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Old tunes take visitors back to Lincoln's life and times

By **ROB STROUD, Staff Writer**

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LERNA -- Lincoln Log Cabin State Historic Site's theater was air-conditioned Sunday, but you could picture the steamy banks of the Ohio River if you closed your eyes. Singer-songwriter Chris Vallillo had his audience clap to imitate the sound a float boat crew's poles would make on the river during a hot summer day in the 1820-30s, when Abraham Lincoln worked on these watercraft. The clapping accompanied Vallillo's performance of "Way Down in Shawneetown," one of the songs flat boat crews sang to stay organized in their work. "It's hot in the summer, boys. The air is thick and dank," Vallillo sang.

The Macomb resident performed "Abraham Lincoln in Song," music associated with the 16th president's life and times.

Lincoln heard songs during his childhood in Kentucky, where he was born in 1809, extolling the virtues of nearby Illinois, Vallillo said. The song "Way Down Upon the Wabash" even said this land impressed the Queen of Sheba so much that she wanted to be the "Queen of Illinois."

"Move your family westward. Bring all your girls and boys. Cross the Shawnee ferry to the state of Illinois," Vallillo sang. The Lincoln family moved to Indiana in 1816 and to Illinois in 1830. While residing in Indiana, Lincoln's mother died of "milk sickness." Vallillo noted that the loss of Nancy Hanks Lincoln was one of the first of many tragedies to befall Lincoln over the years. "Lincoln would later say his first memories were of her voice singing the Lincoln children to sleep," Vallillo said.

As an adult, Lincoln got involved in Illinois politics and became a lawyer. Vallillo said Lincoln made music of his own while traveling the 8th Judicial Circuit with other lawyers. He said Lincoln sang and played the small, wiry mouth harp to pass the time at night.

"While he was not a good singer, he was an enthusiastic singer," said Vallillo, adding Lincoln often acted out lyrics.

Slavery was the major issue of the day and the song "Oh My Darlin' Nelly Gray" told the story of a slave whose true love had been taken away.

"Oh my darling Nelly Gray, they have taken you away. I will never see my darling anymore," Vallillo sang. "They have taken you to Georgia for to work your life away. Now you are gone from that Kentucky shore."

Vallillo said the Hutchinsons, who were abolitionists and popular entertainers, supported Lincoln's 1860 presidential campaign in song.

"We will fight 'til our cause is victorious, for Lincoln and liberty too," Vallillo sang. Secession by the Southern states and war soon followed Lincoln's election.

The war's early years did not go favorably for the Union, and Lincoln called for 300,000 more volunteer soldiers in 1862, Vallillo said. This call inspired a poem and popular song.

"We are coming, we are coming, our Union to restore; we are coming Father Abram, with six hundred thousand more," Vallillo sang.

Lincoln would go on to lead the Union to victory but lose his life to assassin John Wilkes Booth on April 14, 1865.

Vallillo said a latter day song by Bob Gibson paid tribute to Lincoln's willingness to reconcile with the South. This song quotes Lincoln's reaction to the Union victory.

"On the day Lee surrendered Mr. Lincoln told the crowd, 'Let the band play Dixie,'" Vallillo sang.

