



The Plant That Killed Abraham Lincoln's Mother



As the frontier was settled and more land was cleared the incidence of milk sickness declined. Clear cutting of the woodlands in which the snakeroot plant thrived destroyed its natural habitat.

On October 5, 1818, Nancy Hanks Lincoln passed away after a brief but agonizing illness caused by a disease known as milk sickness. Milk sickness was mysterious and frightening to the pioneers because they did not know what caused it. In time, careful observation and study by physicians and others throughout the 19th century finally determined that the poison was from the innocent looking white snakeroot plant, which is commonly found in wooded areas. A cow that ate the plant ingested a toxin that accumulated in its milk and that could then be passed on to humans to cause milk sickness. Unsuspecting pioneers, living off the land and their livestock, frequently fell victim to their ignorance of this cause and effect relationship. But its impact on their lives can not be underestimated. It led some to abandon their dream of a new life and a new home and return to more settled, less dangerous, environs. For others it cut short their very existence. And on an autumn day in 1818, it touched the life of a nine-year-old boy named Abraham.