

Lincoln Love

Spring 1997

PUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI.—MAY 9, 1863.



THE GREAT "CANNON GAME."

ABE LINCOLN (ARMS). "DARN'D IF HE AIN'T SCORED AG'IN !—WISH I COULD MAKE A FEW WINNING HAZARDS FOR A CHANGE."

Number 1848
The Bulletin of
The Lincoln Museum

Lincoln Memorial University Celebrates One Hundred Years



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Lincoln Lore

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Editor:

Gerald J. Prokopowicz, Ph.D.

Historian/Director of Public Programs

Contributors:

Joan L. Flinspach, Director

Carolyn Texley, Director of Collections/Archivist

Guy Young, Director of Marketing

For subscription information, contact The Lincoln Museum

200 East Berry, P. O. Box 7838

Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801-7838

(219) 455-3864 Fax: (219) 455-6922

email: TheLincolnMuseum@LNC.com

<http://www.TheLincolnMuseum.org>

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One day in 1863, while conferring with Major General Oliver O. Howard on matters of military strategy, President Lincoln suddenly pulled from the wall a map and put his finger on remote Cumberland Gap in East Tennessee, a heavily Unionist section in a Confederate state. "They are loyal there, they are loyal," Lincoln said. "Howard, if you come out of all this horror and misery alive, and I hope that you may, I want you to do something for these people who have been shut out from the world all these years." On February 12, 1897, General Howard fulfilled Lincoln's request by founding at Harrogate, Tennessee, an institution of higher learning for the people of the mountains: Lincoln Memorial University.¹

In its first one hundred years, LMU has not only carried out its mission of providing educational opportunities to its once-isolated region, but has also become a center for the study of Lincoln himself. The Abraham Lincoln Museum, on the LMU campus, has one of the nation's largest collections of Lincolniana, including the cane Lincoln carried into Ford's Theatre, the Meserve photographic collection, and Daniel Chester French's plaster model of his Lincoln Memorial statue.

To celebrate LMU's centennial, the Abraham Lincoln Museum recently hosted a symposium, "Lincoln and His Contemporaries," which I had the pleasure of attending. One of the most interesting moments of the symposium occurred during the introduction of one of the speakers, Edna Greene Medford of Howard University, another institution founded by General O.O. Howard. Moderator David Long noted that many of Professor Medford's colleagues at Howard question her interest in Lincoln, just as they question whether Lincoln deserves his reputation as "The Great Emancipator." But when Medford herself protested that she was hardly a "Lincoln scholar" on the basis of giving papers at a few conferences, Long corrected her. "You are now." Professor Long's joke was a gentle expression of the eagerness of Lincoln students to include Medford, and scholars of all backgrounds everywhere, in their shared enterprise, and to persuade people like Medford's skeptical colleagues at Howard that the study of Lincoln's legacy ought not to be limited to any one segment of the population.

The Lincoln Museum congratulates LMU on its success in meeting the challenge of bringing education to the mountains for one hundred years, with wishes for an equally successful second century. — GJP



General O.O. Howard
(TLM # 4295)

1. Lincoln Lore n. 10 (June 17, 1929); Oliver Otis Howard, *Autobiography* (New York: The Baker & Taylor Co., 1908), 1:452-53, 2:568.

(On the cover: John Tenniel, *The Great "Cannon Game,"* published in *Punch* (London), May 9, 1863. Tenniel caricatures the Civil War as a billiards match between Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis; the Confederate president gloats over the Union Navy's unsuccessful attempt to seize Charleston, S.C. on April 7, 1863.)

Abraham Lincoln And The Art Of Billiards

*By Tim R. Miller, Ph.D.
Associate Professor,
Management Department
University of Illinois at Springfield*

Billiard historians have long contended that Abraham Lincoln should be counted among the ranks of those major historical figures who derived personal pleasure from the "cue sport" games of billiards, pool, snooker, bagatelle, etc. Lists of great cue-sport enthusiasts typically include Lincoln with others like Louis XIV, Mark Twain, Mozart, Napoleon, George Washington, Charles Dickens, W.C. Fields, Queen Victoria, and Babe Ruth, but they rarely discuss his involvement with the sport.¹ As a student of both the American presidency and billiard/pool history, I have long wondered whether the claim that Lincoln played billiards was warranted.

Acting upon that impulse, in 1993 I raised the issue with my colleague Cullom Davis, director of the Lincoln Legal Papers project. He didn't know, but directed me to two other Lincoln scholars who might. Two conversations later, I was batting zero-for-three and my inquisitiveness was growing. I turned to Illinois State Historian Thomas F. Schwartz, who confirmed that the Illinois State Historical Library has a clippings file on Lincoln and billiards, but noted that the newspaper accounts in that file either lack authentication or are simply spurious. How is it then that billiard historians could claim as fact that Lincoln played billiards, without the knowledge of Lincoln historians?



Lincoln at billiards, as portrayed by Harry Hahn of Mt. Pulaski, Illinois. (Photo by Sam B. Davis)

Three years of research followed. I am a political scientist trained in research methods related to the American presidency, but since I lacked a background in Lincoln scholarship, I first turned to the experts. It turns out that the world of Abraham Lincoln research is populated by some of the most receptive, knowledgeable, and gracious professionals on the planet, whose aid was invaluable and whom I have the pleasure of naming in the acknowledgments. At the same time, I began to delve into the writings of Lincoln and his associates. "The basic source for any biography of Abraham Lincoln," David Donald explains, "is his own writings."² Additionally, I sought out the published works and original letters, diaries, notes and other reflections of Lincoln's friends, available in the Library of Congress and elsewhere, as well as newspaper clippings, graduate theses, and other sources.

My intent was to seek every reference I could find to Lincoln's recreational hours, and to attempt to move beyond my surface understanding of the public Lincoln toward a greater understanding of the "real" Abraham Lincoln. I failed to identify the real Lincoln, of course, but the search itself has been personally enriching and fruitful. And after three years of research, I can state confidently that Lincoln was without question a billiard player at least in the last third of his life, and that he does in fact deserve to be known as a billiard "enthusiast."

Billiard References in Lincoln Historical Literature

I found a total of nineteen references to the billiards playing of Abraham Lincoln, several of which are repetitions based on the same recollection, story, or event (See sidebar, "Historical References to Lincoln's Billiard Playing"). Undoubtedly, many more remain to be found. My conclusions regarding Lincoln's enjoyment of this pastime are based on the following historical accounts and incidents.

Whitney, Weik and Sandburg

In his introduction to H.C. Whitney's *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln*, historian Paul M. Angle explains that few men "knew Lincoln well, and of those who did only six — Herndon, Lamon, Whitney, Arnold, Nicolay, and Hay — wrote exten-

sively of his life." Of these six, Angle contends that "Only Herndon and Whitney are intimate, realistic and convincing."³ Although many have challenged the accuracy and appropriateness of this type of distinction, Angle's endorsement of Whitney's work still carries weight.⁴ In addition to Whitney's personal association with Lincoln, Angle continues, "The fact that Whitney's work deals mainly with the most colorful part of Lincoln's pre-presidential career — his life as a circuit lawyer — and with the most crucial years of his political life ... [makes] its claim to recognition ... obvious."⁵

Whitney and Lincoln met in the fall of 1854 and "for the next few years the conditions under which lawyers then earned a livelihood brought the two men together frequently." Whitney traveled the circuit with Lincoln and other lawyers, particularly when court traveled to Champaign, Danville, and Paris, among other county seats. Angle notes that despite being twenty-two years younger than Lincoln, Whitney:

seems to have been accepted by the ruling coterie — David Davis, Lamon, Swett, and Lincoln. Days of association in court, and nights of companionship in small taverns, easily led to familiarity. Moreover, though conditions were changing rapidly, enough of the old conviviality, of the self-made amusement of men away from home, remained to bring the little group of travelers into close personal relation.⁶

Their seven years together on the circuit, then, gave Whitney first-hand knowledge of the circumstances in which they passed their spare time, undoubtedly with Lincoln spinning his web of stories.

Late in his memoir, Whitney observed that Lincoln "was very eccentric and uneven in his friendships." As one example, he alleged that in Lincoln's distribution of patronage, some friends like Ward Hill Lamon were handsomely rewarded with desired appointments, while others such as Leonard Swett were not. He then gave another example of this trait:

For instance, he did not like the best lawyer in one of our county seats at all, and the latter did not like him: but a drunken fellow who turned lawyer

late in life, and settled there, Lincoln used to seek out and play billiards with, by the hour...⁷

Jesse W. Weik, who co-authored Herndon's classic biography of Lincoln,⁸ cites the same story as being "further illuminative of Lincoln's peculiarities." Weik's phrasing is essentially identical to Whitney's, and he presents it as Whitney's story.⁹ Likewise, Carl Sandburg draws from Whitney, stating:

[Lincoln] picked his companions by what they could do for him at the time he wanted something done, Whitney also noted. "As a constant habit he chose as his opponent at billiards a bibulous lawyer of no merit save the negative one of playing billiards as awkwardly and badly as Lincoln himself; it was a strange but not unfamiliar sight to see these two men, who had nothing else in common, playing billiards in an obscure place, sometimes for hours together." And Whitney also wished to note that billiards was the only "non-utilitarian thing" that he ever knew Lincoln to indulge in.¹⁰

As an amateur historian, it came as a considerable surprise to me to find that Sandburg is considered an unreliable source of historical fact. Because I could not locate Sandburg's source for this story, I will focus on the more reliable passages from Whitney and Weik.¹¹

The Whitney-Weik account appears related to a letter from H.C. Whitney to W. H. Herndon, dated August 27, 1887, in the Herndon-Weik Collection, which names Lincoln's billiards partner. Several years after Lincoln's death, and in anticipation of a book on his famous law partner, Herndon contacted a broad range of Lincoln's colleagues, friends, and associates, including Whitney, and asked them to forward their reminiscences of Lincoln. Amid a wide-ranging series of reflections, Whitney commented that, "Lincoln & George Lawrence — a worthless, drunken lawyer — used to play billiards together: one played about as well as the other."¹²

For analytical purposes, the elements of the published Whitney-Weik account are: (a) Lincoln played billiards "by the hour," (b) with "a drunken fellow" (c)

whom "Lincoln used to seek out"; (d) the fellow "turned lawyer late in life" (e) "and settled there" (f) in a neighboring county seat (g) where Lincoln "did not like the best lawyer ... at all" (h) "and the latter did not like him." The question thus becomes, "Do the elements match with George Lawrence?" The answer is that they do.

Lawrence was from Danville, the seat of Vermilion County and a regular circuit stop. Other discussions of Lincoln's circuit-riding in the region list Lawrence (often with no first name or initial) as a member of the delegation.¹³ Two pages after his handwritten reference to Lawrence as Lincoln's billiard opponent, Whitney turned his attention to Lincoln's intimacies. After noting that his "memory is good" and that he "took to Lincoln on the circuit from the start," and claiming to have personally "happened to have rather more intimacy with him than ordinary," Whitney continued, "[David] Davis and [Leonard] Swett were more intimate [with Lincoln] — Lamon, Weldon, Parks, Moore, Hogg, Vorhees, McWilliams less so. Oliver L. Davis of Danville he despised and Oliver hated him."¹⁴

So, according to Whitney, Lincoln played billiards with Lawrence, who was in fact from the Vermilion County seat of Danville.¹⁵ Likewise, Lincoln "despised" Oliver L. Davis and was "hated" in return. But was O. L. Davis the "best" attorney in Danville? This is clearly subjective, but we are not without guidance. H.A. Coffeen, in his 1871 *Historical, Statistical, and Descriptive Handbook and Official Directory of Vermilion County* chose to begin the citation of those in the legal profession with the name O. L. Davis.¹⁶ The names are not in alphabetical order. Elsewhere, Lottie E. Jones, in her *History of Vermilion County*, concludes her comments on Oliver L. Davis saying, "His subsequent history is such as to reckon him among the distinguished citizens of the county."¹⁷ These are at least consistent with O. L. Davis being among the best attorneys of the community.

Likewise, Lawrence was born in Virginia in 1826 and later "settled" in Illinois.¹⁸ He was admitted to the Illinois bar in 1854, when he was twenty-eight.¹⁹

In an era when most people decided their occupations in their teens, life expectancy did not exceed sixty years, and Lincoln was already known as "Old Abe" in his forties, admission to the bar at age twenty-eight seems to meet the test of coming to the law late in life.

Altogether, the Whitney-Weik passage has seven elements, of which six are either directly verifiable or entirely consistent with the idea that Lincoln did indeed play billiards — and often did so with George Lawrence. In fact, Lincoln's seven-year

circuit colleague Whitney says that "Lincoln used to seek out" his partner in billiards, rather than the other way around, a distinction that billiard aficionados will notice and find poignant. The only element that cannot be verified here is whether Lawrence was a "drunken fellow." Unfortunately, the 1860 U.S. Census did not record such matters, nor have historians written much about Vermilion County lawyers in the circuit-riding period. It is known, however, that drinking alcoholic beverages was quite popular during the

Historical References to Lincoln's Billiard Playing

From the Herndon-Weik Collection (original letters, notes, and handwritten documents by Lincoln's associates):

1. Henry C. Whitney to William H. Herndon, Chicago, 27 August 1887; DLC-HW, Group 4, Reel 10:2186.
2. Henry C. Whitney to William H. Herndon, DLC-HW, Group 4, Reel 10:Frames 2187-2192.
3. William H. Herndon to himself, DLC-HW, Group 4, Reel 11:2977.

Biographical Histories

4. William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln: the True Story of a Great Life*, 3 vols. (Chicago, Ill.: Belford, Clark and Co., 1889), 3:462-63.
5. William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*, Paul M. Angle, ed. (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1930 and 1965), 374.
6. Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: the Prairie Years*, 3 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1925-26), 2:75.
- 7-8. Jesse W. Weik, *The Real Lincoln: A Portrait* (Boston, Ma.: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), 216-17, 265.
9. Henry Clay Whitney, *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln* (Caldwell, Id.: Caxton Printer, 1940), 423.

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- 10-11. "Lincoln's First Billiard Game," *The Journal* (Springfield, Ill.), 20 January 1909; Walter B. Stevens, "Recollections of Lincoln: Lincoln's First Game of Billiards," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, January 31, 1909, Magazine Section, p. 3.
12. "Lincoln Was a Billiard Fan," *Illinois State Journal* (Springfield, Ill.), 1 August 1947.
13. Bazy Miller, "The Starter," *La Salle (Ill.) Tribune*, 11 February 1949.
14. "Beat Lincoln at Billiards," citation unknown, possibly Kansas City, Missouri, *K.C. Journal*; copy in Lincoln-sports-billiards file, Illinois State Historical Library.
15. *Central Transcript* (Clinton, Ill.) September 20, 1860, p. 2, col. 6. As cited in Maurice Graham Porter, "Portrait of a Prairie Lawyer: Clifton H. Moore 1851-1861 and 1870-1880, A Comparative Study." (LL.B. thesis, University of Illinois, 1938), 147n.
- 16-17. *Neosho Missouri Times*, 12 August 1948. Single sentence quotation from Lincoln expressing his admiration for billiards. Quotation also cited in John Grissim, *Billiards: Hustlers & Heroes, Legends & Lies and The Search for Higher Truth on the Green Felt* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 38.
18. Henry M. Beardsley, "Abraham Lincoln in Our Own County." (M.L. Thesis, Illinois Industrial University, 1880), 14.
19. J. Hubley Ashton, "A Glimpse of Lincoln in 1864," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 69 (February 1976):68-69.



While the Republican convention of 1860 was seeking a candidate for President (above), was Lincoln seeking an open billiards table in Springfield? (TLM #594)

period, with many members of the traveling bar adhering more to the rule than the exception (Lincoln excluded).

Word of Presidential Nomination

On Friday, May 18, 1860, the Republican national convention in Chicago turned to the issue of nominating a candidate for the presidency of the United States. By all accounts, Lincoln was unusually anxious that day. He arose early from his Springfield bed and roamed the town while waiting for word of the Chicago results, visiting his law office, James C. Conkling's law office (to see what Conkling knew upon his surprise return from Chicago), the telegraph office, and the office of Edward L. Baker, editor of the *Illinois State Journal*.

When Baker brought the first-ballot telegram results to the Lincoln and Herndon office, no candidate had the 233 votes needed for nomination. Lincoln was second: Seward had 173½ votes,

Lincoln 102, Cameron 50½, Chase 49, and Bates 48. Lincoln then moved to the *Journal* office, as second ballot results arrived: Seward 184½, Lincoln 181 (led by movement his way among Pennsylvania delegates), with all other candidates losing strength. Word of the third and final ballot found Lincoln at Baker's office. Seward's support had held, but most of the other delegates had gone over to Lincoln, the party's new candidate for the presidency of the United States. As word spread, Lincoln's fellow townsmen began to congregate at the *Journal* office and his house. To some ballplayers who broke up their game nearby to congratulate him Lincoln joked, "Gentlemen, you had better come up and shake my hand while you can — honors elevate some men."²⁶

Much has been written about what Lincoln did during his anxious wait on that Friday. How did he seek comfort or serenity while passing the time on that fateful day? When cue sport devotees

undergo such stress, they typically head to the billiard hall to find peace in a threatening world, where they (actually, "we") often drink a beer in the process. This is apparently what Abraham Lincoln did as well.

Accounts of Lincoln's activities that day differ only slightly. Edward L. Baker gave the following description to William Herndon:

I left Chicago on night train; arrived here [Springfield] in morning before balloting began. Met Lincoln and we went to ball alley to play at fives — alley was full — said it was pre-engaged; then went to excellent beer saloon near by to play game of billiards; table was full and we each drank a glass of beer; then went to *Journal* office expecting to hear result of ballot; waited awhile; but nothing came and finally we parted; I went to dinner.²⁷

Herndon himself later wrote:

The news of his nomination found Lincoln at Springfield in the office of the *Journal*. Naturally enough he was nervous, restless, and laboring under more or less suppressed excitement. He had been tossing ball — a past time frequently indulged in by the lawyers of that day, and had played a few games of billiards to keep down, as another has expressed it, “the unnatural excitement that threatened to possess him.”²²

Two key points are evident. First, it is clear that Lincoln at a minimum made an attempt to play billiards during this anxious day. Many historians have acknowledged that he played “fives” (a version of handball) to pass the time on that Friday, but most have ignored the other sport he set out to play — billiards.²³ Second, whereas Baker said that he and Lincoln set out to play handball and billiards but found the handball alley and billiard table full, Herndon held that Lincoln and Baker did in fact play “a few games of billiards” in order to “keep down the unnatural excitement that threatened to possess him.”

It is likely that both passages come from the same interview of E. L. Baker by Herndon. Herndon’s notes on the interview billiards passage state:

that he got here on the night train the day before the nomination: that Lincoln and himself went to what is called the ball alley a [or “to”] play at 5’s [or “5ers”] — that the alley was full ... — that they went to a excellent and neat Beer Saloon to play a game of Billiards. That the table was full and took a glass of Beer. That they then went to the Journal office and there read the first dispatch stating the result of the first ballot and finally they parted, each his own way. Baker to dinner — Lincoln to his paper [or “people”].²⁴

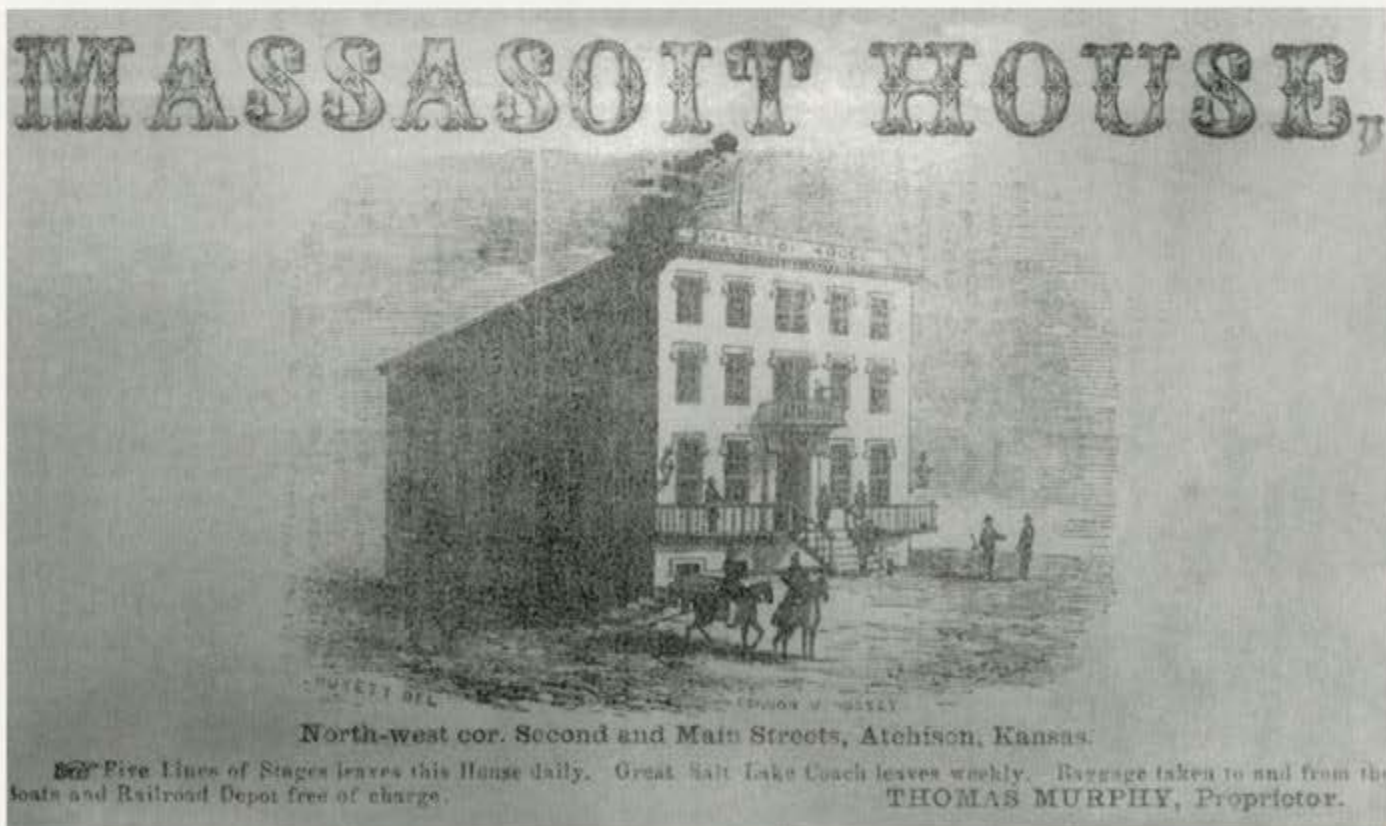
Accordingly, Herndon cites Baker to the effect that he and Lincoln passed the time that day by drinking a beer in “a excellent and neat Beer Saloon,” when unable to play billiards and after being unable to play “fives” earlier. The act of drinking beer would have been somewhat unusual for Lincoln, but could be taken as another sign of Lincoln’s nerves at that anxious time.²⁵

It is quite possible that both passages are accurate. After all, Lincoln’s intent to play billiards being blocked at one point in the day does not preclude his having played at some other time during that day. Either way, in all probability Abraham Lincoln set out to play billiards — and may have accomplished his goal — as he waited to hear whether he was nominated for the presidency of the United States.

The Match at the Massasoit

In late November 1859, Lincoln left Springfield for a visit to Kansas Territory.²⁶ He wanted to try out the speech he would give at the Cooper Institute in New York in February 1860, without having it come to the attention of the Eastern press, as well as to see “Bleeding Kansas” and perhaps win over its six delegates to the upcoming Republican national convention.²⁷

At Atchison, his fourth tour stop, he spoke for two hours and twenty minutes at the Methodist Church on the evening of December 2, 1859. According to two eyewitnesses, Lincoln’s speech on the imperative of preserving the Union was “profound.”²⁸ When he attempted to finish ninety minutes into his remarks, the audience would not let him stop, and



The Massasoit House in Atchison, Kansas. In December 1859 Lincoln stayed, and perhaps played, at this hotel. (Photo courtesy of Tim R. Miller)

afterward many of them followed him to the Massasoit House hotel, where a prolonged reception took place.²⁹

Years later, a brief article appeared under the bold print heading "Beat Lincoln at Billiards." This undated clipping, which I found in the files of the Illinois State Historical Library, probably appeared in the "Kansas Topics" section of the *Kansas City, Missouri Journal*.³⁰ No more is known about the piece. Its elements are: (a) When Lincoln visited Atchison in 1859, he stopped at the Massasoit House kept by the late Thomas Murphy; (b) after he delivered his speech at the old Methodist Church, (c) he went back to the hotel and played billiards with the landlord; (d) several years later when Lincoln was president, Thomas Murphy was appointed superintendent of Indian affairs for Kansas and Indian Territory; (e) the appointment was presented to Lincoln by Senator Pomeroy; (f) "Who is Murphy?" Lincoln asked; (g) Pomeroy told him he was the proprietor of the Massasoit hotel at Atchison, Kansas; (h) "Oh," Lincoln said, "is that the little Irishman who beat me playing billiards when I was at Atchison?" and (i) the source of the story is John B. Murphy, son of Thomas Murphy.

Obviously, newspaper articles based on the memories of family members may include any number of historical inaccuracies. Many elements of the story can be verified, however. Lincoln was in Atchison, Kansas in 1859, and delivered an address at the Methodist Church. He stayed at the Massasoit House, which was built in 1858 and burned in 1873.³¹ The Massasoit House was the finest hotel in Atchison at the time,³² and has been described variously as a "pretentious hotel"³³ and a "magnificent establishment."³⁴ Likewise, Thomas Murphy was the proprietor of the Massasoit House³⁵ and was appointed Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Kansas and Indian Territory during Lincoln's administration.³⁶ Samuel C. Pomeroy "was destined to be one of the first United States senators from Kansas" and he served in the Senate during Lincoln's tenure in the White House.³⁷

A consistent — though admittedly inconclusive — pattern between the article and the known facts is evident

here. As to the critical point, that Lincoln "went back to the hotel and played billiards with the landlord," it is indeed possible that the alleged match could have occurred there. Atchison, with an estimated population of 4,000, had at least four billiard establishments, including the "Massasoit Billiard Room" located "under" the Massasoit House.³⁸ Although this does not prove that the Lincoln-Murphy match occurred, it shows that the opportunity existed.

And was Lincoln's Kansas trip a success? He achieved his primary objective, in that he tested, practiced, and polished what would become his great Cooper Institute speech, and he also got a first-hand look at "Bleeding Kansas." He did not, however, win over any of the six Kansas convention delegates, who remained firmly in the Seward column. And if the billiard match with Murphy did in fact occur, with Lincoln the loser, the future president was only two-of-four among his really important Kansas endeavors!

Clinton, Illinois Bids Farewell to Lincoln

Lincoln's impending election to the presidency in 1860 meant that the nation's gain would be Illinois's loss. On September 20, 1860 the *Central Transcript* of Clinton noted that when the Circuit Court next commenced:

We cannot hope to have the presence of the noble form, the genial face, or listen to the ready wit, the convincing eloquence, the close deflecting argument — as is our wont — of that greatest living statesman Honest Old Abe Lincoln. Mr. Lincoln has probably amused the people of Clinton for the last time with his awkward attempts at billiard playing, or his incomparable manner of telling a good story. The last time we saw him in Clinton, he was walking past our office door when he was accosted by an old acquaintance who apologized for naming a very ugly looking hound dog, "Abe Lincoln." "Well" said Lincoln, "I don't care anything about it if the dog don't."³⁹

The author felt strongly about Lincoln, and was saddened by the community's pending loss. How did he acknowledge the depth of this loss? First, he admired

the noble manner, ready wit, and persuasive eloquence of "that greatest living statesman Honest Old Abe Lincoln." Next, he highlighted Lincoln's personal qualities, paying homage to his "incomparable" story-telling and "awkward attempts at billiard playing." Last, he featured Lincoln's self-deprecating humility, expressed in a typically funny Lincolnian anecdote.

What is significant here is the editor's selection of the personal features most characteristic of Abraham Lincoln. In a list of otherwise undeniably accurate and well-known traits, he included billiard playing right along with the others. The implications are unmistakable: I ask you, how likely is it that a passage written to honor such an admired and unique individual, which would be read by people personally acquainted with him, would have mentioned Lincoln's billiard playing if it were an activity only casually, passingly, or peripherally associated with him?

The Urbana Controversy over Lincoln's First Game.

On January 20, 1909, the *Illinois State Journal* reported the story of "Lincoln's First Billiard Game." The article, which depicts life on the circuit, is based on the recollections of H.M. Russel, who as a young man worked at an Urbana hotel and stage house.⁴⁰ The article's key elements are: (a) the proprietor of the Champaign House was Russel's uncle, James S. Gere; (b) Lincoln and company resided at the Champaign House in Urbana, Illinois in May, 1848, during their circuit travels; (c) Lincoln's billiards opponent was a young local attorney named J. C. Sheldon; (d) the event took place at "a new billiard hall and the first that had ever been in Urbana ..."; (e) neither one played billiards up until then, and they "jollied and bantered ... that they were behind the times"; (f) word of the match having spread, "the hall was soon comfortably filled with spectators"; (g) no one else played on other tables during the Lincoln-Sheldon match, in order to watch; (h) the match was to 100 points, with Russel unable to remember who won; (i) Russel "always felt sure they told the truth (about having never played billiards), for the game was, I think, one of the most awkward and laughable games I ever witnessed even

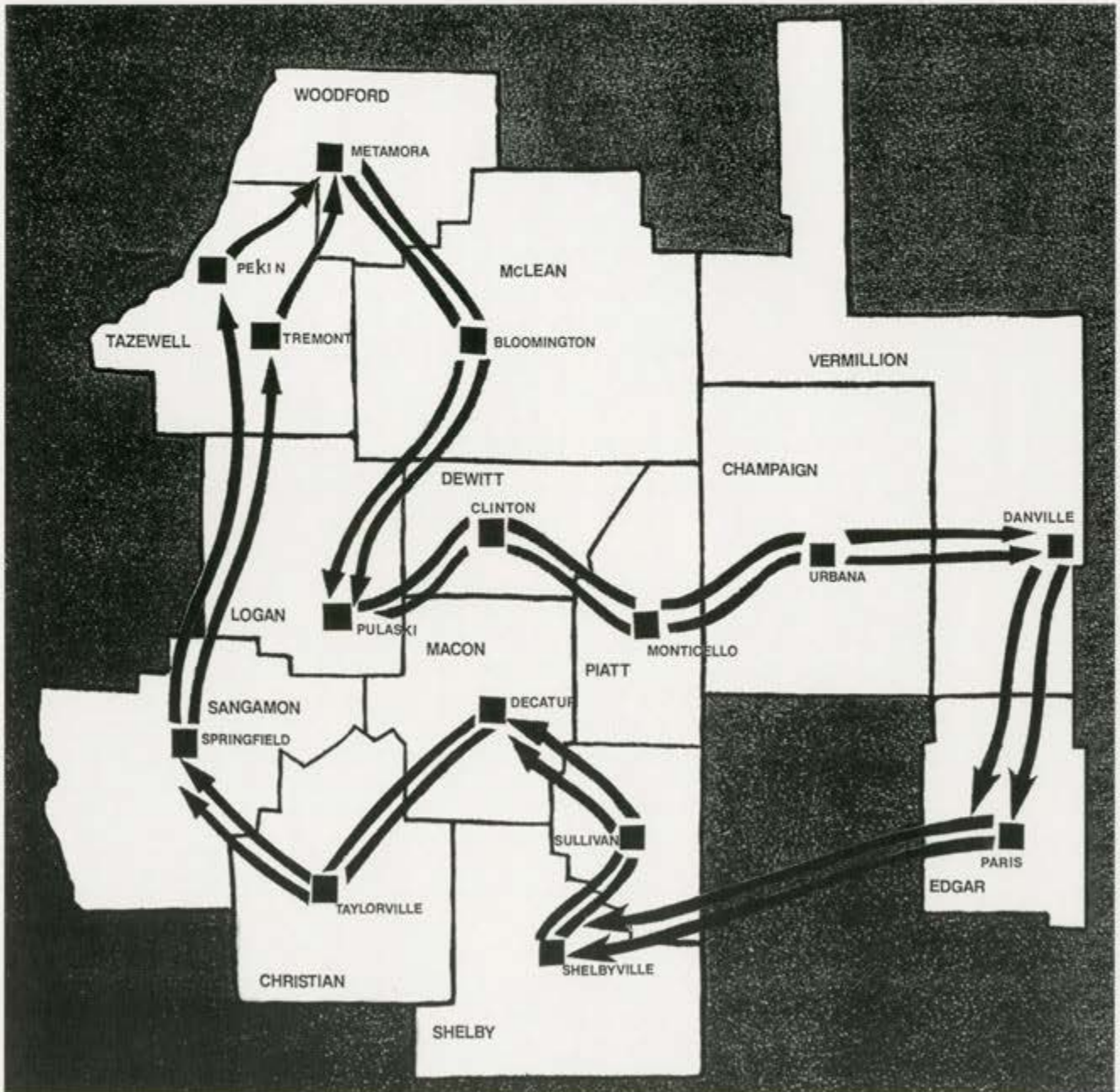
among amateurs"; (j) "No matter where a ball lay Mr. Lincoln could lean his whole body over the rail and reach with his long arms a ball anywhere on the table"; (k) the context of the article is positive and up-beat, suggesting that the contestants enjoyed themselves; and (l) "Judging from the Urbana man's description of the game, Lincoln would never have become a champion billiard player."⁴¹

So the "First Billiard Game" is rich in detail for the would-be Lincoln billiard historian. The problem is that Lincoln was not traveling the circuit in May, 1848 and

was not in Urbana during the entire month of May, 1848. It's a fine article, but Lincoln simply was not there at the specified time.⁴²

This does not mean, of course, that these events did not occur at some other point in time. Lincoln was in Urbana in May of 1850-52 (1853 is doubtful) and 1854-57, as well as other times, and he and his circuit colleagues did regularly frequent the Champaign House hotel during their stays there.⁴³ Although the Champaign/Urbana city directories from 1850 make no specific references to billiard halls, there are several references to inns, saloons and taverns,

which often included billiard tables, as did hotels like the Champaign House. Likewise, James S. Gere "came to Urbana, Champaign County, in 1845 or 1846, and for several years kept the Champaign Hotel." Gere even had an interest in the law, and "practiced to a considerable extent in the lower courts." Also, Henry M. Russell lived in Urbana during the period in question, having moved there "in 1847, shortly before attaining his majority The next year he was in the employ of his uncle, James Gere, assisting him in conducting the old time 'Champaign Hotel' and in farm work."⁴⁴



This map traces Lincoln's travels along the Eighth Judicial Circuit in 1850. The life of a circuit-riding lawyer provided ample opportunity to indulge in billiards and other amusements.

Lincoln's alleged opponent, J. C. (Jairus Corydon) Sheldon, presents another problem. In 1848 he lived in Ohio, where he apprenticed as a ship builder. However, by May 11, 1853 he was living in Urbana where he began legal apprenticeship in 1855. It is clear that his path crossed that of Lincoln, because Lincoln composed "the committee appointed to examine him" when Sheldon was admitted to the bar during the fall term of 1855.⁶ Further, in an 1880 thesis on Lincoln in Champaign County, Henry M. Beardsley wrote:

Once in a while he [Lincoln] would play a game of billiards. I remember an old citizen tell me, "the first game I ever played [was] with him. When it came my turn to play, he said to me in a legal-like manner, 'Now if this were my case, I would hit this ball, make it roll against that one, have it hit the cushion and then roll back against the third ball there.'"⁶

Presumably, the unnamed "old citizen" cited here was Sheldon, who would have been 52 or 53 in 1880.

So what is to be made of this? Although the hotel, its proprietor, and Russell's presence can all be verified, and the probability that a billiard table or hall existed in Urbana during the period is high, it is nevertheless clear that Lincoln and Sheldon did not play billiards in Urbana in May, 1848. My own inclination — based on the evidence in the rest of the paper — is to believe that the match quite likely took place, but on some different date.

To be concluded in the Summer 1997 issue.

Notes

1. See, for example, Mike Shamos, *Pool* (New York, NY: Mallard Press, 1991), 9; John Grissim, *Billiard: Hustlers & Heroes, Legends & Lies and the Search for Higher Truth on the Green Felt* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 31-38; Edward D. Knuchell, *Pocket Billiard with Cue Tips* (Cranbury, NJ: A.S. Barnes, 1970), 17-23.

2. David H. Donald, *Lincoln* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 600.

3. Henry C. Whitney, intro. Paul M. Angle, *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1940), 19-20. As Angle explains, "Lamon's books ... filtered through the pens of others, Arnold's biography was cast in the classic mold, with every intimate touch rigorously excluded; and the principal work of Nicolay and Hay carries not only the weight of official sanction, but a heavy burden of Civil War history as well." Elsewhere Angle is critical of Herndon as well; see Paul Angle, "Lincoln's First Love?" *Bulletin* (Lincoln Centennial Association) December 1, 1927, 1.

4. See, for example, David Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered* 2d ed., enl., (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1961), 160-63.

5. Whitney, *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln*, 19-20. Angle acknowledges that "Whitney's opportunities for personal observation were limited ... When Whitney wrote of events between 1854 and 1861, the presumption is that he had first-hand knowledge; when he wrote of other phases

of Lincoln's life he wrote as a fallible — often a very fallible — biographer." *Ibid.*, 21.

6. *Ibid.*, 20-21.

7. *Ibid.*, 423.

8. William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life*, 3 vols. (Chicago: Belford-Clark, 1889).

9. Jesse W. Weik, *The Real Lincoln: A Portrait* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1922), 216-17.

10. Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln*, 3 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1925), 2:75.

11. Sandburg's "notes" are a largely disorganized collection of written items and books which are housed at the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign. No reference to this passage was located in the box containing the reference material for this part of Sandburg's treatise. Special thanks to John Hoffmann (University of Illinois) for his assistance.

12. Henry C. Whitney to William H. Herndon, Chicago, August 27, 1887; DLC-HW, Group 4, Reel 10:2186. Historian Michael Burlingame interprets the word "worthless" as "noteless" (personal communication to the author, November 4, 1996).

13. See, for example, David F. Hawke ed., *Herndon's Lincoln: The True Story of a Great Life* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 137-38.

14. Henry C. Whitney to W. H. Herndon, DLC-HW, Group 4, Reel 10:2188 (see Frames 2187-2192 for the broader discussion of Lincoln's intimacies).

15. Records of the 1860 U.S. Census show George W. Lawrence, his wife Nancy A. and their five children residing in Danville. Lawrence's occupation is listed as "Lawyer."

16. H.A. Coffeen, *Vermilion County: Historical, Statistical, and Descriptive* (Danville, Illinois: H.A. Coffeen, 1871), 44.

17. Lottie E. Jones, *History of Vermilion County, II* (Chicago: Pioneer Publishing, 1911) 1:174.

18. U.S. Census, 1860.

19. George W. Lawrence of Danville was granted a license to practice law in Illinois on July 19, 1854. See the Illinois Roll of Attorneys, Illinois Supreme Court Library.

20. Donald, *Lincoln*, 250-51.

21. Weik, *The Real Lincoln*, 264-65. Citation provided by Michael Burlingame.

22. Herndon and Weik, *Herndon's Lincoln* (1889), 3:462-63.

23. Donald, *Lincoln*, 250, is typical: "Up early on Friday, May 18, the day when nominations were to be made, he passed some time playing 'fives' — a variety of handball — with some other men in a vacant lot next to the *Illinois State Journal* office." No mention of billiards is included.

24. William H. Herndon to himself, DLC-HW, Group 4, Reel 11:2977.
25. Clearly Lincoln was nervous that day. C. C. Brown wrote, "Lincoln played ball with me on that day (so he did with Z. Enos, Baker, etc.). L. was nervous, fidgety, intensely excited. Lincoln told stories ..." See Emanuel Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1940), 380.
26. Fred W. Brinkerhoff, "The Kansas Tour of Lincoln the Candidate," Address of the President of the Kansas State Historical Society, *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 8 (February, 1945):294-307. The date of his departure from Springfield is disputed, but was either November 29 or 30.
27. *Ibid.*, 296.
28. Alan W. Farley, "Speeches in Troy, Atchison and Leavenworth Revealed Eloquence and Philosophical Depth Which Gained Him the Presidency the Following Year — Trip Reconstructed by President of State Historical Society," *Kansas City Star*, (8 February 1959), 21.
29. Brinkerhoff, "The Kansas Tour of Lincoln the Candidate," 301; Farley, "Speeches ...," 21-22.
30. Virgil W. Dean (Editor, *Kansas History Quarterly*), personal communication to the author, October 14, 1996.
31. "Old Massasoit House Where Abe Lincoln Was a Guest," *Atchison Weekly Globe*, 29 June 1911.
32. Anne C. Grego-Nagel (Director, Atchison County Historical Society), personal communication to the author, September, 1996.
33. Brinkerhoff, "The Kansas Tour of Lincoln the Candidate," 301.
34. "Old Massasoit House," *Atchison Weekly Globe*, 29 June 1911.
35. *Ibid.* See also James Sutherland (publisher and compiler), *Atchison City Directory and Business Mirror for 1860-61* (Indianapolis), 67.
36. Matthew Quigg (publisher and compiler), *Atchison City Directory and Business Mirror for 1865*, 69.
37. Brinkerhoff, "The Kansas Tour of Lincoln the Candidate," 301; Quigg, *Atchison City Directory and Business Mirror for 1865*, 77. About Pomeroy's senatorial service, Brinkerhoff continues, "Pomeroy ... was destined to ... be one of the most persistent enemies of Lincoln in the senate" (301).
38. Sutherland, *Atchison City Directory, 1860-61*, 83. Readers who are unfamiliar with the history of billiards and other cue sports may be surprised to learn that so many billiard rooms were in operation in Atchison in 1860. In fact, "By 1845 the billiard industry was firmly established (in the United States), with over twenty billiard rooms in New York City ... the popularity of billiards had spread to almost all levels of society and it had become part of everyday life, and an industry unto itself ..." The billiards industry, and the game's popularity, grew particularly rapidly with the expansion of the railroads. See Victor Stein and Paul Rubino, *The Billiard Encyclopedia: An Illustrated History of the Sport* (Lunenburg, Vermont: Stinehour Press, 1994), 143.
39. *Central Transcript* (Clinton, Il.), September 20, 1860, p. 2, col. 6. As cited in Maurice Graham Porter, "Portrait of a Prairie Lawyer: Clifton H. Moore 1851-61 and 1870-80, A Comparative Study." (LL.B. thesis, University of Illinois, 1938) 147n. The author acknowledges special thanks to Bill Beard, who located this passage.
40. Mr. Henry M. Russell would have been 21 years and 6 months old in May, 1848. See J.O. Cunningham, *History of Champaign County* (Urbana, Il.: Champaign County Historical Archives, reprint of the 1905 edition), 1020-21. The *Illinois State Journal* uses the spelling "Russel"; Cunningham and the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* use the spelling "Russell."
41. "Lincoln's First Billiard Game," *Illinois State Journal*, January 20, 1909. The same facts appear in Walter B. Stevens, "Recollections of Lincoln: Lincoln's First Game of Billiards," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, January 31, 1909, Magazine Section, p. 3. In a personal communication to the author (January 21, 1997), Michael Burlingame suggests that Stevens saw the piece in the Springfield paper and summarized it.
42. Earl Schenck Miers, ed., William E. Baringer and C. Percy Powell, asst. eds., *Lincoln Day by Day: A Chronology, 1809-1848*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Lincoln Sesquicentennial Commission, 1960), 1:309-311.
43. Miers, *Lincoln Day by Day*. An unsuccessful attempt was also made to match the date of Lincoln's presence in Urbana with that of his alleged traveling companions: Judge Samuel Treat, David Davis, and Mr. Campbell (all of Springfield); Mr. Post (probably of Clinton); Benedict and Lawrence (of Danville); later Leonard Treat and Asahel Gridley (of Bloomington) are said to have joined them. For the Champaign House, see personal communication to the author on October 9, 1996 by Jean Gordon, supported by various documents of the Champaign County Historical Archives of the Urbana Free Library (e.g. caption of 1908 photo of the Champaign House).
44. J. O. Cunningham, *History of Champaign County*, 930 and 1020-29.
45. Milton W. Mathews and Lewis A. McLean, *Early History and Pioneers of Champaign County* (1891; reprinted Evansville, Ind.: Unigraphic, Inc., 1979), 146-47; J. S. Lothrop, *Champaign County Director, 1870-71: with History of Same* (Chicago: Rand, McNally and Co., 1871), 189-90.
46. Henry M. Beardsley, "Abraham Lincoln in Our Own County" (M.L. thesis, Illinois Industrial University, 1880), 14.

At The Lincoln Museum

Upcoming exhibit:



White House Style: Formal Gowns of the First Ladies

October 19, 1997 — January 4, 1998

Formal gowns of America's First Ladies are showcased in an exhibit organized by The Lincoln Museum. Featured are several originals on loan from various presidential museums, as well as a special collection of reproduction gowns (made from authentic period fabrics) from the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum.

Special Events:

The Eighteenth R. Gerald McMurtry Lecture

Saturday, September 20 — 7:30 p.m.



Professor Paul Simon of Southern Illinois University will present "Lincoln the State Legislator" as the Eighteenth R. Gerald McMurtry Lecture on Saturday, September 20, at 7:30 p.m. Professor Simon, who represented Illinois in the United States House of Representatives for ten years and in the Senate for twelve, is currently the director of the Public Policy Institute at SIU. He is the author of sixteen books, including *Lincoln's Preparation for Greatness: The Illinois Legislative Years*. The cost of the evening lecture and reception is \$10 for Museum members, \$15 for non-members; call (219) 455-7494 for reservations.

Calls for Information and Items

In 1998 The Lincoln Museum will mark the 85th anniversary of the Lincoln Highway with a temporary exhibit of the origin and history of America's first transcontinental automobile road. The Museum is currently seeking information, artifacts and documents related to the Lincoln Highway to augment the exhibit. Readers interested in lending such items for the length of the exhibit are urged to contact the Director of Collections, Carolyn Texley, by email (CLT@LNC.com) or phone at (219) 455-3031.

Beginning in 1933, Boy Scouts undertook an annual pilgrimage to Paul Manship's epic scale Lincoln statue *The Hoosier Youth* in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Jan Shupert-Arick, Education Coordinator, is preparing a history of this pilgrimage and similar events centered around other Lincoln statues. If you have any photographs, newspaper articles, or other information concerning Boy Scout or Girl Scout pilgrimages to Lincoln statues or memorials, please contact Shupert-Arick at (219) 455-5606.

1996 McMurtry Lecture Now Available

Harold Holzer's presentation "The Mirror Image of Civil War Memory: Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis in Popular Prints," is now available in printed form from The Lincoln Museum. The softbound 44-page pamphlet is illustrated with fifteen examples of contemporary prints of Lincoln, Davis, and other contemporaries.

Other past McMurtry Lectures still in stock are: Robert V. Bruce, *Lincoln and the Riddle of Death* (1981), Frank E. Vandiver, *The Long Loom of Lincoln* (1986), Merrill D. Peterson, "This Grand Pertinacity": *Abraham Lincoln and the Declaration of Independence* (1991), and Phillip Shaw Paludan, "The Better Angels of Our Nature": *Lincoln, Propaganda, and Public Opinion in the North During the American Civil War* (1992).

Copies of McMurtry Lectures are \$5 each, postpaid. To order, please send payment to The Lincoln Museum, P. O. Box 7838, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801-7838.



Mt. Rushmore to Remain Unchanged

Lincoln Lore 1846 described a visitors' poll that formed part of the Museum's temporary exhibit, "Making Their Marks: Signatures of the Presidents." In the poll, visitors were asked to name who they would put on Mt. Rushmore if that monument were being created today rather than seventy years ago; in other words, who were the four greatest presidents? The story of the Museum's poll has since been picked up by a news service and reprinted in dozens of newspapers across the country under the headline "Time for an Update?" As a result, the Museum has received a considerable volume of mail (from twenty-one different states) from people thinking that The Lincoln Museum is proposing to alter the monument itself.

Not surprisingly, those who have written have overwhelmingly opposed any change to Mt. Rushmore. Some, however, have suggested interesting adjustments. FDR, Truman, Reagan, Carter, Nixon and Grant have all been recommended as possible replacements for Theodore Roosevelt. The most sweeping change yet proposed has been the idea of Richard E. Cooper, of Detroit Lakes, Minnesota, to return the lands to their earlier possessors, and replace the presidents with Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, Chief Joseph, Geronimo, and Crazy Horse, as depicted in Mr. Cooper's original oil painting above.