“I think there have been more lies told about Mr. Lincoln than about Santa Claus,” remarked James S. Ewing during a 1909 Lincoln Day address at the Grand Opera House in downtown Bloomington.

For Ewing, many of these lies came from those who never knew—let alone even met—the martyred president.

Ewing, for one, knew Abraham Lincoln quite well, having first met him when his father John W. Ewing owned the National Hotel on Front St., an old haunt for Eighth Judicial Circuit lawyers.

There were plenty of other central Illinois folk who were acquainted with Lincoln. After all, he partly forged his legal and political career in communities such as Bloomington, Clinton, and other county seats while arguing cases before the Eighth Circuit bench and leading the Illinois Whig and later Republican parties.

The year 1909 marked the centennial of Lincoln’s birth, and in the spirit of the times *The Pantagraph* asked its readers to submit their personal stories of the sixteenth president. And though it was almost forty-five years after the assassination, there were still plenty of locals willing to share their memories of “Mr. Lincoln.”

For instance, Julia Holmes Gray, the daughter of Pekin attorney William H. Holmes, remembered as a child accompanying her father to Tremont, then the seat of Tazewell County. Walking from the courthouse to a boarding house for dinner, the young Julia declined Lincoln’s kindly offer to hold her hand. Later, her father asked why she refused
Lincoln’s request. “I didn’t want to take such a homely man’s hand,’” she recalled telling her father.

In the fall of 1860, Lincoln returned to Bloomington to wrap up some casework before heading to Washington, D.C. James S. Ewing, now an up-and-coming Bloomington attorney, met the president-elect in front of the McLean County Courthouse. According to Ewing, after the two shook hands, Lincoln remarked, “Well, you have gotten to be a lawyer. Let me give you some advice. Don’t meddle with politics, stick to the law.”

Lincoln scholars are examining anew the wealth of Lincoln reminiscence oftentimes ignored or dismissed by previous generations of historians. That said, these recollections must be treated with due circumspection, given the fallibility of memory and the all-too-human tendency toward embellishment, to say nothing of outright falsehood. As one Chinese proverb notes: “The palest ink is better than the best memory.”

Still, many of the February 1909 recollections printed in The Pantagraph “smell” (in the words of Lincoln historian Don E. Fehrenbacher) authentically Lincolnian.

Bloomington attorney Calvin Rayburn was a young boy when he and his father caught sight of Lincoln leaving a building on Washington St. off the Courthouse Square. “He was very tall, wore a high black hat, his coat was very long and his boots were coarse and heavy,” Rayburn remembered. “I had heard much praise of Mr. Lincoln, but this view of him was disappointing, there was nothing of the soldierly and grand appearance my mind had conceived of him.”

Lumann Burr, who was deputy clerk of the circuit court, said that in the wintertime, Lincoln “wore a large dark gray shawl in place of an overcoat as many did in those days.” He also remembered Lincoln in the clerk’s office making a casual study of the German language. “Here is a curious thing,” Burr remembered Lincoln saying, “The Germans have no word for ‘glove.’ They call it a ‘hand shoe.’ They have no word for ‘thimble.’ They call it a ‘finger hat.’” This linguistic conundrum of translation drew one of Lincoln’s “inimitable laughs,” added Burr.

Whether this story is based on fact is not known, though it rings true with the historic Lincoln, who, as Ewing noted, had a “wonderfully acute sense of the ridiculous.”

Judith Bradner was another Bloomington resident who shared her memories of Lincoln with Pantagraph readers. At the time, Bradner was in her mid-nineties, though she vividly recalled the old days of the 1840s and early 1850s when Lincoln was a regular dinner guest at her Bloomington home. Back then, Bradner was married to James Allin, considered to be the founder of Bloomington.

“Lincoln was at my house one evening in one of his happiest moods,” she recalled. “Walking up and down the room he struck his head against the chandelier and stopped and said: ‘How awkward I am,’ then continued walking and did the same thing again. He said they had none of those things at his house.”