincoln, whose sobriquet “the rail-splitter” was born that day.²

According to Noah Brooks, Lincoln “was not greatly pleased with the rail incident,” for he disapproved of “stage tricks.”³ Still, Lincoln was rather proud of his rail-splitting talent. Brooks reported that while visiting Union troops at the front in 1863, Lincoln noticed trees that they had chopped down. Scrutinizing the stumps, he said: “That’s a good job of felling; they have got some good axemen in this army, I see.” When Brooks asked about his expertise in rail splitting, the president replied: “I am not a bit anxious about my reputation in that line of business; but if there is any thing in this world that I am a judge of, it is of good felling of timber.” He “explained minutely how a good job differed from a poor one, giving illustrations from the ugly stumps on either side.”⁴

¹ “Republican History, Some Reminiscences of the Decatur Convention of 1860,” *Illinois State Journal* (Springfield), 26 May 1879.

² Plummer, *Oglesby*, 41-43.

³ Brooks, *Lincoln and the Downfall of American Slavery*, 184.

⁴ Noah Brooks, “Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, July 1865, in Michael Burlingame, ed., *Lincoln Observed: Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 213-14.