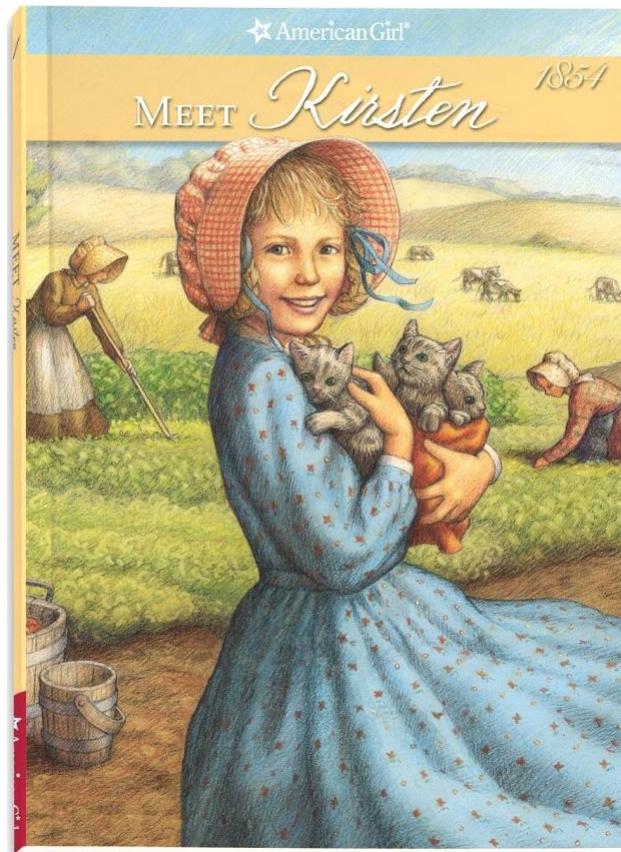




**Toy Stories:
Teaching Children How to be Self-Made in America**



Charlotte Sweeney
Skidmore College
American Studies
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Abstract

The myth of the self-made man is foundational to the United States. Over time Americans have learned to define success based on their ability to achieve progress without the help of others. This self-reliance to which Americans aspired was considered a fundamental feature of democracy and was presumed to be facilitated by American experiences on the frontier. By leaving civilization to attempt to conquer the wild, frontiersmen were thought to be enacting rituals of self-making by acquiring skills that promoted success when they returned to cultivated world and participated in the general democratic process. The myth of the self-made man, however, ignored those who supported the frontiersmen during their ostensibly independent lives on the frontier, including women who were largely redacted from the mythic narrative. It also obscured the many frontiersmen who never made it back to civilization nor succeeded financially when civilization found them. Over time, however, this previously male-centric myth morphed to accommodate certain groups (females especially) and to exclude others (the less socio-economically fortunate). Through fictional stories that supplemented the missing narratives of the lives of women and others on the frontier, the myth of the self-made person eventually came to cater to a wider constituency. This paper tracks the evolution of the myth of self-making for men and women and examines how Lincoln Logs and American Girl Dolls both altered and reaffirmed the myth, encouraging adaptations to its basic formula while simultaneously teaching its most impressionable consumers, children, what it means to be self-made in America.

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Introduction

There is a crash on the floor downstairs. You hear the high pitch of one hundred wooden pieces slam on the hardwood floor. Next you hear a metal tin crash down. The wooden pieces get shuffled around. Click. Shuffle. Click. Shuffle. Click. Click. Click. There's talking now. Two children's voices. You also hear a quiet voice and shuffling. One child is rummaging through a wardrobe. As you walk downstairs you see multiple log cabins on one side of the room and dolls dressed up on the other. "Look Mom & Dad, I made a village!" "Mom! Dad! Kirsten is going to a party today! She's wearing her Christmas dress." Two little girls sat on the living room floor. On one side of the room, Lincoln Logs were sprawled all over. On the other side there were many American Girl dolls with dresses and beds. The girls' parents went on with their adult responsibilities. Sometimes the girls played with one another, other times they imagined on their own. Sometimes, their dad would come over and ask what they built. He would create an even more elaborate structure it would take them an hour to mimic. Other times, their mom would ask about a particular outfit. Once their mom sewed them a matching dress for their doll. My sister, Sydney, and I could play for hours.

Toys have always been an important part of my life. There was an entire other world in toys that my sister and I explored together. Some days we would argue over control of the imaginary worlds we created. Other days we played in harmony. When I was in the fourth grade, my dad got laid off from his job and my mom came home with a new idea. My parents were going to own a toy store and my father was going to run it. I spent hours playing with the toys at the store or, when I got older, learning how to work in a retail store. For six years, toys were an important part of my parents' life, but for me the connection to toys lasted far longer than the existence of the store. Toys gave me freedom to escape the difficulties of the world. Just as some

children look to books to escape, I turned to toys. I hated the confined prescribed nature of books. In books, someone else dictated what the characters did. However, with American Girl I could take the stories from the books and use them to imagine worlds I could not have ever dreamed of on my own. When I sat with Lincoln Logs or American Girl Dolls, I had the ability to tell any story I wanted.

There is a certain light in a young adult's eyes when you ask them about their favorite toy as a child. The list I received in response to that question when I asked my friends included: Happy Family Barbie Dolls, Polly Pockets, Groovy Girls, Hannah Montana and High School Musical Barbie Dolls, Littlest Pet Shops, Webkinz, Ugly Dollz, Lincoln Logs, and American Girl Dolls. All of these toys shaped the childhoods of my friends and my own. When undergoing this project, I began to think about the significant impact toys had on my childhood. Toys shape children's understandings and perceptions of the world around them because children's toys reflect their lives.¹ They also raise a host of questions that began to occur to me more recently as I prepared to write this American Studies senior honors thesis: How does American material culture, specifically toys, reflect the values my parents wanted to impart on me? What did Lincoln Logs teach me about the frontier? How did the stories I read in American Girl and the dolls that accompanied them shape my understanding of what it must have been like to be a young girl in a historic time? What did these stories teach me about myself? How does frontier mythology adapt over time? In addition, if toys are a reflection of parental nostalgia, what themes and lessons associated with Lincoln Logs and American Girl Dolls resonated with my parents and why did they encourage me to play with them as well?

¹ Donald W. Ball, "Toward a Sociology of Toys: Inanimate Objects, Socialization, and the Demography of the Doll World," *The Sociological Quarterly*, 8, No. 4 (1997): 447.

As I pondered answers to these questions, I kept returning to the myth of the self-made man and that myth's impact on American social identity.² The myth suggests the combination of democracy and the frontier in the nineteenth century created a unique circumstance that taught individuals how to succeed without the help of others. Frontiersmen went off in the woods and learned how to live off the land and fight in the wild. They survived despite a lack of civilization. When they joined civilized life, the lessons they learned succeeding alone in the wild helped them achieve greatness. Some of the toys my sister and I played with as children seemed to encourage engagement with these themes. However, I came to understand as I was researching this paper that the myth was, like many myths, a distortion of reality. It is not grounded in the actuality that people garner support from those around them. Frontiersmen frequently had families who supported them in the wild. They did not achieve success alone.

Abraham Lincoln's birthplace cabin serves as a symbol for the self-made man. Lincoln was born on the Kentucky frontier in a log cabin with a dirt floor. There, because of the lack of formal educational opportunities, he educated himself. He also learned how to build a log cabin with his father, where they eventually lived when they moved to Indiana. According to the myth, these hardscrabble frontier conditions prepared the way for Lincoln's later success. Lincoln was eventually a political and intellectual success, having achieved the greatest political office in the country—the presidency—presumably on the strength of what he learned in his humble cabin on the frontier. These were the themes promoted in the advertisement for Lincoln Logs, toys that presumably would allow children living in periods long after the disappearance of the frontier to

² The gendered language in this situation implies that only men could achieve the feat of being self-made. In modern days, the term has expanded to include American male and females, thus giving my sister and I access to this myth. However, it still fails to include people of color and non-binary individuals. The myth of the self-made man was never inclusive of all, but that is not to suggest that people outside of the white male were not contributing to the feats of the self-made man, they were just not receiving the credit.

share in the experiences of a self-made American like the sixteenth president. The myth fails to recognize Lincoln's political success was the result of his marriage into exorbitant wealth or to acknowledge that he achieved political office based on the luck of his wife's fortune. However, despite this inconvenient truth, Lincoln is still perceived to be a man of American mythic proportions. Lincoln's life story is the ultimate one of self-making. From his birthplace on a log cabin dirt floor to his death bed as president he continues to serve as a symbol of the success one can achieve with hard work and perseverance.

As persistent as the myth of the self-made man has been, even as represented in toys in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, its longevity is not assured. Myths need to adapt to remain viable to a society or they no longer remain useful. With the emergence of women in corporate America and their increased ability to become self-made, the myth has undergone adjustments. It now accommodates women who were previously left out of the gendered language of the mythology and who were absent from much of frontier scholarship. Those who wrote about the effect of the frontier on America did so ignoring women's contributions outside of the household. The result was a complete lack of material culture that gave concrete form to a myth that supported women as self-made. That absence changed with the creation of a new toy evoking images of powerful young women and girls on the frontier. Pleasant Rowland, creator of the Pleasant Company which was later renamed American Girl, authored fictional story lines of several young girls based on historical time periods. It is telling that these are fictional works, as, just like the mythology informing Lincoln Logs, the lack of authentic and verifiable factual information invites fictional speculation. Rowland's stories create narratives of brave young women who influence the moral characters of the readers. The material culture surrounding the stories, and the stories themselves, shape current understandings of what it means to be a self-

made woman in America in the eyes of young girls. The adaptation of the myth to include women allows it to remain viable and to fill in gaps in historical narratives of the frontier in which women seem to be absent altogether. The myth of the self-made man has remained fundamental to what it means to be American and achieve success as a man. This new adaptation serves a larger group of individuals and shapes the current generation of Americans currently entering the workforce.

Methodology

This paper explores how our ideologies inform our material world. I will look at how the popular children's toys, Lincoln Logs, teaches children about the myth of the self-made man. I will then analyze how that myth was adapted to teach young girls about the myth of the self-made woman through American Girl Dolls and the story of Kirsten Larson. I will employ symptomatic analysis, a material history of Lincoln Logs and the American Girl Company, and semiotic analysis to understand how children's toys reflect and influence cultural myths. My main goal is to show how objects display meanings and to consider how the stories of Lincoln Logs and American Girl Dolls reveal specific meanings associated with the myth of the self-made man and woman. Methods that look at texts and objects as representations of culture, how meanings are formed, and the histories of the object allow deeper perspective about American culture.

The method of symptomatic analysis, a term coined by French Marxist Louis Althusser, examines how a text serves as a representation of cultural and historic beliefs and events. It is based on the basic premise that authors of texts are influenced by the time the piece is created. These texts are part and parcel of the ideologies that exist in any given era and additionally they satisfy the needs of a culture.³ A symptomatic analysis examines the cultural and political economy where a piece was created. For example, I argue the myth of the self-made woman emerges out of a cultural need for stories of women as self-made. I associate this with the emergence of women in corporate America and the existence of more self-made women. The culture, and myth, is then forced to adapt to create material culture and images of those prominent figures. A potential limitation of this method is an over-emphasis on cultural

³ *Althusser: The Detour of Theory*, compiled by Gregory Elliott, New York: Verso, 2006 (1987).

surroundings that led to the creation of an object. This method assumes that all texts and objects are the result of cultural situations, which could be argued as a weakness. Perhaps some items just result as art and are not symptoms of the culture they were created in. A symptomatic analysis suggests the cultural and political economy in the United States led to the creation of American Girl Dolls. It offers a better cultural understanding of why these toys were so popular in the United States and helps link the object directly to the myth of the self-made woman by suggesting the myth had an important impact on the creation of American Girl Dolls.

An analysis of material history examines the creation of an object. This method of analysis was proposed by Rappports De Recherche in his paper “Towards a Material History Methodology.” It lays out a specific research method to employ when doing material histories that examines observable, comparative, and supplementary data.⁴ This method attempts to view the item as a physical item, but it also considers the surrounding consumption and use. Recherche’s work creates a historical timeline of the creation of a product such as production, marketing, and consumption elements.⁵ Such elements are crucially important to understanding the history and larger cultural influences of the product. In trying to understand how Lincoln Logs serve as a form of the myth of the self-made man, it is important to know that the imagery of Lincoln was imposed on the object three years after its creation.⁶ It proves that the item is separate from the myth, but its success is derived from the association with the log cabin symbolism. Before this marketing tactic, they were simply logs that emulated a model for architects. By adding this symbol, John Lloyd Wright, gives logs a larger cultural meaning.

⁴ Rappports De Recherche, “Towards a Material History Methodology,” *Material Culture Review* 22 (1985):1.

⁵ An analysis of the consumption of these products, however, is out of the scope of this project because of access to data and scope of analysis required to understand how people previously consumed the products.

⁶ “Lincoln Logs Company est. 1916,” *Made in Chicago Museum*, accessed November 5, 2019. <https://www.madeinchicagomuseum.com/single-post/lincoln-logs>.

While I do not plan to use all aspects of the research method laid out by Recherche, I will use many of his questions to guide my analysis such as: Why was this artifact produced? and What function did it perform? Some of Recherche's questions I will use include: What materials were used to produce the artifact and complete its appearance? How was the object fabricated and finished? How was the object's appearance affected or influenced by the construction techniques employed? What stage of development or evolution does this artifact represent when compared with both older and more recent objects of a similar type? What was the artifact's value to its original owner? What value was placed on the object by society? What cultural value does it reveal?⁷ One limitation of Recherche's method of material history is that it is designed for artifacts from past cultures such as the Victorian era, not items of an industrialized society that are still being created today, and therefore some of the questions do not apply. A material history cannot tell you the cultural contexts around which the product was used. It does not tell you the discourse around the specific use or the dialogue that took place while it was being used. I will use a material history to gather facts about the creation and production of Lincoln Logs into mass culture.

The method of semiotic analysis developed by Ferdinand de Saussure analyzes the cultural signs reflected in literary and non-literary texts. Scholars agree that members of a society have systems of meaning embedded in texts. In this form of analysis, "an arbitrary and temporary separation is made between content and form, and attention is focused on the system of signs that makes up a text."⁸ People understand that an object or text contains certain meanings because of shared culturally understood symbols. As members of a cultural group, people understand certain items to have certain meanings, even if that is not clear to people

⁷ For more information on the method see.; Recherche, "Towards a Material History Methodology."

⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).

outside of that culture. For example, Lincoln Logs reflect the American frontier through their image of the log cabin. However, they evoke more than just feelings about the frontier. The log cabin conveys direct imagery of the frontier. American pioneers routinely built housing for themselves and livestock using the timber available to them. Because these families sustained themselves by building and fortifying their shelters, cabins became synonymous with that same self-taught nature. Cultural texts and material objects reflect and state something more about the culture, and people inherently understand what those meanings are when they are members of that culture. A limitation of this method is a potential mischaracterization of a symbol. People analyze cultural symbols differently and the subjective nature of this method creates issues regarding the cultural relevance of those symbols.

Lincoln Logs teach children about the myth of the rugged individual before they fully understand the story and meaning behind that myth. Lincoln Logs symbolize the myth of the self-made man through nostalgia of the Frontier. American Girl Dolls and the stories associated with the dolls helped the myth of the self-made man accommodate women. The result was a series of fictional stories that inserted women into the frontier mythology where they were otherwise ignored. I conducted an analysis material history coupled with a symptomatic analysis to understand how and why these products emerged in the United States. Material history provides context as to how the products emerged, and symptomatic analysis provides further understanding as to why the products emerged. A semiotic analysis frames the understanding that people approach objects with. These methods rely heavily on history and cultural understanding and less on the personal and individual effects these toys had on children or adults.

Chapter 1:

The Myth of the Self-Made Man and the Frontier

The United States was built on self-made men. Benjamin Franklin, David Crockett, Theodore Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, and Abraham Lincoln to name a few. A self-made man is someone who has “achieved success or prominence by one’s own efforts.”⁹ But can someone really be entirely self-made? Americans tend to put men who have touted their own achievements on a pedestal. Men who have achieved greatness without the help of others are heroicized. This group of individuals is looked to for leadership, even beyond their deaths, because their stories serve as messages of hope for the rest of the country going forward. And yet the self-made man is a myth, and, as such, is rarely grounded in reality. The idea that he achieved success without the support of his family and his peers and that he did so by pulling himself up by his bootstraps from an impoverished condition, does not conform to the facts. Statistically, self-made men are rarely ever self-made in the sense that they purport. Historians Gerster and Cords point out the inconsistencies:

Intrigued by the persistence of the Horatio Alger mystique in America, a number of economic historians and sociologists have studied the backgrounds of America’s leading businessmen and industrialists during the alleged heyday of the self-made man—the 1980s. Their findings lead inescapably to the conclusion that by far the majority of men who made it to the top in that era were not poor farm boys or uneducated immigrant lads starting from the bottom. Instead, they were those who had been given rather exceptional opportunities to make the race to the top of the social and economic ladder...Indeed, it seems clear that the best way to have become a self-made man in America was to have been a native-born WASP—white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant—of well-established background.¹⁰

In the current day, many of those who carry the myth of the self-made man like a tool in their back pocket are just overemphasizing certain elements of their background for gain. In reality,

⁹ “Self-Made,” *Merriam Webster*, accessed March 15, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-made>.

¹⁰ Patrick Gerster & Nicholas Cords, *Myth in American History* (Encino: Glencoe Press, 1977), 180.

the leaders we identify with the self-made man tradition are some of the most privileged people in the country. The myth of the self-made man is exclusive to a specific category of Americans. The white male. The gendered language suggests that this is a feat only a man can be strong enough to have accomplished. The myth suggests that the self-made man achieved all his successes based solely on his own merits. But who is to say he is not just failing to attribute those who contributed along the process? When did the heroic American become an idealization of someone who does not give credit to those who assisted them where credit is due? Or was that really the archetypal American all along? The myth of the self-made man helps to inspire the average man to become a great man, but in the process he fails to recognize he is attempting to achieve the impossible.

The myth of the self-made man reaches back to the founding of the United States, but it has adapted over time, allowing new generations of Americans to remain inspired. This adaptation has taken place in a variety of ways: by creating new self-made men, or creating an idealized (and sometimes changed) nostalgia surrounding existing self-made men.

But what makes the myth of the self-made man so pervasive? James Catano argues that the founding of the government, not the settling of the colonies, was the source of the myth of the self-made man. Unlike Brown, Mitchell, & Paul, Catano ties the myth of the self-made man to the rhetoric of Franklin and Jefferson at the time of the founding. It was not the conservative Protestant ethic but the “formation of individual and social virtue first defined by Franklin and Jefferson and later embodied in the Emersonian dictates of self-reliance” that helped forge the myth of the self-made man.¹¹ Catano ties the myth of the self-made man to democratic ideologies

¹¹ James V. Catano, “The Rhetoric of Masculinity: Origins, Institutions, and the Myth of the Self-Made Man,” *College English* 52, No. 4 (1990): 423.

and the ability to transcend social class.¹² It is apparent throughout Catano's argument that he believes "you are limited more by desire than by fact of birth and identity formation is regularly masked in education by a strong appeal to democratic ideals."¹³ Hard work, education, and an appeal to democratic ideals are things Catano feels will assure success in the United States, as opposed to the previous cultural notion that birthright sustained social hierarchy. Benjamin Franklin is a clear example of this notion as he rose from slim social status to achieve greatness. Social mobility is one of the promises afforded to the self-made man. Unlike other scholars, Catano also highlights the way individuals use the myth of the self-made man to gain power in American culture by framing it as a political narrative. Presidential aspirants often highlight their self-made nature to advocate why they have the qualities to serve in this role.

A common thread in self-made men narratives is the emergence of the hero from frontier conditions. According to scholars such as Frederick Jackson Turner and Henry Nash Smith, the frontier was the most unique testing ground for those wishing to demonstrate American excellence. The frontier teaches men how to be self-made. Turner saw that the experience of a vast, unoccupied territory was foundational to the democratic lessons and individual traits of the renowned men of the time period.¹⁴ It is the frontier that "American intellect owes its striking characteristics."¹⁵ He argued that there were unique traits that resulted from the frontier that could not be gained anywhere else. Americans learned

that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things,

¹² Catano, "The Rhetoric of Masculinity: Origins, Institutions, and the Myth of the Self-Made Man," 423.

¹³ Catano, "The Rhetoric of Masculinity: Origins, Institutions, and the Myth of the Self-Made Man," 424.

¹⁴ Unoccupied territory, in this instance, refers to the frontiersmen and founders of the United States belief this land was theirs to take. In reality they drove indigenous people off the land they lived on for many years for the benefit of the United States. Despite being a difficult part of this land's history, this is a story that took place frequently on this land and many self-made men gain credibility by committing crimes against indigenous peoples.

¹⁵ Frederick J. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *American Historical Association*, 1893, <https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/historical-archives/the-significance-of-the-frontier-in-american-history>

lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy;[that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom.¹⁶

The conditions of the frontier created unique lessons that provided Americans with unparalleled opportunities to learn how to be self-made. These characteristics fostered the self-made man and provided the basis for his emergence as a national heroic type. It is the American self-made man that learns how to control the wild on the frontier and how to survive for himself in uncharted territory, Turner concluded. From there he was able to rejoin society and bring his frontier knowledge to bear on the practical challenges of succeeding in a civilized environment.

Henry Nash Smith, in his pioneering American Studies book *Virgin Land: The American West as Myth and Symbol*, argues in a manner similar to Turner that the frontier had a defining effect on American culture. In the preface to his work, Smith poses the question: “What is America? He answers his own query by stating that “one of the persistent generalizations concerning American life and character is the notion that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward through the passes of the Alleghenies, across the Mississippi Valley, over the high plains and mountains of the Far West to the Pacific Coast.”¹⁷ The need to travel west into uncontrolled territory defined what it meant to be American in the Eighteenth Century. This territory allowed for the vast expanse of the United States and contributed to the innovation of the country. The result was a large country with leaders that learned how to control the wild and later used those skills to become self-made men. Smith goes on to state that Turner’s frontier thesis was not created in a vacuum. He believes part of the success of Turner’s theory was the implicit truths it seemed to convey about American

¹⁶ Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.”

¹⁷ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 3.

life, truths that many Americans had largely accepted even before the frontier presented itself as an environment for the working out of the details of the myth. As “brilliant and persuasive as Turner was, in his contention that the frontier and the West had dominated American development could hardly have attained such universal acceptance if it had not found an echo in ideas and attitudes already current,” Smith noted.¹⁸ The West constituted a fertile ground for the working out of the fundamental aspects of a mythology that many living in more “civilized” portions of the country found compelling.

M. J. Heale also attributes the founding to the emergence of the myth of the self-made man, but he finds that it flourished during the time period of death of the Founding Fathers as the country looked to the Western frontier to define itself; hence, he tied the myth of the self-made man to David Crockett and Jacksonian politics. According to Heale, the myth of self-made man emerged when Americans were able to confirm the actual frontier experiences of those, like Crockett, who had survived the frontier and returned to teach its lessons to others, as he did in the Halls of Congress. Unlike other scholars, Heale defines the self-made man as “dependent on his own inner resources. He was directed by natural impulses rather than theory or logic.”¹⁹ This definition provides the image of an outdoorsman who has a natural ability to be one with the land in the absence of infrastructure. In this form, the myth of the self-made man only applies to those who gained their credibility from the frontier and not those who flourished in politics without western experience. The emergence of the frontier in America combined with the founding of American democracy created a myth that the frontier fostered particularly extraordinary self-

¹⁸ Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, 5.

¹⁹ M. J. Heale, “The Role of the Frontier in Jacksonian Politics: David Crockett and the Myth of the Self-Made Man,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 4, No. 4 (1973): 419.

made men. These men were looked to, even after the founding period and expansion into the frontier was over, to serve as heroes and moral guides for future self-made men.

The myth of the self-made man was further informed and complicated by many additional factors, including individualism and democracy. These elements came together in the founding moment of the United States to define what it means to be self-made in a country that was still making itself. The myth surrounding individualism is directly related to American democracy because it allows individuals to thrive. The inherent tie of the self-made man to democracy is attributed to the promise for social progress for individuals. The founding of the United States is a pinnacle moment in this narrative arc. The country was founded on the idea that individuals can break from their social classes and gain greater success through hard work and the democratic process, the myth of the self-made man draws inspiration from that belief. Lawrence E. Mitchell argues that individualism is a key part of democracy and was, in fact, the product of the founding of the country: the “settlers’ characteristics of individual independence and self-reliance led them to settle the colonies and develop them to the point of revolution.”²⁰ Richard Harvey Brown, author of *Culture, Capitalism, and Democracy in the New America*, agrees with Mitchell and associates individualism with democracy. Individualism was “thereby linked to democracy, for it was long thought that independent, self-reliant persons were the natural members of a democratic society.”²¹ Mitchell and Brown place an emphasis on the founding and the settling as key moments in the development of what it means to be “American.” It is part of the American national identity to be proud that the country was founded from “nothing” and emerged a great nation of self-made men. The myth, however, is only

²⁰ Lawrence E. Mitchell, *Stacked Deck: A Story of Selfishness in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 16.

²¹ Richard Harvey Brown, *Culture, Capitalism, and Democracy in the New America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 146.

inclusive of certain backgrounds. It fails to mention those who were immigrants or did not have political rights at the time of the founding, such as women and people of color.

In short, there were many factors that led to the origin of the myth of the self-made man. Self-made men of the time were individuals who used their independence to transcend social class and rise to prominence in society.²² They were individuals who took full advantage of democracy. The definition of the self-made man was also influenced by the founding moment combined with intellectual lessons learned on the frontier. The frontier “concerns the image of themselves which many –perhaps most—Americans of the [1950s] cherish, an image that defines what Americans think of their past, and therefore what they propose to make of themselves in the future.”²³

For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that the frontier image has become so classic to the definition of Americans that it has permeated material culture. While the frontier no longer exists in reality, Americans have created smaller, more tangible, versions of the frontier in toys. Toys often serve as smaller more tangible symbols of items that have a larger cultural context, such as the log cabin was the home frontiersmen lived in, therefore it serves as lasting symbol for the frontier. Toys present those symbols to children in a more tangible form. Many toys serve as symbols for the larger cultural narratives that adults wish to teach children. Toys about the myth of the self-made man socialize children from the beginning of their life to believe they need to build their own futures and can control their destiny alone.

²² Heike Paul, *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies* (Bielefeld: CPI—Clausen & Bosse, Leck, 2014); Heale, “The Role of the Frontier in Jacksonian Politics: David Crockett and the Myth of the Self-Made Man.”; Catano, “The Rhetoric of Masculinity: Origins, Institutions, and the Myth of the Self-Made Man.”; Spicker, *Reclaiming Individualism: Perspectives on Public Policy*.

²³ Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, 5.

Scholars from disciplines such as: new media, psychology, sociology, archaeology, museum studies, and history have analyzed the importance of toys to children. They argue that toys play a significant role in the socialization of children and reflect the lives of the child around them. According to the scholars, the key part of this socialization is the understanding that toys reflect real life. Toys are smaller scale, and often ‘more appropriate’ versions of material objects belonging to adults. For example, a baby doll is a smaller version of a child; it teaches a young girl how to raise a child before she actually has the high-risk situation to care for another life. Scholars also discuss the commodification of toys and the transition between toys in the home as a pedagogical tool to toys as a form of accumulating wealth. In early society, toys represented ways for children to learn about life, but as industrialization and capitalism took off in the United States, children began to accumulate a greater number of toys. Hence, the acquisition of toys was as important as the specific cultural messages emanating from them.

Scholars agree that toys reflect the life of a child and the significant role toys play in the socialization of children.²⁴ They reference how toys have specific pedagogical goals for children that reflect their future life as an adult. For example, young girls get baby dolls to teach them about raising a child from a young age. Scholars argue that toys reflect the material culture of the child’s family. If the parents have wealth, it is reflected in the toys of the child and the same if they do not. Daniel Ackerman highlights how parents of wealthy children imported toys from all over the world and had child-scale versions of their houses in the colonial era.²⁵ Donald Ball adds to this argument to claim that toys reflect the world children live in, and, even if the toys

²⁴ Summer Moore, “Working Parents and the Material Culture of Victorianism: Children’s Toys at the Ludlow Tent Colony,” in *The Archaeology of Class War: The Colorado Coalfield Strike of 1913-1914*, ed. Karin Larkin, and Randall H. McGuire (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2009); Maaïke Lauwaert, *The Place of Play: Toys and Digital Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).

²⁵ Daniel Ackerman, “Toys,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Column 23: Folk Art*, ed. Carol Crown and Cheryl Rivers (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

involve elements of fantasy, they are firmly grounded in the material culture that surrounds children. However, Ball goes further than Ackerman, to argue “toys have identities imputed or assigned to them through a social process.”²⁶ These identities then link the child to understandings of larger social concepts before they can understand what they are. Toys are both a reflection of the lives of children and a reflection of the lives of the adults that purchase them. Lewis states that “toys were designed to appeal to the adult purchaser and the nostalgic memories of play that he or she held.”²⁷ Nostalgia from their childhoods convinces adults to buy toys for their own children. Adults have memories of certain toys and want their children to have similar experiences.

Maaïke Lauwaert highlights how political changes affects toys in capitalism. She notes as people retreated into the home during the mid-twentieth century, toys adapted and “the relationship between the individual, the processes of commodification, domestication, and urbanization, and toys changes drastically during the postwar period with the maturing of a commercial culture, the suburban obsession with the private sphere, and the growing fear of the world outside the private home.”²⁸ This generational change meant toys no longer reflected current life and they transitioned become a form of nostalgia of the parents’ life. These toys impact how Americans value and conceive individualism. The toys serve as a reflection of previous values in American life because as people moved into the home there was a need for “toys that would keep children occupied safely indoors. These toys would often mimic the ‘dangerous outside world’ that children were being shielded from.”²⁹ Toys attempted to give

²⁶ Ball, “Toward a Sociology of Toys: Inanimate Objects, Socialization, and the Demography of the Doll World,” 447.

²⁷ Beatrice E. Lewis, “Antique Toys: Vestiges of Childhoods Past,” *Children’s Environments Quarterly* 1 (1984): 5.

²⁸ Lauwaert, *The Place of Play: Toys and Digital Cultures*, 22.

²⁹ Lauwaert, *The Place of Play: Toys and Digital Cultures*, 39.

children outdoor experiences, but did so by creating a smaller form that could be used indoors. As people went into the home to hide from external fears during the Cold War, they looked further outwards to expand the idea of toys and to protect the child from the impending threats outdoors because of the fear of nuclear annihilation. This is a key transition where the toy no longer reflected the material life a child could access. Instead of serving as a pedagogical tool, the toy reflected an item children could use to imagine and gain experiences of which they were otherwise deprived, such as that on the frontier. These toys teach children similar lessons about how to be self-made because the myth deriving from that concept is so foundational to American society.

John Lloyd Wright, son of famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright, took architectural blocks, marketed them as suitable for building a log cabin and, thus, created one of the most famous American toys. How did he make architectural blocks so successful? He utilized the story of one of America's greatest self-made men, Abraham Lincoln, to convince parents that their children could, too, rise to greatness if they learned the foundational lessons from the American frontier. Since the frontier no longer exists, Lincoln Logs provide a vehicle for children to experience the lessons of the frontier from the comforts of their own living rooms. Lincoln Logs, and the myth of the self-made man on which they are based, create the promise of greatness that matches Lincoln's by giving children access to a more tangible version of the frontier birthplace of one of America's most famous frontier heroes.

Given all the requirements of the self-made man persona as outlined above, it is clear that Lincoln is the ultimate embodiment of the myth. He was born on the frontier but rose to greatness and fame. His leadership during the Civil War did the impossible by uniting a massive country on the brink of separation. The lessons he learned during his time on the frontier made

him keenly qualified to lead the country through this difficult time. What is not commonly recognized, however, is that it was Lincoln's marriage that gained him the wealth he needed to run for political office. Abraham Lincoln is remembered as an American hero because he saved the country, but he did so with advantages that most rugged frontiersmen didn't have—a wealthy wife. The result is an idealized nostalgia for the lessons of a frontier whose history is clouded by the perpetuation of a myth that does not always comport with reality. Lincoln's likeness, which is used as a marketing tool for objects like Lincoln Logs, plays on the false notion that that a child who engages with Lincoln Logs can learn some of the lessons he experienced out on the frontier and can share in some of his greatness as well.

Chapter 2:

Abraham Lincoln as the Ultimate Self-Made Man in American Material Culture

Abraham Lincoln was born in Kentucky on the frontier. More specifically, in a one-bedroom log cabin with a dirt floor.³⁰ Coming from parents who barely knew how to read and write, Lincoln read by the fire after farm chores until he left the frontier to work on a ferryboat.³¹ At age twenty-one Lincoln and his family moved to Illinois where he and his father built the famous log cabin that becomes a symbol for Abe Lincoln's childhood and frontier image.³² Lincoln spoke of his own upbringing five months before receiving his party's nomination for president.

I was born Feb. 12, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky. My parents were both born in Virginia, of undistinguished families—second families, perhaps I should say. My mother, who died in my tenth year, was of a family of the name of Hanks.... My father ... removed from Kentucky to ... Indiana, in my eighth year.... It was a wild region, with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods. There I grew up.... Of course when I came of age I did not know much. Still somehow, I could read, write, and cipher ... but that was all.³³

Lincoln reinforces the effect the frontier region had on his upbringing and moral character. There was a duality to Lincoln's image. He was capable of being both the noble president and the bear-fighting wood-chopping frontiersman. Through his humble beginnings Abraham Lincoln claimed to learn lessons that shaped his moral character and qualified him for the presidency. On the frontier, in a log cabin he learned the lessons that contributed to his rise as an American hero. Despite Lincoln's lack of formal education, which he notes, he will take the presidency at the most tumultuous time in history and succeed in preserving the Union. In this quote, he subtly

³⁰ "Abraham Lincoln: Life Before the Presidency," Michael Burlingame, UVA Miller Center, Accessed November 5, 2019, <https://millercenter.org/president/lincoln/life-before-the-presidency>.

³¹ "Abraham Lincoln: Life Before the Presidency."

³² "Abraham Lincoln: Life Before the Presidency."

³³ "Abraham Lincoln," WhiteHouse.Gov, Accessed November 5, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/abraham-lincoln/>.

emphasizes how he is self-made; however he does not talk about how he married into one of the wealthiest families in Illinois or the others that helped him along the way to reach the presidency.³⁴ What Lincoln does not say in this instance is equally as important as what he does say. He uses his difficult life beginnings to emphasize his moral leadership and ability to guide the country but does so denying the help he received to achieve that position of power. The mid-eighteenth century self-made man is still socially mobile and has frontier experience, but he is also the extreme individual who denies those who helped him achieve greatness.

Abraham Lincoln's image was repurposed after his life and political career. Lincoln had three unique characteristics that allowed his version of the self-made man to become so present in the mid-twentieth century and fulfill the nostalgia of the day: he was of the wild, he was self-taught, and he had the capacity to build. These three characteristics can be emulated by material culture to fit many of the cultural and political needs of the mid-twentieth century. This serves those looking to cultural symbols for inspiration about how to endure in difficult times. Lincoln had (and still has) a uniquely malleable image according to the Richard Norton Smith, director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. "After six years of living with Abraham Lincoln, I can give him to you any way you want, cold or hot, jazz or classical. I can give you scandalous Lincoln, conservative Lincoln, liberal Lincoln, racist Lincoln, Lincoln over easy or Lincoln Scrambled."³⁵ Lincoln is a malleable cultural character because he embodies many of the characteristics Americans believe reflect the United States and democracy.

There is a duality that surrounds Abraham Lincoln in the popular discourse of the twentieth century. Lincoln can be simultaneously great and ordinary, features that make his image so easy to contort for any cultural context. As Barry Schwartz notes, there is a tension

³⁴ "Abraham Lincoln: Life Before the Presidency."

³⁵ Andrew Ferguson, *Land of Lincoln* (New York: Grove Press, 2007), 109.

because “ordinary men cannot represent great and powerful nations; elitist strongmen cannot represent democracies.”³⁶ Lincoln presents a middle ground because he is self-made. He was a great man because he accomplished so much in his lifetime and preserved the union, but he also came from the humblest beginnings to achieve that greatness. Scholar Barry Schwartz goes on further to argue:

Two Lincolns—the common man and the great man—matured in the early twentieth century. It was as if two tickets were issued for Lincoln, ‘one giving access to the almost superhuman savior of the Union and sad-eyed emancipator; the other to the droll humorist and the ‘great heart’ who subsumed reason to sentiment.’ These two tickets, as in now clear, represent a cultural dualism—the kind one finds in a society that values both equality –the familiarity that makes people alike—and hierarchy—the powers that distinguish them.³⁷

Lincoln’s self-made nature makes him accessible to the common man who no longer has direct experience with him.

Lincoln in Material Culture

Images of the frontier era were common the twentieth century because they served as a form of nostalgia for a simpler time and connected people to an important cultural element that no longer existed—the frontier. Abraham Lincoln’s childhood log cabin home became a symbol of the importance of being self-made and of being able to reinvent oneself in perilous times. Lincoln’s childhood story won over the hearts and minds of the American people. Erin Cho argues: “the values Lincoln represented were extremely potent. Lincoln reminded Americans that their country was a unique place where ‘every door is open...for the ruler to emerge when he will and claim his leadership in the free life.’ Lincoln’s log cabin birthplace emerged as a

³⁶ Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 256.

³⁷ Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory*, 267.

powerful symbol demonstrating that every individual, no matter how humble his origins, could achieve greatness.”³⁸ The log cabin emerged in American popular and material culture as a symbol for the self-made man. In many instances such as that of Lincoln Logs, it was associated directly with President Lincoln. This image circulated in an American material culture in the form of Lincoln Logs which “were a hit, tapping into Progressive-era nostalgia and persisting through World War II.”³⁹ Lincoln Logs gave material form to the nostalgia. This contributed to the growing Lincoln mythology that was developing in the twentieth century, from the centennial of his birth in 1909 to the opening of the Lincoln Memorial in 1922. Leaders during this so-called Progressive Era used the likeness of Lincoln to show how a strong, noble, but self-made man, could provide inspiration for a nation at War in Europe or enduring the Great Depression. That image was repurposed throughout the twentieth century as a form of hope, nostalgia and as an educational tool.

Lincoln Logs are a toy, which complicates their messaging and symbolism. As Beatrice Lewis wrote: toys serve as “tangible objects representing the interrelationship between people and the environment. Toys are commemorative symbols of a historical period, but at the same time they help to influence the generation of children who use them.”⁴⁰ In many instances toys reflect the lives of children.⁴¹ In the case of Lincoln Logs, however, a more accurate representation of the toys is that they commemorate a historical period and serve as a form of idealized nostalgia of the time period which they symbolize. Lewis goes further to argue that “toys were designed to appeal to the adult purchaser and the nostalgic memories of play that she

³⁸ Erin Cho, “Lincoln Logs: Toying with the Frontier Myth,” *History Today* 43 (1993): 34.

³⁹ “Lincoln Logs Company est. 1916,” *Made in Chicago Museum*. <https://www.madeinchicagomuseum.com/single-post/lincoln-logs>.

⁴⁰ Lewis, “Antique Toys: Vestiges of Childhoods Past,” 1.

⁴¹ Ball, “Toward a Sociology of Toys: Inanimate Objects, Socialization, and the Demography of the Doll World.”

or he held.”⁴² By this definition, Lincoln Logs are meant to appeal to the adult users who are nostalgic for the frontier at the time they purchase them for their children. Both audiences, the children who play with such toys and the parents who buy them, must be satisfied.

John Lloyd Wright, son of famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright, created Lincoln Logs. Inspired by his father’s model of the earthquake-proof Imperial Hotel in Japan, John took the design and made a small-scale version for a children’s toy.⁴³ The notches in the beams differentiated this toy from other wooden blocks at the time and allowed the structures to withstand children’s rough play.⁴⁴ Wright received the patent for the design in 1920 and began marketing his toys as Lincoln Logs after-the-fact three years later. “Some say he chose the name “Lincoln” to honor his dad’s original middle name: Frank Lincoln Wright... The more widely held belief for decades, however—aided by the product’s own marketing materials—was that Lincoln Logs were a clear nod to our 16th president; that noted log cabin builder himself, Honest Abe.”⁴⁵ Although the toy was created in the 1920s, it surged in popularity during the 1950s because Wright sold the company to Playskool, a large American toy company, for \$800 in 1943.⁴⁶ Advertisements for the toys aired during television shows like Disney’s *Frontierland* and *Davy Crockett King of the Wild Frontier*, further underscoring the frontier mythology the toy evokes. This advertising campaign sold the image of the self-made man even further because of the fascination with the frontier in the 1950s.

Lincoln Logs took off in American popular culture and are still produced a century later. Wright had an interesting marketing technique. The original toy blocks he designed had nothing

⁴² Lewis, “Antique Toys: Vestiges of Childhoods Past,” 6.

⁴³ “Lincoln Logs,” National Toy Hall of Fame, Accessed November 10, 2019, <https://www.toyhalloffame.org/toys/lincoln-logs>.

⁴⁴ “The Birth of Lincoln Logs,” Christopher Klein, History.com, Last Modified August 29, 2018. <https://www.history.com/news/the-birth-of-lincoln-logs>.

⁴⁵ “Lincoln Logs Company est. 1916.”

⁴⁶ “The Birth of Lincoln Logs.”

to do with Abraham Lincoln. They could be made into the shape of a log cabin but in reality, they were only marketed using the frontier image. They were architecture blocks that could be made into any shape, but they were marketed as best suited for building a log cabin. According to the Toy Hall of Fame: “Wright used the storied past of the American frontier to sell his creation, naming the toy after President Abraham Lincoln's fabled childhood cabin.”⁴⁷ Wright took a piece of American memory and solidified it into American material culture. The famed childhood cabin that Lincoln built himself before he was born was in the hands of children all over the United States. Now, “Kids could be as resourceful and self-reliant as their pioneer forerunners who rose from humble origins to become, well, President, in at least one case.”⁴⁸ Children who play with this toy can also learn how to become self-made individuals, the ads implied, by allowing them to do in their playrooms what Lincoln had done for the nation: building for the future.

Lincoln’s childhood story of the log cabin was infamous. That association raised sales and tied the toy back to the frontier. Lincoln Logs aided in circulating the image of the log cabin into popularity as a symbol of Abraham Lincoln’s childhood. The packaging presented icons of President Lincoln and in the eyes of the consumer immediately evoked the sentimental feelings of the self-made man who could save America. While Lincoln Logs were creative, another similar toy, Wright Blocks, did not use Lincoln in marketing and was not as successful.⁴⁹ Interestingly, still other toys that utilized frontier nostalgia, like ‘Frontier Logs’ and ‘Log Cabin Play House,’ also did not take off in American popular culture.⁵⁰ The association with Lincoln

⁴⁷ “Lincoln Logs.”

⁴⁸ “Lincoln Logs.”

⁴⁹ “The Birth of Lincoln Logs.”

⁵⁰ “Lincoln Logs Company est. 1916.”; “Lincoln Logs Inventor John Lloyd Wright,” Monica M. Smith, Lemelson Center, Last modified August 23, 2018, <https://invention.si.edu/lincoln-logs-inventor-john-lloyd-wright>.

was what made Lincoln Logs more successful than its counterparts, because consumers were not just purchasing a toy, they were also buying into the narrative myth of self-making.

Some of the early Lincoln Logs were advertised with the quote “interesting play things typifying *the Spirit of America*.” The language in the advertisements and on the Lincoln Logs suggest that the toy is attempting to represent a

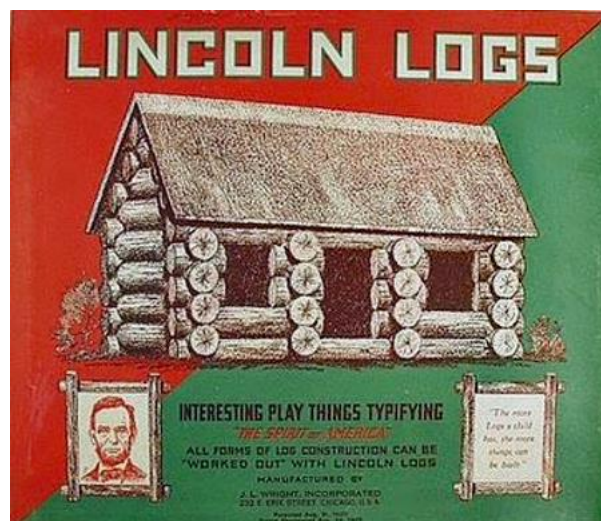
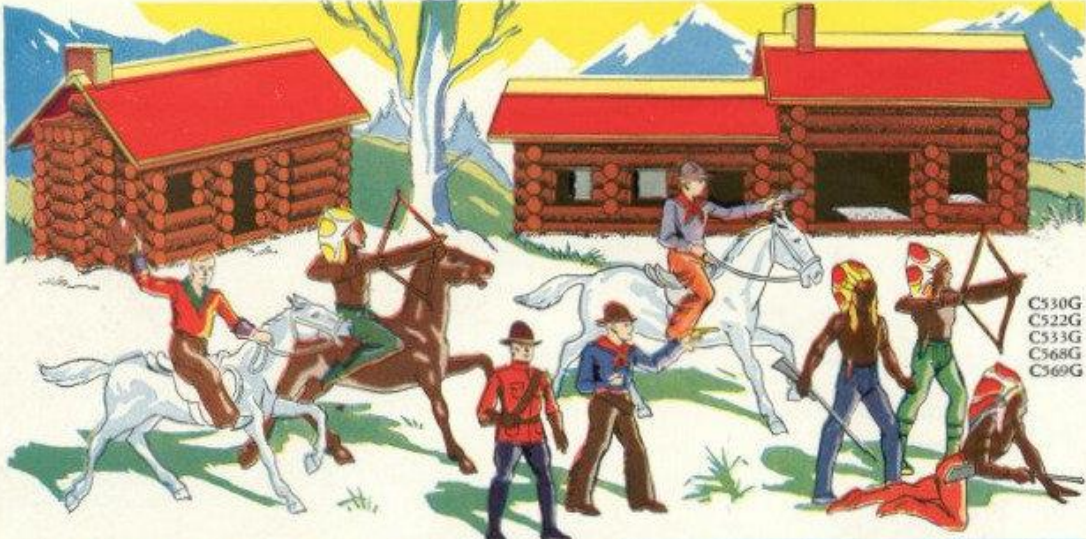


Figure 1: Lincoln Logs Advertisement

larger cultural narrative. The image of Lincoln is repurposed to evoke the clear image of his log cabin birthplace. The “spirit of America” is evoked through the self-made nature that is implied with Lincoln’s birth story. Lincoln Logs teach children similar qualities of being self-made that allowed Lincoln’s image to be easily repurposed for the mid-twentieth century. Lincoln Logs emphasized the value of surviving in the wild, how to be self-taught, and how to build. Both the physical toy and the advertisements show these qualities. A newspaper advertisement from 1934 shows how the marketing emphasizes these three qualities about Lincoln. These same three qualities transcend nearly a century as advertisements on YouTube from the 1970s and 2000s evoke the same cultural symbols as the paper advertisements from the 1930s. It is clear that these themes carried throughout the advertisement of Lincoln Logs in every one of its numerous marketing campaigns.⁵¹ Lincoln Logs have enduring moral and cultural lessons that transcend generations and maintain their popularity.

⁵¹ “Lincoln Logs By Playskool TV Commercial HD,” YouTube video, 0:46, posted by “FM1156,” March 29, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSdPYhfMKw4>; “Lincoln logs, celebrating 100 years!,” YouTube video, 0:30, posted by “knex team,” October 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoSW19VIo5I>.



C530G
C522G
C533G
C568G
C569G

LINCOLN LOGS

AND
ALLIED TOYS


Miniature Building Material made of hardwood, seasoned and stained a weathered brown. Simple designs illustrate innumerable different items of log construction. Easily put together.

You all know the stories people tell about the pioneers who settled our country. How they cleared land, built log cabins, and fought the Indians. They also built a big fort called Fort Dearborn and made it entirely out of logs. Today we don't have to do the things the pioneers did, but you boys and girls can build the same sort of little houses, barns, forts and villages that the pioneers did if you use LINCOLN LOGS. These Logs come in several sets along with roofs and chimneys, fences, etc. There are also little figures of Indians, cowboys, soldiers, and trappers, and a set of animals for a farmyard.


No. C530G Single Set—53 Logs, Roof and Design Book—Price \$1.00
 No. C522G Double Set—110 Logs, Roof, Chimney and Design Book—Price 2.00
 No. C533G Triple Set—166 Logs, Two Roofs, Chimney and Design Book—Price 3.00

LOGS AND FIGURES PACKED TOGETHER
 For separate Figure Sets, see below.
 No. C568G Single Set Logs—4 Indians, 4 Pioneers, 2 Cowboys, 4 Farm Animals—Price per Set \$2.00
 No. C569G Double Set Logs—14 Metal Figures as above—Price per Set 3.00

LINCOLN LOG LUMBER SETS
 Logs are made in Groups instead of Singly
 No. C543G—Early American Fort Set. Price \$5.00
 No. C521G—Settler's Cabin and Five Metal Figures. Price 1.00



C565G
C521G



C601G

LINCOLN BARNYARD
 No. C601G—Lincoln Barnyard and 12 Farm Figures. Price \$2.00

Lincoln Log Historical Figures
 Made of a new metal which is practically unbreakable, these figures are historically correct and beautifully enameled in bright, durable colors.


Price 50c Set			Price \$1.00 Set	
No.	Description		No.	Description
C617G	INDIANS, 1 mounted, 3 on foot.	C606G	INDIANS, 2 mounted, 10 on foot.	
C614G	COWBOYS SHOOTING, 1 mounted, 3 on foot.	C607G	INDIANS AND PIONEERS, 10 Indians and 4 Pioneers on foot.	
C619G	COWBOYS WITH ROPE, 1 mounted, 3 on foot.	C608G	COWBOYS, 2 mounted, 10 on foot.	
C621G	COWBOYS AND INDIANS, 4 cowboys and 3 Indians on foot.	C609G	COWBOYS AND INDIANS, 1 Cowboy mounted, 5 on foot, 1 Indian mounted, 5 on foot.	
C623G	INDIANS AND PIONEERS, 2 Pioneers and 5 Indians on foot.	C611G	U. S. SOLDIERS 1918, 2 mounted, 10 on foot.	
C624G	SOLDIERS OF 1812, 6 on foot.	C610G	FARM SET WITH TREES, 2 trees, 2 sheep, 4 pigs, 1 each of man, woman, horse, cow.	
C625G	U. S. INFANTRY 1918, 1 mounted, 5 on foot.			
C627G	MACHINE GUNNERS 1918, (7).			
C628G	AMERICAN SAILORS, 7 on foot.			
C629G	WEST POINT CADETS, 7 on foot.			
C632G	ROYAL CANADIAN POLICE, 1 mounted, 4 on foot.			
C634G	FARM SET, 1 each of farmer, horse, cow, sheep, and 2 pigs.			

Figure 2: "Lincoln Logs magazine ad from 1934"

Lessons about the Wild

Having been born in the wild on the Kentucky Frontier, Lincoln appealed to twentieth-century creators of the Lincoln legend because he was representative of a western spirit that was fast fading. Lincoln's boyhood on the frontier, difficult as it was, evoked nostalgia among those who longed to have experienced a world in which the freedom and independence of the West created opportunities for self-assured individuals. Taming the woods and living in a log cabin in humble beginnings on the frontier helped to prepare the ground (literally) for the image of Lincoln as a self-made man by prompting citizens to ask: how is it possible that the person who saved the Union came from a family whose home did not even have a floor? It was possible because as a self-made man, he required obstacles to overcome.

Lincoln was of the wild and as a result he had to rely on himself to overcome tough circumstances which shape his own image. In a speech five months before his presidential nomination, Lincoln stated of his boyhood home: "It was a wild region, with many bears and other wild animals still in the woods. There I grew up..." This wild upbringing on the frontier had an effect on his morals and his ability to be self-made. The fact that he had developed from wild roots impressed those in the mid-twentieth century who no longer had access to the formative struggles of the frontier. Lincoln was able to tame the wild and make something of himself in the process, an experience that people could rarely gain in the mid-twentieth century except in national parks. Unchartered territories of the sort that Lincoln endured were a thing of the mythic past, and admirers of his character sought to experience their lost power by evoking the memory of a childhood that may never have truly existed in the first place.

Lincoln Logs are a toy that emulate the wild by teaching children about life on the wild frontier. By playing with Lincoln Logs, children can think about what life would have been like

if they lived on the frontier. Lincoln Logs provoke children to think: How would they have survived in a log cabin like the ones that Lincoln built and that they were recreating in their own play spaces? The toy is of the wild because it is a symbol for those who lived in the wild during the frontier era, yet it is also a tamer version of the real thing. The smaller, more tangible form is much more controlled and does not put children at risk; yet they can simultaneously imagine what it was like to live on the frontier and build their own home—all from the comfort of their actual home.

The imagery and text in both advertisements evoke themes of the wild. In figure one, the images of the white settlers and the Native Americans fighting evokes themes of warfare on the American frontier. On the frontier, things were uncontrollable. People were fighting animals and Native Americans for control of the land. That is reflected through the imagery of warriors with bow and arrows drawn. However, the image does not imply that the Native Americans and the white settlers were fighting one another, an interesting twist on reality, as in Lincoln's day, the struggles between whites and Native Americans were certainly contentious. In this circumstance, everyone is fighting in the same direction, suggesting that they may be working together to conquer another larger foe such as the wild. Children could create scenarios with frontiersmen fighting Indians, characterized by the tensions felt by these natural enemies in Lincoln's day, but they could also invent more conciliatory storylines in which cooperation superseded combat. In such cases, the wild could be tamed a bit.

The text in figure two suggests that by playing with Lincoln Logs children could also evoke the wild of the frontier even though they were physically removed by more than half a century from its disappearance. The ad reads:

You all know the stories people tell about the pioneers who settled our country. How they cleared land, built log cabin, and fought the Indians. They also build a big fort called

Fort Dearborn and made it entirely out of logs. Today we don't have to do the things the pioneers did, but you boys and girls can build the same sort of little houses, barns, forts and villages that the pioneers did if you use Lincoln Logs. These logs come in several sets along with roofs and chimneys, fences, etc. There are also little figures of Indians, cowboys, soldiers, and trappers, and a set of animals for a farmyard.⁵²

In this instance, the advertisement suggests that children can pick and choose the elements of the frontier life they want to incorporate into their own. The language of the advertisement specifically mentions the pioneers. Lincoln Logs promise children the ability to act like pioneers even though the country no longer provides this experience. Kids have the ability to pick certain homes, certain forts, and certain activities to learn about the frontier. The language of the advertisement also promises authenticity; the "same sort of little houses." This imagery suggests the children could simulate the experiences of the wildlife on the frontier, but in sanitized form. They can imagine what life would be like to fight Native Americans and build giant forts.

The figurines make the toy more realistic. While a child cannot learn the same lessons, Abraham Lincoln did because they are no longer growing up on the frontier. Today, some children may live in more rural areas, but that is not the frontier experience. Lincoln Logs make the lesson of building your own home and facing the wild frontier more accessible to a generation that otherwise would have lost this important American lesson. Times have changed, but teaching children about the important lessons Lincoln learned through his experience in the wild suggests those qualities are still applicable in the twentieth century.

Self-Taught Lessons

Being self-taught was one of the largest components of the myth of the self-made man from the founding to the mid-twentieth century. One of Abraham Lincoln's largest claims to

⁵² "Lincoln Logs Company est. 1916."

self-making was his self-education. As Kenneth Winkle has noted, “[s]elf-education . . . was a rare achievement in a pioneer culture,” but Abraham Lincoln accomplished it and then exploited the imagery of himself as a self-starter in order to suggest his worth as a self-made man.⁵³ During the period of Lincoln’s childhood on the frontier, Americans did not think of formal education as a necessary precondition for success. Achievement could be attained through hard manual labor as well as scholarly pursuits. The period of Lincoln’s young life, however, marked a transition in the concept of work. “During these years Americans redefined work itself, drawing a new distinction between physical and mental labor and enthusiastically endorsing the latter,” Winkle has argued. “One hallmark of a truly self-made man was an inexorable rise from manual to mental labor, usually accomplished through diligent—active and persistent—self-education.”⁵⁴ Lincoln overcame the obstacles of the frontier while still learning the valuable lessons they had to offer, and he did so without the advantages of formal schooling. Through self-education, Lincoln became a symbol of the modern virtues of mental labor for a people who valued that trait, especially given that was attained under frontier conditions. Lincoln’s duality as an exemplar both of mental and physical labor made him an easy candidate for mythologizing.

Abraham Lincoln’s image as a self-educated man existed before he even ran for president. Winkle points out “[t]he biography Lincoln authorized for his presidential campaign pictures his family as ‘poor and uneducated and concluded that ‘It would be difficult to conceive of more unpromising circumstances than those under which he was ushered into life.’⁵⁵ Lincoln approved that depiction of his family. He made it clear to the country that he was not just from the frontier region, but he was also from extreme poverty. Lincoln, thus, helped foster the image

⁵³ Kenneth J. Winkle, “Abraham Lincoln: Self-Made Man,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 21, no. 2 (2000), 13.

⁵⁴ Winkle, “Abraham Lincoln: Self-Made Man,” 14.

⁵⁵ Winkle, “Abraham Lincoln: Self-Made Man,” 1.

of himself that he broke the bounds of poverty through self-education. The self-generated discourse suggested working hard and educating himself rendered him access to escape the bounds of poverty and the frontier region. Coming from poverty was a salient message in the mid-twentieth century as the country had just recovered from the biggest economic crisis in its history, the Great Depression. Lincoln's image serves as a message of someone who understood the struggles people endured and still made it through was inspiring for those looking for role models to emulate.

Despite Lincoln's lack of formal education, it was his strong moral character, a tenet of a rugged individual that defined his time leading the country at war. Lincoln believed secession from the Union was illegal, and he used force to defend it as he had done so often on the frontier when faced with challenges.⁵⁶ He also relied on mental discipline, however. Daniel Walker Howe argues that Lincoln developed his own moral character and did so consciously as a child. "Lincoln developed himself through reading," Howe wrote. "Conscious as he was of the limitations of his rural environment, he might have read for escape—but he did not. Instead he read for discipline."⁵⁷ As Kenneth Winkle highlights, later in life, Lincoln wrote about the importance of the ethic of self-education and experiential learning:

The key to success was self-improvement. "The way for a young man to rise," Lincoln wrote, "is to improve himself every way he can." To Lincoln, self-improvement meant a combination of hard work and a single-minded, unwavering pursuit of knowledge. "You have been a laborious, studious young man," Lincoln reassured his partner. "You can not fail in any laudable object, unless you allow your mind to be improperly directed." A young man need not depend on his family, rely on his friends, or even go to school. The surest way for a man to succeed, from Lincoln's perspective, was to "improve himself."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ "Abraham Lincoln," WhiteHouse.Gov, Accessed November 5, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/abraham-lincoln/>.

⁵⁷ Daniel Walker Howe, "Honest Abe: Abraham Lincoln and the Moral Character," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, Last Modified June 1, 2008, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2008/06/honest-abe-abraham-lincoln-and-the-moral-character/>.

⁵⁸ Winkle, "Abraham Lincoln: Self-Made Man," 16.

Lincoln's family did not value education and viewed him as lazy for pursuing an education.⁵⁹ The rest of the country, on the other hand, would soon celebrate Lincoln for his pursuit of knowledge. Lincoln's only options were no-education or self-education, and he took the more virtuous route, worked hard and created something of himself. Lincoln's self-education as a form of social mobility allowed his image to be repurposed because he had a connection both to the nineteenth century through the frontier and the twentieth century through mental labor. By lifting himself from poverty through self-education, Lincoln's image served as a form of hope for those who struggled during the Great Depression.

Lincoln Logs teach children how to build. This form of self-education is not the same that Lincoln experienced, but it evokes the imagery of his place and time. Lincoln Logs can teach children about life on the frontier by encouraging them to imagine scenarios before their formal education introduces them to such. Based on the age of the child playing, Lincoln Logs could be a child's first exposure to American history and a discussion of the frontier. The logs teach children how to build and most of this education is self-taught. One reviewer of Lincoln Logs who posted in 2019 spoke to how Lincoln Logs allow children to "put down the video game and actually build something in real life – and it adds a little nostalgia when parents or grandparents remember playing with the same toy as children."⁶⁰ Children must learn how to work the toys; what fits together and what does not. This is not an electronic toy, like a video game, so children can feel the tangible benefits of their own construction at their fingertips. There is no

⁵⁹ Winkle, "Abraham Lincoln: Self-Made Man," 13.

⁶⁰ "Lincoln Logs—100th Anniversary Tin-111 Pieces-Real Wood Logs- Ages 3+- Best Retro Building Gift Set for Boys/Girls- Creative Construction Engineering- Top Blocks Game Kit- Preschool Education Toy," Amazon, October 3, 2019, https://www.amazon.com/LINCOLN-LOGS-Anniversary-Construction-Education/dp/B00RWNEN9W/ref=pd_rhf_ee_p_img_3?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=93GWBE41C5ZSCBC5EC56.

requirement that children work alone to learn about Lincoln Logs, but the idea of being self-taught is a crucial part of the image of the self-made man in the toy.

The imagery in the ad does not contribute to the discussion of being self-made as much as the text. The text of the ad provides a limited background to the lives of those who lived on the frontier. “Today we don’t have to do the things the pioneers did, but you boys and girls can build the same sort of little houses, barns, forts and villages that the pioneers did if you use Lincoln Logs.”⁶¹ Children no longer do the things the pioneers did because the United States’ economy has developed and wild land is not the same, instead children attend school. Children can begin to ask questions. What was life like on the frontier? How is my life different? What were their homes like? What things did they have access to? Lincoln Logs are an introduction into the idea of self-education. The child can learn individually, but in a structured environment. It allows the child creativity to learn about the forts that were built on the frontier and frontiersman’s interaction with animals and Native Americans. Through the figurines that are included with the logs, children can imagine and understand what it meant to be a frontiersman and emulate those scenarios in a context understandable to them.

Children can understand the conditions of the frontier in sanitized form through Lincoln Logs. These toys represent a nostalgic representation of an idealized past that multiple generations can use to connect. Through Lincoln Logs, children can connect with other family members who learned about the frontier in the same format. A reviewer of Lincoln Logs from 2007 suggested

Lincoln Logs are a wonderful way for parents, grandparents, and children to interact together, especially for younger children...Grownups get very nostalgic when playing with Lincoln Logs with their children. It brings back fond memories and creates new

⁶¹ “Lincoln Logs Company est. 1916.”

memories for themselves and their children. I highly recommend Lincoln Logs as a creative choice for your children and grandchildren.⁶²

Lincoln Logs inspire creativity amongst children and allow other generations to bestow knowledge. They gathered through their experiences with Lincoln Logs and in life. There is an intergenerational connection built through the shared experience of playing with Lincoln Logs. Parents who learned the tangible skills about building and the wild can nostalgically bestow the same knowledge on their children in the exact same form. Lincoln Logs are a tool of self-teaching and just a tool of learning.

Lessons on Building

The self-made man has the capacity to build in mythic proportions. Lincoln did just that and therefore his image was easily serviceable at a time when the country needed to rebuild from the Great Depression. Lincoln had an ability to build like no other. He could build tangible objects like log cabins and flatboats or he could build with his mind and conceive of a way to preserve the country during the Civil War. According to the Miller Center, Lincoln built his first flatboat because he was inspired by his work on the Mississippi River. After that, he sold the timber and gave the money to his father. At age twenty-one “the family again moved, this time to Illinois just west of Decatur. The father and son built another log cabin not much bigger than the one they had lived in before. Following this move, Abe built a second flatboat and made another run down river, but this time as an independent operator.”⁶³ Lincoln built the infamous log cabin that serves a symbol for his childhood. Through this ability to construct (both physical objects

⁶² “Lincoln Logs Commemorative Edition Tin,” Amazon, December 11, 2007, https://www.amazon.com/Lincoln-Logs-Commemorative-Edition-Tin/dp/B000AEOFFM/ref=pd_rhf_ee_p_img_4?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=93GWBE41C5ZSCBC5EC56.

⁶³ “Abraham Lincoln: Life Before the Presidency,” Michael Burlingame, UVA Miller Center, Accessed November 5, 2019, <https://millercenter.org/president/lincoln/life-before-the-presidency>.

and ideas), Lincoln learned important lessons about being humble, putting in effort, and taking pride in tangible success.

Lincoln learned other lessons as well, but these have been distorted, perhaps, by myth makers. He was quoted as saying “Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the ax.”⁶⁴ It is not clear the lineage of this quote or whether Lincoln actually said it or not, but it contributed to his mythic stature insofar as it highlighted his sense of the importance of preparing for a task. He applied that same knowledge to think he created with his brain. He built a plan to save the Union from the Civil War and used his self-taught lessons to guide him. The epitome of the American rugged individual, Abraham Lincoln spent years preparing himself mentally to help solve the problems that led his country into brutal warfare. Only second to those that founded the great United States, Abraham Lincoln was noteworthy for having preserved the country at a time when the very existence of the nation was at stake. Lincoln’s leadership preserved the union and prepared the way for the transitions the country underwent after the emancipation. Lincoln served as a symbol for the individual who could find a way for the government to unite the states when they were anything but united. In this sense, Abraham Lincoln was the ultimate self-made man because he could build tangibly and with his mind, he taught himself, and he was from the wild. All of these elements gave him a moral compass to guide the country during his life and afterwards. Lincoln’s experiences served as markers to display the moral leadership the country needed (and still needs) in difficult times. As a self-made man, he became a prominent role model for citizens of a nation who were trying to rebuild their economy following a disastrous depression and a dust bowl in the Midwest.

⁶⁴ “Zachary Forget,” *Medium*, Last modified November 11, 2017, <https://medium.com/@zacharyforget/abraham-lincoln-was-quoted-as-saying-give-me-six-hours-to-chop-down-a-tree-and-i-will-spend-the-e1a4fc84229>.

Most importantly, Lincoln Logs teach children how to build. Children have the ability to create whatever they want with Lincoln Logs. While they are still confined to the notches of their logs, children can build any fort that fits within those confines and imagine it to be anything. Lincoln Logs are a toy made to build. They teach children how to create structures and how to imagine what goes inside those structures. They do not need to chop down trees; they can grab the finished timbers at the tip of their fingers. Their work is also not taxing but is designed to be fun. The importance of the Lincoln Logs is to teach children the values Lincoln learned when he was required to fashion his own crude homes from real timbers and mortar, but without the mess (literal as well as figurative).

The text of the advertisement suggests that the toy is intended to teach children how to build. “Miniature Building Material made of hardwood, seasoned and stained a weathered brown. Simple designed illustrate innumerable different items of log construction. Easily put together.”⁶⁵ The advertisement conveys the impression of an easy to build, and easy to learn about, toy that will introduce children to the idea of engineering for the future. In addition to the text, the imagery supports this even further with the designs of the various log cabins that can be built from the sets. Importantly, some of the sets have elements you can buy pre-made, but those only supplement the structures children create. For them to do anything with the toy, it is clear that they have to learn how to build.

It was reported that Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin he built himself.⁶⁶ How is it possible that such inflated rhetoric surrounded Lincoln? The simplest answer seems to be that such an origin narrative conforms so nicely to the myth of the self-made man. American popular

⁶⁵ “Lincoln Logs Company est. 1916.”

⁶⁶ Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory*.; Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

discourse has mythologized the birth story of the idyllic American self-made man, because every self-reliant hero needs a spectacular backstory. Obviously, Lincoln could not have built the log cabin he was born in, but the legend demanded something extraordinary of that sort. The real Abraham Lincoln was born on the western Kentucky frontier in 1809, and that fact alone was a sufficient starting point for the future mythologizing of the man.

Chapter 3:

An Adaptation: The Myth of the Self-Made Woman

The United States was built by self-made men *and* women who worked together on the frontier to create a great nation that expanded from ocean to ocean. However, women rarely make an appearance in the stories of self-made men that define the American frontier and American psyche. The myth ignored the existence of many identities on the frontier and as a result, the material culture that utilizes and perpetuates this myth does not cater to those groups. However, as a culture changes and advances, myths are forced to do the same if they want to remain viable. If a myth does not change and the society cannot relate to it then it simply dies out. The myth of the self-made man adapted to include women, a previously overlooked group.

Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, "The Significant of the Frontier in American History" overlooked the role of women on the frontier. This thesis remains one of the most important pieces of writing defining the contribution of the frontier to what it meant to be self-made. However, women were either not included in the story at all or they were not useful to Turner's intentions for identifying the male-centric contributions of the frontier to American thought and progress. Prior to the adaptation of the myth typical images of women presented a narrative of those who only performed housework. According to Glenda Riley, the lack of women in Turner's work "helped create a tunnel vision that his followers perpetuated in the area of study he loved-sectionalism and the American West. Instead of enlarging Turner's viewpoint to include such groups as women, they supported and repeated Turner's primary argument."⁶⁷ The scarcity of women in the original frontier thesis led to a paucity of women in the study of the west all together. As Henry Nash Smith argued, Turner's thesis would not have been so

⁶⁷ Glenda Riley, "Frederick Jackson Turner Overlooked the Ladies," *Journal of the Early Republic* 13 (1993): 217.

successful had its concepts not permeated the culture so pervasively at the time, and it was decidedly a patriarchal culture. The lack of women in Turner's thesis allowed the myth to take off only recognizing a single group of contributors, men. This resulted in a vacuum of scholarship that excluded a large group of people. Perhaps this was because women did not need the myth at the time since they were 'only in the household' (as the myth itself would suggest), but this seems far too simplistic.

The unarguable fact is that the lack of women in frontier scholarship led to a myth that fostered only the image of men chopping down wood and controlling the uncontrollable wild. There was a large reliance on male leadership in scholarship at the time Turner wrote his thesis. Riley hypothesizes that Turner's inattention to women was the result of the time he was writing in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Men looked for a story that emulated the image of themselves.⁶⁸ Therefore, many of the objects of material culture that perpetuate this mythology, like Lincoln Logs, focus on the role of men from this time. The myth and the material culture deriving from it, have been forced to adapt to changing conditions. Women began to play a more prominent role in public affairs in the decades after Turner wrote, especially during and after World War II, when they entered the workforce in increasing numbers. They were no longer the silent homemakers and women needed to be recognized for their contributions to more than just the home. How would women utilize a mythology that did not relate to their image? The result was a need to change the myth of the self-made man or retire it all together.

The myth of the self-made man adapted to accommodate women in the twentieth century. This resulted in cultural symbols that related to a new group of self-made individuals, women. *Forbes Magazine* began publishing its lists of "Americas Richest Self-Made Women," a practice

⁶⁸ Riley, "Frederick Jackson Turner Overlooked the Ladies," 221.

that recognized women for their contributions and individual success in capitalism. However, women as a group are still working to prove themselves in a system that was designed to cater to men. One way women have begun to accomplish this is to reinvest themselves into the story of the frontier, encouraging Americans to recognize that the nation's foundational story belongs both to men and women. Once women have received the proper recognition they deserve for their roles on the frontier, the mythologies that have emerged from the West can be retooled to accommodate them as well. And once the foundational myth has been reworked to include the concept of the self-made woman, it can become more serviceable to the entire population, even if it continues to retain some of those mythic qualities that make it unrepresentative of reality in its truest sense.

Many of the women who are helping to reshape the mythology surrounding the self-made women are themselves self-made, and some of the most successful at that. Pleasant Rowland, founder of the Pleasant Company which was later sold to Mattel and renamed American Girl, created a toy line that projects the story of powerful and resourceful young girls into history. As of 2019, Pleasant Rowland is number sixty-six on the aforementioned list of "America's Richest Self-Made Women" by *Forbes*. Rowland's goal in American Girl was to redefine the image of women in American material culture and subsequently reshape the narrative of what it meant to be a young woman in American history with the hopes of influencing the next generation of self-made women. However, because stories of self-made women prior to the twentieth century are few and far between, Rowland uses fiction to teach young girls about being self-made during historically based time periods. Kirsten Larson, the American Girl growing up on the Minnesota frontier in 1854, represents the adaptation of the myth of the self-made man into the myth of the self-made woman. She demonstrates how women, too, were a part of the frontier experience and

despite being traditionally deprived of the ability to learn from the frontier, young girls could also accomplish and learn the lessons from the frontier that men could. In so doing, Rowland has demonstrated how a myth can be adapted to meet changing cultural conditions and how, in the process, it can retain its viability. In this situation, fiction is the means of its adaptation. And while the myth does accommodate women it does so in a way that forces women to do traditionally male jobs to prove their self-making. Kirsten's story demonstrates this as she is forced to keep up with the typically male jobs on the frontier to prove she is self-made. The myth of the self-made woman emerges during the twentieth century to preserve and even revitalize an outdated myth that used to only recognize men for their accomplishments in the United States. Pleasant Rowland is living proof that women can be self-made too, *despite* being excluded from the foundational scholarship that would have awarded them these opportunities all along. Her accomplishments also suggest that recognizing the commercial power of myths and one's ability to influence their authority in ideological ways is vital to the process.

Chapter 4:

The Inspiration for American Girl

Pleasant Rowland's concept of an "American Girlhood" enterprise profoundly shaped the childhoods of many young girls growing up in the United States in the late Twentieth Century.

Rowland founded the American Girl line in 1986 after a trip to Colonial Williamsburg where the idea was born. In a postcard to her friend Valerie Tripp, Rowland wrote:

I have been down in Williamsburg this week and had an idea. What do you think of it? A series of books about nine-year-old girls growing up at different times in American history. There would be six books for each, and each book would reflect the important moments of girlhood. How it changed and how it stayed the same over the years. There would be a doll for each character with historically accurate clothes and accessories so girls could play out the stories. There might even be matching clothes for the girls. (Transcribed from YouTube).⁶⁹

From this simple postcard concept, the American Girl idea and company emerged.

Accounts of the beginnings of the project contain many of the elements of a classic American origin myth. A few months after describing the idea to her friend, Rowland travelled to a cabin in the woods with her husband. There, "sitting by the wood stove," she "sat down to write out [her] vision."⁷⁰ It is significant that she formulated her plans in the woods. Not only did she find that she wrote with ease in the forested environment, but the wilderness inspired her and became the setting for some of her most important American Girl storylines "I have done a lot of writing in my life and never before or since had words flowed so quickly or easily," she wrote.⁷¹ "The peace of the woods and sitting by a wood stove removed distraction."⁷² The woods allowed her to envision herself as a modern-day frontierswoman, who, like the originals, gained greater

⁶⁹ "Pleasant Rowland speaks at American Girl 25th Anniversary Tribute | American Girl," YouTube Video, 7:22, posted by "American Girl," November 29, 2011,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=7&v=_ItX5W6eZYw&feature=emb_title.

⁷⁰ "Pleasant Rowland speaks at American Girl 25th Anniversary Tribute | American Girl."

⁷¹ "Pleasant Rowland speaks at American Girl 25th Anniversary Tribute | American Girl."

⁷² "Pleasant Rowland speaks at American Girl 25th Anniversary Tribute | American Girl."

self-reliance in their wilderness outposts. In the woods, she gained a sense of freedom from gender constraints. Back home she was dependent on others, particularly men who dominated the business world, to advance her ideas. In the wilderness she imagined that she could be her own woman, working beside her husband, to be sure, but independent of him as well. Reflecting on her own dreams and aspirations, she thought of herself as a frontier woman who had to rely on her own strengths to see her vision through to completion. It was a woman's turn now.

Rowland's sense of joyful self-reliance was short-lived, however. After her inspirational sojourn in the wilderness, Rowland returned home to find that many toy executives, mostly men, did not share her belief in the American Girl concept.⁷³ Their objections were many and various. Some pointed out that the dolls and accompanying books were geared towards girls who were older than the toy market typically was aimed. Others felt that most children of any age would be disinterested in historically themed products. She describes the feeling of defeat she experienced in the face of these doubts. "When I left the cozy boathouse and began to ask people what they thought of my big idea I was met with disbelief and patronizing tolerance summarized with 'are you kidding? Historical dolls in the day and age of Barbie?'"⁷⁴ Nonetheless, she persevered. She worked hard and built a successful company as a result. Reflecting on the experience Rowland recalled that she was not deterred by her lack of expertise or by the gender stereotypes that impacted her work. "What I didn't know didn't stop me. I simply knew I had a good idea and somehow I would figure out how to get it done."⁷⁵ Like many of the self-made men in the industry before her, this self-made woman made it up as she went along. She learned as she needed to and survived in a world dominated by men, just as the frontierswomen she wrote about

⁷³ "Pleasant Rowland speaks at American Girl 25th Anniversary Tribute | American Girl."

⁷⁴ "Pleasant Rowland speaks at American Girl 25th Anniversary Tribute | American Girl."

⁷⁵ "Pleasant Rowland speaks at American Girl 25th Anniversary Tribute | American Girl."

did when asked to participate as equals with men out on the frontier. She was daring enough to take the risk and did so without other financial backers. She succeeded.

American Girl is a company that seeks to empower young girls and shape who they grow up to become. The company's website states: "We believe in creating girls of strong character. Facing fears, running into roadblocks, and learning from mistakes? That's life. Responding with optimism and resilience? That's character—the kind we build in girls everywhere, every day through stories and experiences both timely and timeless."⁷⁶ Rowland created her brand based on the assumption that American Girl dolls would embody more than the beauty of a doll or a simple story. By encountering different challenges, the dolls would teach young girls how to emulate the qualities of hardworking and passionate girls of good character. The story lines within the books would allow girls to consider how they might have acted in a given historic time period and what lessons they would have learned from its circumstances. The stories that are curated by American Girl are "chosen with intention and purpose, to inspire girls to think about who they are and who they want to be."⁷⁷ The girls who played with the dolls and who read the accompanying stories would be expected to take real life lessons from such activities. The dolls would come to life and becomes a tool of the imagination. Instructions for understanding the historical context of specific periods would be given, and girls would then be free to allow their imaginations to wander as they considered how they might have reacted to conditions in another era.

Pleasant Rowland dreamed of a company run by an independent woman that would shape the way girls understood themselves by encouraging them to re-imagine and reinvent themselves

⁷⁶ "Building Girls of Strong Character," *American Girl*, accessed February 16, 2020, <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/who-we-are>.

⁷⁷ "Character Matters: American Girl," *American Girl*, accessed February 16, 2020, <https://www.americangirl.com/explore/articles/our-purpose-your-girls-our-world-character-counts/>.

in other historical contexts. Rowland's original ideas, sketched loosely on a postcard, developed into a major industry. The dolls each have a series of six books. All of the dolls are created with historical accuracy in mind. The clothes the dolls wear match clothes girls can purchase as well. While remaining true to Rowland's original vision, American Girl today has expanded far beyond what she imagined when she traveled to her cabin in the woods with her husband and developed the concepts for the original dolls. Her vision was embryonic at best when she emerged from the woods, but her perseverance paid off. Rowland sold the Pleasant Company to Mattel in 1998 for \$700 million and it has since been known as American Girl.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Emilie Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2017): 5.

The Biography of a Self-Made Woman: Pleasant Rowland

Pleasant Rowland's rise to success fit some but not all of the traditional elements associated with the myth of the self-made man. She was born in 1941, but not into poverty; rather, she came from a wealthy family in the exclusive Chicago suburb of Bannockburn, Illinois.⁷⁹ She was the oldest of four and was raised primarily by her stay-at-home mom. Her father was the president of the Leo Burnett ad agency whose clients were Campbell's soup and Green Giant vegetables.⁸⁰ She did, however, in her youth, imbibe the spirit of rugged individualism inherent in the myth. When she was a little girl, Rowland was impacted by her father's hard work ethic as an advertising executive and was "the source of her belief that 'great ideas need to be detailed and beautifully executed.'" ⁸¹ Rowland attended Wells College in Aurora, New York, after which she embarked on a number of careers. She began as a schoolteacher on the East coast and in California, although she was apparently bored by curricula "lacking in creativity and in the attention to detail and beautiful execution."⁸² After six years she left teaching and dabbled in journalism and television reporting. During this time she met the designer of a bilingual children's curriculum and made a professional connection that eventually led to a job at the Boston Educational Research Company. There, she worked for eight years to develop a reading curriculum that schools still use today. Rising rapidly to Vice President, Rowland went to Madison, Wisconsin to oversee the printing of the curriculum. There she met the owner of the printing company, Jerry Frautschi, who became her husband.

Pleasant Rowland was well-educated and fortunate to move across the country to make professional connections. She did not pull herself up by the bootstraps and create a company

⁷⁹ Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 13.

⁸⁰ Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 13.

⁸¹ Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 13.

⁸² Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 14.

from nothing, as the myth would imply. She had help, and plenty of it. The mythic story of the rise of the American Girl Company from the inventive mind of Pleasant Rowland often excludes the important assistance of these contributors, distorting the historical record in the process. Just as many self-made men obscured the role their wives played in their successes, so Rowland's husband takes a lesser role in the origin myths surrounding the founding of the company. The initial trip to Colonial Williamsburg that inspired the Pleasant Company was actually a convention her husband was attending according to one scholar, Emilie Zaslow. However, when Rowland spoke at the twenty-fifth anniversary tribute for American Girl, her husband's part in the formative trip to Williamsburg was not mentioned at all.⁸³ He is also not mentioned in her original postcard nor in her accounts at national conventions of Jerry Frautschi's presence during the creative days when the project was formulated in the cabin in the woods. Her husband drops out of the story entirely because, from the earliest moments when the American Girl enterprise began to thrive, the myth of the self-made individual began to dominate the origin story. It would not have been consistent with the formula for Rowland to have received too much aid from anyone else. Hers needed to be told the story of a single individual persevering against tremendous odds, and that is often how it is told.

And the odds were formidable, both professional and personal. In order for her business to succeed, she had to convince executives in the toy market that girls would be anxious to play with dolls beyond the age of six.⁸⁴ Rowland's entire line was geared for girls aged seven to twelve. One critic described Rowland's idea as "absurd" for its time. Like many who were associated with the self-made mythology, she started with some financial advantages, including

⁸³ "Pleasant Rowland speaks at American Girl 25th Anniversary Tribute | American Girl."

⁸⁴ Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 15.

the \$1.2 million she had saved from her textbook royalties.⁸⁵ Her true claim to fame came from risking what she had for something greater. In this sense, her story conformed to the mythology nicely. She also overcame physical hardships. In the third year of the company, Rowland moved operations into an expanded warehouse. At the same time, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She showed considerable bravery in a moment of personal duress. “I cut the ribbon on the new warehouse in the morning and went into the hospital that afternoon to have surgery,” she recounted. Though the tumor was large and the prognosis poor, Rowland attributes her survival to the work she did at Pleasant Company where, despite “chemotherapy and radiation,” she “never missed a day of work.”⁸⁶ American Girl scholar Emilie Zaslow credits the health of both Rowland and the company to the founder’s selflessness. “Her dedication paid off in her health as well as the company’s growth.”⁸⁷ Like other proverbial self-made individuals, she overcame considerable personal hardships to become famous and successful. Once again, however, this version of her heroic story does not highlight the support Rowland got throughout her time in treatment. In order to overcome her condition, she relied on an extensive support network and the story only highlights the individual at the top, not those who worked hard to maintain the success of the Pleasant Company in the face of the founder’s adversity.

Pleasant Rowland was a self-made woman who defied many boundaries with her work in the Pleasant Company that later became American Girl. As a result of this groundbreaking company, Rowland helped change the narrative of the previously gendered myth of the self-made man. She expanded the nature of what it means to be self-made in the United States by modeling some of its most characteristic features, like courage, kindness, and compassion.

⁸⁵ Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 15.

⁸⁶ Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 22.

⁸⁷ Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 22.

Rowland also expanded the male version of the mythology to include women entrepreneurs who had traditionally been denied access to any of the rungs of the “ladder of success.” In demonstrating that women could be as successful in the toy market as men, Rowland exposed the gendered nature of the original myth, creating a new category, the self-made woman. This new mythic conceptualization often denied credit where it was due, as had been the case with the male version of the myth, but in this case it was a woman doing the ignoring (often of men) on behalf of female entrepreneurship. In Rowland’s case, she used the mythology to advance her own interests as a woman, and, while that may seem self-serving, it also provided her a means to achieve levels of success that the previous male-centric mythology would not allow her.

What is American Girl?

The American Girl brand was originally the Pleasant Company founded in 1986 by Pleasant Rowland. Rowland sought to create a doll brand that was an alternative to Cabbage Patch Dolls and Barbies that dominated the toy market in the 1980s. These popular dolls had substantial flaws, according to Rowland. The Cabbage Patch doll, seen in Figure 3, was a “scrunchy vegetable doll” as Rowland put it and the Barbie, seen in Figure 4, “was too sexual for young girls” because she was “garbed in her tight mini dresses and heels” which rushed girls into pre-mature adolescence. The dolls Rowland created were different from these competitors. American Girl dolls, as seen in Figure 5, were pre-adolescents and focused on history, not the objectification of the female body like Barbie. The torsos of the dolls have “prepubescent, curveless shapes. The slightly rounded limbs create a childlike silhouette, and their baby-cheeked faces have delicate features. Pleasant Rowland designed the dolls to look specifically like the eight- to twelve-year-old girls to whom they are geared.”⁸⁸ The doll in figure 5 shows all of these qualities. They were intended to be play toys that would reflect, in age-appropriate ways, the outlooks of the girls who played with them. Rather than looking to a doll like



Figure 3: Cabbage Patch



Figure 4: Barbie Doll



Figure 5: American Girl Doll
Kirsten Larson

⁸⁸ Molly Rosner, “The American Girl Company and the Uses of Nostalgia in Children’s Consumer Culture,” *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 6 (2014): 39.

Barbie as an aspiration of idealized feminism, Rowland hoped to create dolls that would make girls proud of being girls and provided realistic models for girls to emulate. Rowland was motivated by her upbringing and coming to age in the 1960s, a time that broadly expanded women's roles. When Rowland considered competitors like the Barbie dolls, she found a dissonance between being a member of "a generation of women at the forefront of redefining women's roles" whose "daughters were playing with dolls that celebrated being a teen queen or a mommy."⁸⁹ Instead of focusing on beauty or child rearing, the American Girl doll line was meant to preserve childhood for as long as it could. Girls between the ages of seven and twelve needed a doll that was not too infantile (Cabbage Patch) or too mature (Barbie) but something in-between that could prolong youthful exuberance for active play.

Rowland's dolls had a special element to them because they were not just dolls. The dolls had individual names and personalities, and their characters were developed through a series of six books for each figure. The dolls and books were meant collectively to help shape the characters of the girls who were playing with them by each demonstrating the virtues of certain values as evidenced in historical contexts. The American Girl Company described itself as "a trusted partner for parents who want to raise their girls with confidence and character."⁹⁰ Each doll has a fully fleshed out character, and her series of six books helps "girls discover their sense of self with timeless stories and memorable characters who instill important values like honesty, courage, kindness, and compassion. These values help shape who our girls will become."⁹¹ The books teach young girls important lessons that they can actualize and absorb for themselves by playing with the dolls. Reading provides one source of inspiration, but the fact that girls could

⁸⁹ Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 15.

⁹⁰ "Our Company: American Girl," American Girl, Accessed February 16, 2020, <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/our-company>.

⁹¹ "Our Company: American Girl,"

read an inspiring story and then manipulate a tangible object to reproduce and reaffirm the lessons of that story was a significant breakthrough. There were obvious educational benefits to such a literacy-based form of play, but it also provided opportunities for children to participate in activities that would anticipate challenges they would face later in life as women.

The American Girl Company functions as part of a competing duality. In one sense, the product line promotes activism and challenges young girls to defy norms, such as femininity. Heike Paul, an American Studies scholar, argues that “more recent female exemplars often follow a skewed logic that tends to define female success not in terms of work as productivity, but more often in terms of the kind of work that goes into maintaining and improving one’s physical attractiveness.”⁹² While there may be many examples of self-made women who are idealized for their looks, like Barbie or Miss America, American Girl defies those ideals as the standard for what it means to be self-made for women in America. Rowland’s story fits more into the myth of the self-made ‘man’ if the myth of the self-made woman is defined by Paul’s superficial characteristics. The narrative behind the formation of the Pleasant Company and American Girl defies the idea that to be a self-made woman you have to be beautiful and fit into a mold. Instead, American Girl hopes to shatter that mold and teach girls how to be self-made in a way that stands up for morality and privileges character over physical appearance. The dolls themselves do not conform to the typical beauty standards as a form of opposition to the standard that to be a self-made woman you must be beautiful. The entire mission of the American Girl company is centered on leading by example and teaching girls to stand up to that sexist notion.

In another sense, however, the company reaffirms traditional culture, in this case, capitalist culture. Consumers are asked to literally buy into the idea that dolls need to be

⁹² Paul, *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*, 398.

purchased in order to teach young girls how to live their lives. American Girl scholar Emilie Zaslow calls this “commodity activism.” She explains that “like other manifestations of girl power media culture, American Girl is a collection of material goods produced and purchased within a capitalist system but also a material form of resistance to historical power dynamics.”⁹³ She recognizes American Girl “as a product both of a massive corporation whose messaging is organized around a capitalist imperative and also of critical feminist writers and product designers whose intentions are politically inspired.”⁹⁴ According to Zaslow, American Girl has been successful both in promoting ideological change (feminism) and in stabilizing tradition (consumerism). The doll designers and script writers seek to shape a new generation of girls who do not need to play with a scrunchy vegetable doll or a highly sexualized physique to learn about their femininity but who do so in the capitalist marketplace. Zaslow finds that the demand for a product like American Girl derives partially from the “the parental goal of shaping a generation of resilient, self-directed girls who recognize the power of their voices (and not just their sexuality) as a critical part of their (American) identity.”⁹⁵ It also comes from market-driven promotions that convince a girl and her parents that the company’s products need to be purchased in order to attain these goals. Through American Girl, young girls receive a counter narrative to the traditional ideals of what it means to be a woman in the United States, but they get it through traditional capitalist means.

It is also important to note in this regard that American Girl dolls are only accessible to those who are socioeconomically advantaged. The original line in 1985 included a doll and her first story for \$82. Today, the same doll and first story cost \$98. This makes the doll far out of

⁹³ Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 5.

⁹⁴ Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 6.

⁹⁵ Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 6.

the price budget for the average girl. In addition, the accessories that accompany the doll are also expensive. The collections included “historically accurate doll beds [which] sold for between \$40 and \$60; trunks or dressers to store the dolls’ \$22 dresses ranged from \$150 to \$175 and parents who were able to purchase the whole collection at once shelled out nearly \$1,000.”⁹⁶ \$1,000 is a very high price to pay for a child to play for only a few years. While these accessories aided in the imaginative potential for play, they relegated the dolls to the luxury end of the toy spectrum. In addition, the brand remains exclusive. It is not sold in big box stores. There are only nineteen American Girl stores in the entire world and most purchases took place by catalogue before the platform transitioned to internet sales. Today, parents can purchase a Barbie doll for \$9.99 at a number of toy stores. Some dolls that come with sets of accessories to accompany the doll are \$19.99 for a doll *and* the accessories. American Girl promotes a form of activism and teaches girls to consider a feminist narrative of what it means to be a girl in America, but those lessons are only accessible to the few girls who are typically already surrounded by immense financial privilege. The result is that the lessons of reform feminism are confined, ironically, to those who have grown up in family situations among those who have mastered the traditional capitalist system that repressed those values in the first place.

⁹⁶ Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 21.

The Original Girls and the Setup of American Girl

The story of the original characters Rowland created expands far beyond the pages of a book. Rowland and subsequent American Girl executives have said they are “not in the doll business but in the ‘business of little girls.’” Zaslow explains: “American Girl... is not only involved in the production of dolls but the production of girls. Indeed, the books children read and the toys with which they play normalize particular ideologies and encourage particular ways of interacting with the social world.”⁹⁷ While the stories may seem simple or clearly historically based, they are meant to teach the readers more than what is just on the page. They are interested in shaping the character of the consumer. The stories of the first three dolls: Kirsten Larson, Molly McIntire, and Samantha Parkington, sparked \$1.7 million in sales in the first year. Their books and characters allowed girls to relate to the dolls historically based problems and eventually to apply the moral lessons to their own lives. Each of the three dolls was associated with a different time period. Kirsten Larson was a Swedish immigrant growing up in Minnesota in 1854. The American Girl archive describes Kirsten’s story as that of a girl who “encounters a different culture as her family settles in the New World. In time, she learns the richness of the land—and the true meaning of home.”⁹⁸ The focus of Kirsten’s story is perseverance in the face of an entirely new world. It is a glimpse at what it was like for immigrants to come to the United States and live on the frontier.

Samantha Parkington’s is the story of growing up in the Victorian era surrounded by a conservative family. Samantha is the only of the original dolls that is still being sold today, and her character is described as: “a kindhearted girl in 1904 who won’t let ‘proper’ society stop her

⁹⁷ Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 10.

⁹⁸ “Retired Dolls | Archives | American Girl,” American Girl, accessed February 18, 2020, <https://www.americangirl.com/archives>.

from helping others.”⁹⁹ Samantha defies the typical gender norms of the Victorian Era to follow her values.

The last of the original trio was Molly McIntire, a middle-class girl whose father served as a doctor during World War II. The American Girl Archive website describes Molly’s story as that of a self-sacrificing young heroine: “In 1944, Molly McIntire is facing the hardships of World War Two. While she awaits her father's return, with Emily's help, Molly learns to pull together for the common good.”¹⁰⁰ Molly puts the need of the country over her own wants to have her father at home with her. The new American Girl company added Emily, Molly’s best friend, to supplement their sales and enhance Molly’s original story. The current American Girl company has vastly expanded the historical dolls line to include dolls from many different time periods. Each doll has a different issue to encounter and the lessons they learn teach the girls who play with them about differing and new places and times, defying the norms or putting the collective over oneself to name just a few.

The book series for each doll follows a formulaic approach to teach the readers important moral lessons. The books are themed, taking each girl through a series of six developmental stages, including home, school, Christmas, birthday, achievement, and change. These six milestones allow the reader to become acclimated with the character and her struggles, transferring their lessons to the reader’s personal life. The first book in each case is titled *Meet _____*. It introduces the background story of the character and the main characters of the series, typically the doll’s family members or close friends. This book “situate[s] her within a historical time period and often within a socio-historical conflict.”¹⁰¹ The stories in the second volumes

⁹⁹ “American Girl Historical Characters | American Girl,” American Girl, accessed February 28, 2020, <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/historical-characters-brand>.

¹⁰⁰ “Retired Dolls | Archives | American Girl.”

¹⁰¹ Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 20.

about school help girls learn about education in the time period in which the doll lives. Often, these stories contain a moral message for the reader to absorb in addition to the educational lesson the character learns in school.¹⁰² The stories in the third and fourth volumes about Christmas and Birthdays enhance the particular character of the doll in addition to providing more products for the reader who is presumed to be interested in emulating such traits. In the “saves the day” narratives of the fifth volumes, the character generally prevails over conflict in ways befitting a heroine.¹⁰³ The final sixth volumes present the characters with changes to which they need to adapt. They offer advice to young girls who may face similar challenges of change such as switching schools or moving.¹⁰⁴

The issues the dolls encounter are similar to those that Rowland presumed young female readers would be likely to face in their own young lives. Themes such as romance are not included, as the American Girl Company assumes that this is not (or should not be) an intense interest of seven-to-twelve-year-old girls.¹⁰⁵ The explicit goal in excluding romance is to avoid rushing girls forward in their development too quickly, such as what happens when they play too early with anatomically suggestive Barbie dolls. While some of the situations the girls encounter are certainly overdramatized and perhaps not relevant to what privileged young consumers might encounter in their lives, the goal is to present realistic scenarios from which any young reader might benefit. For instance, Kirsten has to help her father lead a horse through a snowstorm when he gets hurt. While a child today may not be leading horse drawn carriages on their own through Minnesota snowstorms, they may have to help an injured parent or endure inclement weather. The underlying lessons are more important than the details of what is actually taking

¹⁰² Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 20.

¹⁰³ Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 20.

¹⁰⁴ Zaslow, *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 20.

¹⁰⁵ Rosner, “The American Girl Company and the Uses of Nostalgia in Children’s Consumer Culture,” 39.

place. The young girls can imagine how they would handle that situation and adapt to their own lives based on the lessons they learned from the doll, even if the time periods are different. The characters frequently defy the narrative of what a woman would be expected to do in that time period, much less a young girl. As Zaslow notes, the books “frequently present girls as countering prescriptive femininity of the times in which they live and ascribe a high value to the political work in which many of the girl protagonists engage.”¹⁰⁶ The dolls are far ahead of their times because frequently, the lessons they teach are better applied to the contemporary moment of the readers day than they are to the historical time period of the characters whose stories are being read. They use the past to teach girls about lessons they should apply today.

The stories add significance to the material items in the doll’s collection. This has both moral and economic implications. The dolls are often far ahead of their political times in many of the stories because presenting their stories in such a way fits American Girl’s overall moral intent, such as promoting feminism. This sometimes requires distorting historical accuracy. All of the items claim to be historically accurate for the time period in which the doll is based, but the girls, or their parents, are encouraged to purchase the items the dolls promote in their stories, leading to additional potential distortions. The sale of these products creates a market of nostalgia for an idealized past. There are elements of the dolls stories that are glamorized for the purpose of consumerism. Emily Rosner argues “the stories are written in a way that relates more to the experience of a middle- and upper-class American girl at the turn of the twenty-first century than to the history of the era it purports to represent.”¹⁰⁷ Despite claiming that they are selling historically accurate dolls, the lessons that the company promotes in the encounters faced by girls like Kirsten, Samantha and Molly do not align always with the historical narrative.

¹⁰⁶ Zaslow, *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection*, 5.

¹⁰⁷ Rosner, “The American Girl Company and the Uses of Nostalgia in Children’s Consumer Culture,” 41.

Rosner goes on to argue that the company is really selling the dolls to the mother of the child and “the success of the American Girl dolls stems from the manipulation of the nostalgic impulse of this adult consumer by the company...the consumer is encouraged to identify historical periods, not with important social, cultural, or political events but with semiotic signifiers like hairstyles, clothing, and accessories associated with particular trends.”¹⁰⁸ This raises a question about the priorities of the American Girl line. In the end is it a history company with a capitalist agenda or a doll company that also teaches girls about morals?

¹⁰⁸ Rosner, “The American Girl Company and the Uses of Nostalgia in Children’s Consumer Culture,” 40-41.

Kirsten Larson: A Frontier Feminist

The story of Kirsten Larson emerges piecemeal in the pages of a six-volume series. The six books are: *Meet Kirsten: An American Girl*; *Kirsten Learns a Lesson: A School Story*; *Kirsten's Surprise: A Christmas Story*; *Happy Birthday, Kirsten!: A Springtime Story*, *Kirsten Saves the Day: A summer Story*; and *Changes for Kirsten: A Winter Story*. This series covers the life of a nine (turning ten)-year-old girl who emigrates from Sweden to the United States in 1854. Each book is sixty pages or less, but the mahogany box set in which the six volumes are packaged contains a comprehensive narrative of what life on the American frontier was like for an immigrant girl. The narratives are compelling from a storytelling point of view, but they serve larger moral purposes as well: to inspire young girls who own Kirsten dolls to confront difficulties head-on, to learn the appropriate lessons from such challenges, and to defy convention in these endeavors where appropriate, especially with regard to gender restrictions. The author of the books, Janet Shaw, expects that these didactic intentions will become evident to young readers in increments as they work their way through the six volumes. There is a seasonal nature to the stories. As the year goes on and flourishes, Kirsten also flourishes in her new home. This mimics the developmental nature of Kirsten's story. Throughout the series, Kirsten gradually develops into a more selfless and brave young woman who does not conform to the typical gendered stereotypes for her time; a heroine for young girls who are emotionally developing in the same way. Kirsten frequently disobeys her parents but often does so to benefit the greater good. As in the case of the standard self-made man myth, she gets by with a little luck and pluck. But in addition to these traits, she also stretches the formula to incorporate lessons learned about how young girls can challenge gender restrictions. In the process, she helps morph the mythology, becoming the embodiment of a nascent self-made woman.

Nostalgia for an Idealized Past in Kirsten: An American Girl

On one level, the Kirsten books are typical nostalgia narratives that glamorize an idealized past on the frontier. Read in such a fashion, the books would seem to encourage young girls playing with Kirsten dolls to engage in fantasies about life in a log cabin out in the wilderness, tapping into the same sentimentalized impulses that the creators of Lincoln Logs encouraged in young boys in the 1950s. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines nostalgia as “a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition.”¹⁰⁹ In many ways, Kirsten’s story is exactly that. Readers are prompted to indulge sentimental yearnings for the nineteenth century in which Kirsten lived on the frontier and can satisfy those yearnings by playing with dolls and accessories that allow them to imagine themselves in that time period. Molly Rosner suggests that The American Girl Company promotes these nostalgic impulses in its advertising for monetary reasons. As Rosner argues, “the impossibility of recapturing the past is reconciled by the possibility of recapturing the style of the past through consumption, specifically through the purchase of clothes and accessories for these historical dolls.”¹¹⁰ Key to Rosner’s argument is the assertion that The American Girl Company captures the *style* of the past. These stylistic elements constitute the surface packaging for a series that taps into the self-made person tradition as played out on the mythological frontier. One must simultaneously remember that this is a glamorized version of the past. It has been sanitized for the purpose of commercialization and does not reflect the actual reality of life on the frontier.

¹⁰⁹ “Nostalgia,” Merriam Webster, accessed March 28, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nostalgia>.

¹¹⁰ Rosner, “The American Girl Company and the Uses of Nostalgia in Children’s Consumer Culture,” 37.

The six volumes certainly present Kirsten with challenges that she must overcome, just as the mythic literature of the self-made American requires. Throughout each of the six volumes, Shaw provides historical details that allow readers to become nostalgic for Kirsten's time in hopes of learning similar lessons to those mastered by Kirsten. Throughout the entire series money must be spared. It begins when the Larson family does not have enough money to finish their journey to Minnesota and they are forced to walk from the town to the farm with family members.¹¹¹ The Larson family just gets by with what they can earn on the farm. Each story includes an element where the young characters are forced to be resourceful because they do not have any other means. The girls have to borrow candles from their teacher who is living with them or use everyone's scrap clothing to make a quilt. Life on the frontier was about being resourceful and making the most out of every belonging the girls had. This is a historic lesson, but also one of value for twenty-first century children about Kirsten's efforts to overcome hardships. In the last book, a cabin fire leaves the Larson family with nothing but the belongings they brought with them to America. Only one trunk full of their most prized possessions was pulled from the burning cabin.¹¹² Any hopes they had of buying their own land were squashed because they were forced to start over again. They receive a lucky fortune and are able to purchase a family friend's house with that money, but without both luck and pluck, as the self-made man mythology requires, the story of the Larson family would not be allegorical enough to justify inclusion in the series.

Part of the mythic quality of the Larson family's struggle to make it in America is tied to the challenges Kirsten eventually overcomes in seeking to adjust to a new schooling system. Janet Shaw makes it very clear to the reader that young children on the frontier did not have

¹¹¹ Janet Shaw, *Meet Kirsten: An American Girl*, (Middleton: Pleasant Company, 1986): 42.

¹¹² Janet Shaw, *Changes for Kirsten: A Winter Story*, (Middleton: Pleasant Company, 1986): 21.

access to a robust education. Kirsten was also held back in her schooling because of her time on the frontier. While as an immigrant she struggled to learn English and adapt to the American culture, it is also clear to the reader that American children also find it difficult to “learn their books” out on the frontier. The school is described as a log cabin similar to those in which the Larson family and their neighbors live.¹¹³ One American-born student is nineteen years old and reads at a third-grade level.¹¹⁴ The teachers in frontier schools were itinerant instructors, moving from place to place as positions became available and pupils presented themselves. Miss Winston, Kirsten’s teacher, originally came from Maine and is now teaching on the frontier where children frequently miss school because they are helping around the farm or house. The school calendar is affected by seasonal weather fluctuations and agricultural demands. Kirsten frequently misses school because she has to help her mother or the weather is too severe for her to make the journey.¹¹⁵ While many young girls now may dream of skipping a few days of school, they are not generally forced to miss because their families depend upon them to cook, clean, and help take care of small children.¹¹⁶ In this story, nostalgia for the past is tempered by the knowledge that many children on the frontier had only limited opportunities to educate themselves and that such restrictions would likely make it difficult for them to achieve success later in life. The prospect of turning the myth of the self-made man into a reality was dependent in many ways on individuals having access to proper schooling, and often immigrant children like Kirsten Larson did not.

¹¹³ Janet Shaw, *Kirsten Learns a Lesson: A School Story*, (Middleton: Pleasant Company, 1986): 5.

¹¹⁴ Shaw, *Kirsten Learns a Lesson: A School Story*, 11.

¹¹⁵ Janet Shaw, *Happy Birthday Kirsten! A Springtime Story*, (Middleton: Pleasant Company, 1986): 19; Shaw, *Changes for Kirsten: A Winter Story*, 36.

¹¹⁶ This fact only reaffirms the socioeconomic division between the average girl and the one that has access to Kirsten’s story. Those who are less socioeconomically fortunate are more likely to have a story that emulates that of Kirsten—one where their families rely on them to take on roles in the household. The girls who see the marked change between their lives and the lives of Kirsten are able to afford the nearly \$100 doll.

Kirsten's Moral Development Through Danger on the Frontier and Mischief

A closer examination of the individual texts, however, reveals that in composing her six volumes, Shaw challenged some of the most pervasive elements of the self-made American formula. For instance, Kirsten Larson is a generous and brave young girl, but she's also rebellious and frequently does things that put her and her family in danger. Unlike the do-gooders that one often finds in traditional self-made man myth narratives--think little George Washington with his tiny hatchet—Kirsten defies her parents and often underestimates the danger that the wilderness imposes on children. The important lesson is that she learns from her mistakes and develops over time into a responsible daughter and citizen, but she does so almost despite herself and in ways that require the myth to be altered to fit the circumstances of her gender and her immigrant status. She matures over the course of the six volumes, but it is hardly the formulaic transformation one sees in traditional rags-to-riches narratives.

Kirsten's adventures are presented in a graduated, stepped format that corresponds with the progressive nature of her moral development. As the year and seasons develop, does Kirsten's intellect and moral understanding. Early on in the series she frequently disobeys her parents for selfish reasons and endangers the entire family in doing so. In the first book, for instance, Kirsten sneaks away from her parents to visit a friend stricken with cholera. While it is understandable, and rather generous, that a young girl would want to risk getting sick to nurture her friend, Shaw makes it clear to readers that Kirsten could have exposed her family to the grave illness. As an uneducated girl traveling on the frontier for the first time, Kirsten is ignorant of the ways in which diseases can be transferred, and her lack of understanding in this regard nearly kills her and her entire family. In this situation she puts her own immediate needs before those of her family and the other passengers on the journey to Minnesota. It's an innocent

enough mistake, and, as Shaw reminds us, it was made in the context of an act of friendship. However, Kirsten has to learn this valuable lesson quickly if she doesn't wish to endanger her life and the lives of those around her. She has a lot to learn about the frontier, about basic health practices, and about herself very quickly.

In a second story, Kirsten is more intentional about her disobedience to her parents and is therefore more culpable for her actions. She disobeys her parents by choosing to meet clandestinely a young Native American girl from a tribe that lives near their farm. Kirsten's first encounter with Singing Bird was accidental, but her subsequent visits are planned and go against the wishes of her parents who are leery of Indians. Living on the frontier, they have been conditioned to believe that Native Americans are savages and not to be trusted. Kirsten's cousin remarks: "Some people say the Indians are kind...They say the Indians gave them deer meat and corn when they needed food. But other people say the Indians are cruel and bloodthirsty."¹¹⁷ The girls go on to describe a situation where an Indian appeared at their door and their mother gave him a piece of meat to go away. "Papa worries about the Indians...he says that if we plant crops on their hunting land the wild animals will go away. He says the Indians won't have enough to eat then, and they'll surely be angry."¹¹⁸ Kirsten thinks she knows better, and, indeed, she and Singing Bird strike up a solid friendship based on mutual trust. In this case, Kirsten may have a better understanding of Native Americans than her parents do—a sign of her developing practical education on the frontier, perhaps. Kirsten demonstrates she still does not understand that she must obey her parents for reasons that as a young girl she might not be able to anticipate or appreciate, such as larger tensions developing between white and Indian communities over disputes. Still more troubling is the fact that she lies to her parents so she can visit Singing Bird

¹¹⁷ Shaw, *Kirsten Learns a Lesson: A School Story*, 17.

¹¹⁸ Shaw, *Kirsten Learns a Lesson: A School Story*, 18.

before school. “[S]he knew it was wrong to lie to Mama and Papa, but she couldn’t help herself,” Shaw noted.¹¹⁹ Here again Kirsten puts her personal wants for friendship above the needs of her family and what is right. Only gradually in this incident does she become aware that once again she has nearly jeopardized her family’s livelihood and even their existence on the frontier.

The series reaches a turning point in Kirsten’s adventures in book three, *Kirsten’s Surprise*, when she has to step up and guide the horse and sleigh that holds her disoriented father through a snowstorm. Once again, a personal interest of Kirsten’s creates the drama, but, in this case, she’s motivated less by selfish need and more by a selfless desire to make her family feel more at home in America. The difficult weather conditions on the frontier are a constant source of danger for the Larsons. The frontiersmen always have to prepare for the long winter. Papa says “‘It *must* be done before the heavy snows come or we won’t get through the winter.’”¹²⁰ This prediction nearly becomes reality when Kirsten convinces her father to venture out in bad weather because she has arranged to put on a traditional Swedish Christmas celebration called Saint Lucia’s Day for her family with the help of her teacher and her cousins. The celebration promises to be wonderful, but she and her father are caught in a storm. In this moment, Kirsten steps up in a way that she has not before. Because she was so familiar with the woods where she played with Singing Bird, her Native American friend, Kirsten was able to guide her father and herself to safety by locating a cave to wait out the storm. Here, Kirsten stands out as a brave character. Her moral development is on display as well as she starts to make an equivalence between her personal journey of self-improvement and the journey her family made from the Old Country to a new one. Shaw wrote: “Papa had told Mama she had heart when she agreed to come here to America. He told Mama she had heart when she was sick on the ship but didn’t lose

¹¹⁹ Shaw, *Kirsten Learns a Lesson: A School Story*, 40.

¹²⁰ Janet Shaw, *Kirsten’s Surprise: A Christmas Story*, (Middleton: Pleasant Company, 1986): 9.

hope. Kirsten wanted to be as brave as Mama. She pulled herself along Blackie's side."¹²¹

Leading the way home through waist deep snow, Kirsten experiences a transformative moment for her character. She is now acclimated to her frontier environment and she has developed enough understanding and practical knowledge to be brave. She has heart and she can begin to help the family and not just herself. Kirsten's moral character has become more generous and selfless.

After Kirsten's epiphany as she takes the lead through the storm in book three her adventuring becomes associated with helping the family succeed on the frontier. In the remaining books in the series, Kirsten becomes a generous soul. The fourth book centers on a number of incidents in which Kirsten must forego many childhood pleasures because she has to help her mother with the new baby. As a result, Kirsten misses a lot of school and cannot help make a quilt for her teacher Miss Winston with the other girls like she planned. When the girls give the quilt to Kirsten for her birthday, her immediate thought is what she can learn about the process in order to make one for the new baby. This form of education was not associated so much with "book-larnin" as with moral development. She begins immediately after her party. "Kirsten picked up the quilt square she hadn't been able to finish and started to sew her design again. 'What will you do with that square?' Mama asked in a sleepy voice. Kirsten thought a moment. 'I think I'll begin a quilt for our baby. It will take a long time to make, but that doesn't matter. I should have it finished before the weather gets cold again.'"¹²² While she appreciates her schoolmates' generosity in designing a quilt for her, Kirsten is selfless and wants to pay it forward to her newest sibling. Kirsten puts the family above herself in this book because she has

¹²¹ Shaw, *Kirsten's Surprise: A Christmas Story*, 38.

¹²² Shaw, *Happy Birthday Kirsten! A Springtime Story*, 52.

to help with the baby and continues to do so even when she is no longer required. This shows her ever-developing moral character.

Kirsten continues to be generous for the greater good when she seeks out situations where she can help the family financially by living off the land. In the fifth book, *Kirsten Saves the Day*, the young immigrant girl adventures further into the woods than she is allowed and puts herself and her brother in danger of being mauled by a black bear. She was looking for a way to harvest honey for the family and was greeted by the bear that had a prior claim to the treasure. Kirsten's father had to rescue her and her brother, returning the favor in a sense that Kirsten provided him in the snowstorm incident. Kirsten is upset at her failure to help provide for the family, although Papa and Lars, Kirsten's older brother, eventually harvest the whole beehive to sell honey to the market and make money for the family. Here, the myth of the self-made woman is affirmed. Kirsten's disappointment originates from her inability to provide for her family on her own. She is forced to receive the help of her father and brother at the cost of preserving her safety. In a sense, Kirsten's good intentions were rewarded, although the suggestion is made in the narrative that the initial failure may have reflected a bit of backsliding on Kirsten's part. We learn that Kirsten was motivated to go into the woods in search of sources of income because she desired to purchase a hat from the store to match one worn by her cousins. The fact that she took unnecessary risks for personal gain suggests that she is human and that she still makes mistakes. That said, she also had her family in mind when she discovered the honey, and she was ultimately responsible in part for the financial gains that resulted from it.

In the final book in the series, *Changes for Kirsten*, the family runs into a difficult situation because of Kirsten's ongoing propensity for good-natured curiosity. Papa goes away for the winter to make extra money logging so the family can buy land of their own. While he is

gone, Kirsten tries to do the right thing by nursing a baby raccoon that was injured. When she brings it into the cabin, however, it springs from its box and knocks over an oil lamp. A fire breaks out that devastates the entire cabin. In the midst of this crisis, for which she was responsible, Kirsten does not put her own safety first. She risks her life to save the family's most prized possessions in the trunk they brought from Sweden. Despite the fact that the family has lost nearly everything, Kirsten has preserved that which was most precious to them. Kirsten also works extra hard to find a way to make up for the lost home and the fact that they no longer have enough money to buy a farm of their own. She tries to set extra traps and goes out into the woods with the boys to collect pelts. In the end, her efforts do not prevail and it is a lucky situation that allows the family to gain success. Regardless, Kirsten proved throughout the series that she developed morally to put the success of the family over her own even if that meant going beyond the boundaries her parents set for the frontier.

Collectively the six volumes tap into themes that are relevant to the self-made man myth. In all such legends, especially those associated with the frontier, protagonists face dangerous challenges. The story of Abraham Lincoln that inspired the creation of Lincoln Logs, for instance, was filled with the same kind of obstacles that Kirsten faces in *The American Girl* doll series. Traveling is hard; people become ill; mothers die in childbirth; and weather proves impossible. In addition, wild animals prove dangerous and tensions between rival claimants for the land mount. Like Lincoln, Kirsten gradually learns to master these conditions, educating herself in formal and informal ways and developing her moral capabilities as she becomes a more ethical person. Importantly, however, Shaw does not try to make Kirsten Larson into a Lincolnesque mythological figure. She is becoming self-made, but, unlike the future president, she is more capable of mistakes and backsliding, and she is not destined to change the worlds so

much as her little corner of it. The fact that her story does not rise to the level of Lincoln's makes her more approachable for young children playing with Kirsten dolls and reading Shaw's books. It is, in fact, the children whose parents invest in The American Girl enterprise who enact the stories they see fit to apply to the nineteenth-century frontier. And it is in through such story-making that the myth is modified.

Kirsten and American Girl Defy Gender Roles

A good example of how this de-mythicizing works can be seen in the ways Kirsten's stories challenge the gender traditions associated with the self-made man narratives. At the beginning of the series, Kirsten's aunt states to the men that they "can look at the barn while the women talk."¹²³ This small statement reveals a large truth: that women on the frontier spend most of their time inside the house. The book continues to teach young girls that their traditional roles as wives and mothers mean that they will be engaged in cooking, cleaning, and raising a family. Aunt Inger and Kirsten's mom, mama, spend their days cooking and doing all the housework while the men spend their time outside hunting or farming. When the men need to leave for the winter to make money logging, "the women and children had to do all the winter farm work."¹²⁴ These statements reaffirmed standard gender roles and were consistent with what one would expect to find in the myth of the self-made man.

In the second book in the series, however, Kirsten is introduced to a woman who defies the typical gender norms for the time. Miss Winston, the local teacher, states that she became a teacher because she "certainly wasn't ready to marry and spend the rest of my life in a house."¹²⁵

¹²³ Shaw, *Meet Kirsten: An American Girl*, 47.

¹²⁴ Shaw, *Changes for Kirsten: A Winter Story*, 4.

¹²⁵ Shaw, *Kirsten Learns a Lesson: A School Story*, 47.

Miss Winston longs for more than just homemaking. She goes on to say “I wanted to travel, to meet people, to have adventures! School teachers travel, so I decided to become a teacher.”¹²⁶

Miss Winston’s character provides a role model for Kirsten as she becomes acclimated to her new life in America. The more Kirsten gets used to living on the frontier, the more she defies the roles she is typically assigned to as a woman. Kirsten’s slow acclimation to the United States and her gradual challenging of gender norms have much to do with one another, as the inference is that the United States provides a land of opportunity for women as well as men to explore any role they wish. It is important to note here that Miss Winston (and by extension Kirsten) are exceptions to the general rules associated with gender roles in nineteenth-century life. Young readers are expected to recognize that both teacher and student are different, that they are more independent than most and seek ways to escape domesticity through mischief and defiance, traits that sometimes get them in trouble but also aid them in their moral journeys by encouraging them to break down gender barriers.

In the latter part of the book series, Kirsten takes on traditionally male roles out of the household. She constantly begs to go outside and adventure in the woods or accompany her father on journeys to town. In the third book, she wants her father to go to town to get the family’s trunk. When he cannot do it in the time frame Kirsten requests she asks her mom to go to town instead, stating: “Well, why don’t you and I take the wagon and get the trunks? You know how to drive the horse and wagon, Mama!”¹²⁷ Kirsten’s mom responds with feigned amusement and deference to gender limitations. ““You’re full of good ideas today! But there’s school for you tomorrow, and we aren’t strong enough to life those big trunks.”¹²⁸ Kirsten does

¹²⁶ Shaw, *Kirsten Learns a Lesson: A School Story*, 47.

¹²⁷ Shaw, *Kirsten’s Surprise: A Christmas Story*, 5.

¹²⁸ Shaw, *Kirsten’s Surprise: A Christmas Story*, 6.

not understand that there are typical roles for women and men in the family. Her mother uses the excuse of lack of female strength to explain why they cannot go rather than admitting to her daughter that society suggests it is not their “place” to go. The illogic of her mother’s denial becomes evident when Kirsten does get to accompany her father to town, and they get stuck in the aforementioned snowstorm. Kirsten steps up in a heroic fashion, leading the horse through the snowstorm to safety in a cave when her father gets injured. Without her bravery, and knowledge of the woods that she gained when she was exploring the frontier against the wishes of her parents, they would have died in the storm. In short, Kirsten’s initial defiance, along with her refusal to accept her mother’s restrictive roles for women, pave the way for her redemption and that of her father.

Kirsten loves to adventure in the woods. In the early books she explores outdoors with her female cousins Anna and Lisbeth. Then, Kirsten becomes more independent and adventures alone into the woods where she encounters Singing Bird, her Native American friend. In the last two books of the series, Kirsten adventures in the woods with the boys. In the fifth book, Kirsten finds a beehive in a tree and tries to harvest the honey by herself to help the family. Kirsten even takes on the traditionally male role of trapping pelts in the final book. She does this with two older boys and works her way up to being an equal with them, not someone who is unsuccessful and needs to call on them for help like the previous book. This is not without difficulty, though. On their first encounter, John, a nearby boy the same age as Kirsten’s oldest brother, is skeptical of Kirsten coming along. The way she and Lars convince him is by promising she will stay out of the way. Still, John resists, insisting that this is not a task in which a girl should be allowed to participate. Kirsten demands to come along, and she gets her way by again affirming she will not cause difficulty or distraction. Notably, she does not gain access to this experience by promising

success. She does so by promising the opposite, that she will not inhibit the success of the boys. However, by the end of the book Kirsten is running with the boys and defies her traditional gender role as a woman on the frontier staying in the house.

Kirsten is the only character who clearly defies gender roles. This series is not a statement on how gender roles on the frontier need to be defied or were defied by many people. Kirsten is the exception as the protagonist in the series. For example, men are not offering to stay inside the home and prepare meals. Instead, Kirsten serves the purpose of *The Pleasant Company* as an anomaly character of her time. She is more progressive and fits better in 1986, when the book was published than she might have in her own day. Author Janet Shaw and *The Pleasant Company* provide a feminist narrative on the frontier “by altering notions of the past to fit contemporary understandings of girlhood.”¹²⁹ Kirsten’s character fits an outdoorsy, defiant, and self-assured girl raised in the late twentieth century because she is meant to serve as an aspirational figure, one who anticipates what women might become in the twentieth century. She achieves this by hinting at what they could have been in the nineteenth century had circumstances been a bit different. The historical narrative of the frontier is repurposed with a feminist twist to teach young girls in the modern era. In this sense, then, Shaw has deliberately altered the self-made man mythology as it emerged in the nineteenth century to repurpose it for twentieth and twenty-first century readers.

Kirsten Larson as the Self-Made Woman

There are instances throughout the series of individuals or thoughts that fit in with the self-made man mythology of the time period. However, the end of the series suggests something

¹²⁹ Rosner, “The American Girl Company and the Uses of Nostalgia in Children’s Consumer Culture,” 42.

more modern about Kirsten and her family as self-made. The premise of the series, that Kirsten's family is coming to the United States to work hard and get a better life, is about being self-made. The family works hard on the farm to earn enough money to slowly start working their way up social ranks. Becoming self-made is about social mobility in the United States. They are slowly working on doing this. Many of those who are praised for being self-made men and women are featured in the most celebrated stories, such as Abe Lincoln's, but there are many subsidiary narratives about being self-made that exist on a smaller and more revised scale. The larger stories of self-making motivate whole generations of Americans to act in formulaic ways, but the smaller versions of narratives about self-making, such as those of the Larson family and other immigrants who hoped for a better life in the United States, don't always conform to the grander, standardized versions of the myth. For instance, the story of Uncle Olav, the family member who moved to America before the Larsons, serves as motivation to be self-made in America. Mama tells the story on the ship in the first book, "Olav left Sweden six years ago, when you were just three...he thought he could make a better life in America. And last year, he wrote to tell us about his new form. The land is rich and good there."¹³⁰ Uncle Olav's is the story of the average self-made man; Kirsten's goes beyond this to add a new layer of gender consideration to the formula. Neither story approximates Abraham Lincoln's or Pleasant Rowland's, but they do suggest a progression of the mythology when juxtaposed with each other.

Old Jack is another character who represents the rural frontiersman who drops everything in his quest to become self-made. He appears in the final book and brings the Larsons some unusual luck—luck that is often present in rags-to-riches stories. We are told that Old Jack "is the oldest trapper in these parts...he came west as an explorer and stayed on. He lives by

¹³⁰ Shaw, *Meet Kirsten: An American Girl*, 7.

himself, way back in the woods. He doesn't have a family and never did."¹³¹ Old Jack represents the rural frontiersman who began the self-made man myth. He is the rugged individual who travelled West to gain success. His story differentiates him from the typical self-made man of the settlements because he stays west forever and does not return with his knowledge to gain success in the civilized society. Toward the end of the final book, the two older boys and Kirsten happen upon Old Jack in a cave. He has died, but because they found him and intend to give him a proper burial the children are allowed to take all of his pelts as their own. The fortune of Old Jack's hard work allows the Larson family to succeed and purchase a four-bedroom house rather than having to rebuild their burned-out shell of a cabin. Their log cabin existence is gone, and they begin to take on the appearance of twentieth century suburbanites. Revealingly, they express greater gratitude to the family that sold them the new home than to the memory of Old Jack, whose hard work provided the income for it. The Larsons are beneficiaries of an "original" self-made man, but, in building on his legacy, they move beyond his nineteenth-century existence and anticipate the world of the twentieth-century children who would play with their likenesses in the form of dolls and read books about them.

In all of this, Kirsten Larson is a new self-made woman whose journey to the United States defines her initial character in traditional ways. At the beginning of the series, Kirsten falls into situations consistent with the self-made American myth and hopes for a good outcome. By the end of the series, her time on the frontier has taught her how to be a determined and driven young woman who cares for more than just herself. Kirsten's time on the frontier, despite being dangerous, provided her with the tools to help her family and the wherewithal to anticipate the future. Kirsten is selfless and generous as she works hard for her family to gain success. She

¹³¹ Shaw, *Changes for Kirsten: A Winter Story*, 5.

defies the typical gender stereotypes for her time and absorbs the lessons of both genders to help her development. By the end of the series, the frontier has taught Kirsten how to make it in a new country. But, still more, it has allowed her to anticipate what life in America will be like for those young children living in era when the myth of the self-made American could be modified to meet alternative twentieth and twenty-first century circumstances. The expectation on the part of Pleasant Rowland and Janet Shaw was that young girls might learn from Kirsten's story and apply those skills to their lives. Kirsten's moral development on the frontier, including her recognition of the importance of feminist concerns, provided a potential prescription for many young girls anxious to make an old mythology serve newer, more immediate purposes.

Redefining What it Means to be Self-Made in America: One Toy at a Time

Lincoln Logs and American Girl Dolls redefine what it means to be self-made in America through their constant lessons. However, these lessons are fundamentally different. Lincoln Logs teach children, broadly, about life in the wild. The characters who occupy the cabins created from Lincoln Logs have no external presence and the child is free to imagine whatever they wish. Learning to build is the most important lesson Lincoln Logs can bestow on a child. Through these logs, children can imagine new depths without consequences. If the engineering is bad, the structure falls down and they try again. It is a sanitized version of life on the frontier. Lincoln Logs create a reality in which children can work alone to make a structure by themselves or work with another person (adult or child). Perhaps in working together, the child will learn that collaboration and support from others is the real way to succeed in life. It is not denying those who came before them or failing to support others in their journey.

These lessons in cooperation, however, are often obscured by the rugged individualism that is at the heart of frontier mythology. Instances of actual self-making are few and far between. Lincoln Logs reaffirm rather than challenge the ultimate symbol of self-making—the log cabin. To be self-made is everything in America and Lincoln Logs, as America's nostalgic toy, help affirm that by encouraging children to create log-cabin structures of their own that they can disassemble and reconstitute with ease. The hardships of the frontier that required people to live in rickety log structures with dirt floors is lost in this lay environment. The real way to change the notion of being self-made is to constantly remind people that it is a *myth*.

American Girl Dolls serve a fundamentally different purpose than Lincoln Logs. These dolls serve to reshape a generation of girls and redefine a myth to include girls just like the ones playing with the dolls. The result is a toy that has far more development and structure. American

Girls include books and dolls. The book series serves as a guide with countless examples of how the doll should act. Through the lessons in the books, young girls can then act out situations to practice the moral lessons they are learning. The girls are forced to learn this through an imaginary character. They cannot look to the lessons of a female equivalent to Abraham Lincoln because no such female exists in America's cultural myths. The result is an extensive series of fictional books that support a young girl in her journey to discover morality. The stories of Kirsten on the frontier redefine what it means to be a self-made woman in America. It shows that a self-made woman can be strong and serve outside of the home on the frontier. Women, too, can learn lessons in the wild and be self-made. Ultimately, the original myth is affirmed when Kirsten's family achieves success through luck. In the end, Kirsten's family is ushered into the ideals of the next century which serve as an example for the impressionable generation learning from Kirsten's story. Simultaneously Kirsten's development mirrors the lessons young girls seek to learn when they respond to everyday situations as brave young women in the twentieth and twenty-first century. By playing with American Girl Dolls, young girls re-learn the stories of self-making in a more inclusive way. These stories suggest that women can be brave, strong, and creative to achieve American success too, just like the countless men they hear about.

Lincoln Logs and American Girl Dolls both continue to define what it means to be self-made in the United States. While these toys serve fundamentally different purposes, they both have a lasting effect on children of all ages from varying generations. Each of them speaks uniquely to the lessons of what it means to be self-made. These toys were created by individual entrepreneurs who were self-made themselves. Both toys reached larger success by being sold to toy giants who have maintained their production to this day. American Girls and Lincoln Logs continue to serve a greater cultural need to explore the wild, even if that wild is actually

imaginary. The creativity that was required to create these toys and the imagination that is encouraged in those who play with them go hand-in-hand in helping to teach children what it means to be self-made in the United States. Together, they suggest that just because a group is previously excluded from a larger narrative, as women often are from Lincoln Logs marketing strategies, it does not mean they did not exist—it does mean they need to question *who* is telling the story. Pleasant Rowland recognized that no one was telling her story, and she developed American Girls dolls as a way of giving tangible form to a hope that space can be made for individuals who are previously underrepresented.

Is the myth pernicious, restrictive or liberative? Perhaps that can only be answered by specific individuals, but I would suggest it is liberating to a child and restrictive to an adult. A child has the ability to learn and grow with a cultural knowledge and experience they would have never been able to achieve if it was not for Lincoln Logs. In American Girl, the child has an ability to see herself in a story with which she would have otherwise lacked a personal connection. However the experience and lessons of self making need to be coupled with a knowledge in adulthood that it is a mythic feat—that being self-made is not actually possible. One day, I hope to hear the click, clack of Lincoln Logs in my living room and American Girl Dolls speaking to one another as my own children play. They will get to experience what it was like to be a frontiersman or a girl redefining the female's role on the frontier. They will understand what it is like to build or provide for more than just themselves. But I hope they will also understand that Lincoln Logs are a toy and the mythic feat they are attempting to achieve is no longer achievable in modern society. However, they will simultaneously see a lesson in American Girl they would not have recognized if it was not for a self-made woman. Not every part of the myth of the self-made man is negative. However, not every part is positive. What does

need to be understood is that no one in actuality can be truly self-made, even if that is what our cultural myths suggest.

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