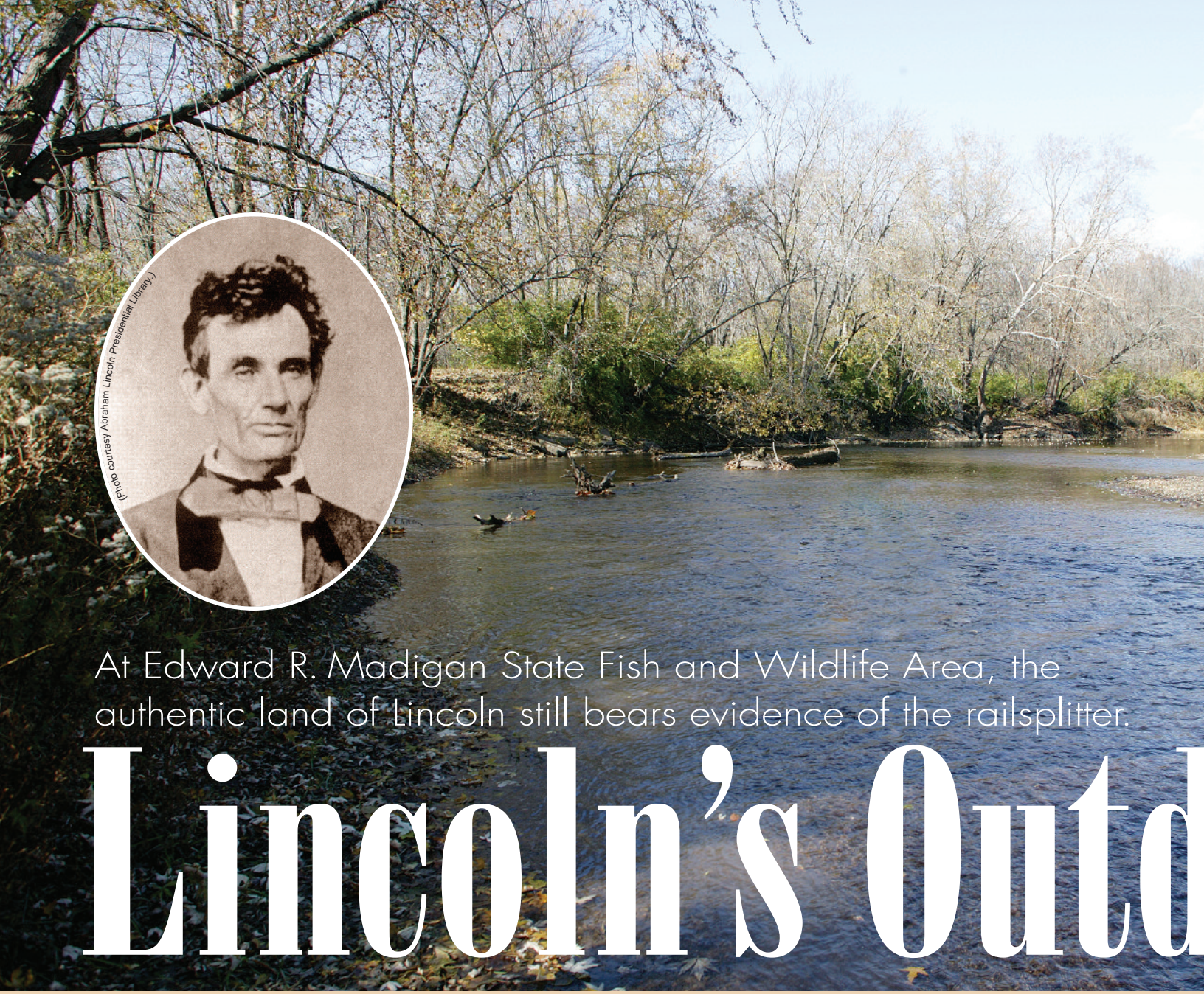

(Photo courtesy Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.)

At Edward R. Madigan State Fish and Wildlife Area, the authentic land of Lincoln still bears evidence of the railsplitter.

Lincoln's Outd

Story By Joe McFarland
Photos By Adele Hodde

From the sparkling shores of Lake Michigan to the rugged hills of Galena, then hundreds of miles south to the historic confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, the Land of Lincoln we call home today includes—to be honest—places Abraham Lincoln probably never saw.

But all around the town of Lincoln, amid the wide-open prairies of central Illinois, today's landscape includes timeless natural images the man himself actually would have observed. Located midway between Bloomington and Springfield, this 154-year-old community on the prairie remains an American original: Lincoln, Illinois was the first town in America dedicated to our 16th president, and it happened during his lifetime. (According to historical lore, Lincoln himself christened

Adjacent to the park is a pheasant hatchery which supplies pheasant chicks to other rearing sites statewide. Public tours are available.

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

Site Superintendent Ron Willmore is overshadowed by a massive sycamore located within Edward R. Madigan State Fish and Wildlife Area. The sycamore was once ranked the largest in Illinois.

loors

the town one summer day in 1853 when he split open a watermelon and ceremoniously let the juices flow.)

While not all parts of Illinois can truly claim Lincolnian heritage, this land which now attracts sightseers and tourists offers some of the original natural world Lincoln himself would've seen.

History relates how, as a young man during the 1830s, Lincoln traveled across prairies, woodlots and streams, surveying towns and property of the still- young Illinois. By the time he owned his law office in Lincoln, a young sycamore tree near the banks of Salt Creek—a familiar waterway south of town—offered shade to the fishermen and hunters of Lincoln's day.

Today that sycamore, one of the largest recorded in Illinois, is one of the living reminders that nature is a timeless attraction in the Land of Lincoln.

The massive sycamore grows in what is now part of Edward R. Madigan State Fish and Wildlife Area, a 1,000-acre tract of Logan County landscape, formerly known as Railsplitter State Park. This was literally Lincoln's outdoors, and it's a place where natural history and Illinois history now come together.

If one wishes to see the actual land Lincoln witnessed, one needs to look no farther than the streets of Lincoln and the adjacent wild lands open to the public.

These rich prairie soils of Logan County (a county created by Lincoln himself) are the soils upon which Lincoln walked and greeted his neighbors. Some of the lesser-known trees were alive when Lincoln passed by. Managed prairie within the site hosts grass and wildflower species Lincoln would have recognized. While the world beyond these fields and forests has changed since Lincoln was here, nature itself remains timeless.

Birders will appreciate the mixed grassland and woodland habitats, which attract everything from migrating waterfowl on Salt Creek to red-bellied woodpeckers (above).

A primitive boat launch on Salt Creek affords access for fishermen and recreational activities such as kayaking. Access is for day use only.

Bring a camera. Herds of white-tailed deer wander freely and represent one of the most popular attractions for nature-seeking visitors.

Originally dedicated as a state park in 1971, Edward R. Madigan State Fish and Wildlife Area offers visitors to the history-rich Lincoln area an authentic taste of our original Illinois landscape. What better way to see the land of Lincoln than to step into buildings Lincoln entered, then head outdoors to the outdoors Lincoln saw?

The waters of Salt Creek at the fish and wildlife area welcome canoeists and kayakers eager to take in the original landscape. A simple canoe launch provides access for day-use visitors. Anglers can float Salt Creek for a range of fish species including smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, crappie, bluegill, sunfish, carp, channel catfish and bullhead. The bottomland forests feature a range of native Illinois species such as walnut, oaks, ash, hackberry, hickory and, of course, sycamore.

Access to the site is easy. Located immediately south of the historic city of Lincoln, just off Interstate 55, this fish and wildlife area is where Lincoln residents go to enjoy the outdoors.

"The site is a day-use facility," explained Site Superintendent Ron Willmore, who said visitors from Lincoln often hit the 7-mile hiking and biking trail for fitness, taking in the natural beauty of prairie and bottomland forest. An additional 3/4-mile fitness trail is for joggers and other foot traffic only.

"There are picnic areas for visitors, with tables, fire pits, toliets as well as shelters," Willmore added. "We have playground equipment and horseshoe pits."

Large groups of 25 or more are required to register in advance at the site office (to avoid scheduling conflicts) and at least one responsible adult must accompany each group of 15 minors.

While much of the wildlife Abraham Lincoln would've encountered in these forests while he lived here still exists here today, Willmore notes there is one attraction Mr. Lincoln would be highly impressed to see.

"This is a great wildlife-viewing park," the site superintendent pointed out. "Everybody comes to see the deer, and a lot of photographers come here to get great shots because the deer aren't easily spooked."

In Lincoln's day, when professional market hunting was still legal, herds of deer in nearby forests would be a nearly unimaginable sight.

"We estimate the herd at between 100-150 deer," Willmore said. "It's a really good spot to take pictures."

Although deer hunting is not permitted at the site, upland game hunters can apply for site-specific permits for dove, rabbit, pheasant and quail hunting programs held during regular seasons. Dove hunting begins Sept. 1 and extends through Sept. 30. Site permits available through a computerized drawing for the first five days. After the first five days, dove hunting is on a first-come, first-served basis with a maximum of 30 hunters per day.

Rabbit, pheasant and quail hunting is offered during a one-day per week hunt. Hunters are pre-drawn through an on-line application for free upland game hunts. There also is a one-day youth pheasant hunt (usually the first Sunday in November).

Hunting and the shooting sports are, of course, a timeless tradition, and Logan County once claimed a national marvel in the arena of marksmanship. Captain Adam Bogardus of nearby Elkhart, a famed member of Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show and the inventor of a trap-throwing device, became the World Champion Wing Shot in London in 1876. Bogardus reportedly won $5,000 on a side bet in

"Tuesday is hatch day," says the manager of the adjacent James Helfrich Wildlife Propagation Center. Youth groups often arrive at the hatchery to witness some of the 80,000-100,000 pheasant chicks hatched here annually.

American bellflower (*Campanulastrum americanum*) is one of the many wildflower species known to inhabit the moist woodlands and lowlands around Salt Creek.

which he shattered 5,000 glass balls in 500 minutes, a legendary feat which helped give rise to the sport of trap shooting.

An even older hunting tradition survives today at Madigan. Falconry is permitted for upland game hunters, with the season beginning Oct. 1 and extending through March 31, or until 10 hen pheasants are harvested.

There is never a shortage of pheasants around this site. Immediately adjacent to the state fish and wildlife area is the James Helfrich Wildlife Propagation Center, where all of the ring-necked pheasants raised at Illinois-managed game farms begin life.

"We hatch between 80,000 to 100,000 pheasant every year," explained Willmore, whose busy days are spent managing a pheasant hatchery and a state fish and wildlife area. "We have 8,000 breeder hens, with 12 acres of flight pens where birds are kept once they are 12 weeks old. The hens start laying eggs in April and it takes 24 days to hatch a pheasant. Hatch day is always on a Tuesday.

"That's when school groups and other visitors always like to stop by for a tour—hatch day is quite an event."

Abraham Lincoln would be amazed at the sight of thousands of pheasants being hatched and raised outside his namesake town, especially since the exotic birds weren't stocked in Illinois during his lifetime. But while the inevitable changes of time have altered the features and nature of Illinois' landscape, portions of the land around Lincoln, Illinois still conjure famous images of distant, and not-so-distant, history.

Facts at a glance

Address: Edward R. Madigan State Fish and Wildlife Area, 1366 1010th Avenue, Lincoln, IL 62656.
Telephone: (217) 735-2424.
Web site: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/R4/Edmad.htm.
Directions: Located immediately south of Lincoln, which is between Bloomington and Springfield on Interstate 55.
Additional Site Features: Dog training is permitted from Sept. 1-March 31 (excluding upland game hunting dates). A permit must be obtained through the site office.

Upland game hunting—including pheasant hunting—is available through site-specific permits issued annually. Other hunting opportunities include rabbit, quail, dove and even falconry.

"The original Route 66 ran right through Lincoln," explained Geoff Ladd, executive director of the Abraham Lincoln Tourism Bureau of Logan County. The famous highway which transported millions between Chicago and Los Angeles in the mid-1900s now serves as a nostalgic voyage for travelers seeking a slice of the past, and tourists stream through Lincoln year-around as they retrace the journey made famous decades ago.

In Lincoln, a slice of watermelon serves as the unofficial town mascot, along with Abe Lincoln's famous stovepipe hat and the Route 66 sign. Visitors find no shortage of attractions. There's a railsplitting contest and craft fair each year, historical buildings and walking tours, plus enough Abraham Lincoln lore and historical souvenirs and information to keep visitors intrigued—and shopping—until they're ready to relax amid the original and peaceful Land of Lincoln.

Lincoln the Railsplitter sketch by Lloyd Ostendorf provided courtesy Lincoln College.

"It's a perfect match," Ladd suggested. "People can come to Lincoln and take in the Abraham Lincoln and Route 66 sights, then head over to the state park for a picnic or a trail hike."