

STOLEN *in* STATE



Tanner Kent

Secret Service agents plan the capture of thieves attempting to steal Abraham Lincoln's body during a rehearsal for Bryce Stenzel's re-enactment "Graveyard Ghouls and the Stealing of Lincoln's Body." It will be performed Saturday at the Summit Center.

Author, local historian team up to illustrate the attempt to steal Abraham Lincoln's body

By Tanner Kent
tkent@mankatofreepress.com

MANKATO — There's Abraham Lincoln — the Emancipator.

There's Abraham Lincoln — the Uniter, and Abraham Lincoln — the father and husband.

One filmmaker even tried (rather unsuccessfully) to portray Abraham Lincoln as a vampire slayer.

But few know of Abraham Lincoln, the grave-robbing victim who spent the decades following his death shuffling between 17 different final resting places.

"We all know Lincoln was buried in 1865," said Bryce Stenzel, a Mankato educator and historian who has devoted much of his life to studying and portraying the 16th president, "but what happened next? It always seemed like there was more to the story."

Indeed there is. Jack Koblas, who recently published a book on the matter, and Stenzel will bring that story to life with a book reading and reenactment 1-3 p.m. Saturday at the Blue Earth County Heritage Center. Proceeds will benefit the Boy in Blue Memorial Project to replace the Civil War statue that once stood in Lincoln Park.

Koblas published his book, "Abe Lincoln's Graveyard Ghouls," in November of 2012. In it, the Savage, Minn., author of more than 90 books (many of them in the realm of historical non-fiction), documents the forces of greed, rampant criminality and morbid fascination with death that led

a group of Chicago thieves to lead an attempt to steal the president's body in 1876.

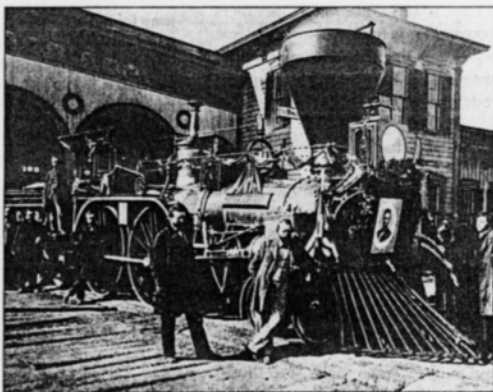
Stenzel's re-enactment introduces the main characters of the body heist: Petty thieves Terrence Mullen and Jack Hughes, ringleader "Big Jim" Kennally and Lewis Swegles, an undercover Secret Service informant dispatched to Chicago to infiltrate Big Jim's counterfeiting ring.

In a Chicago bar called "The Hub," the thieves hatch a plan to steal the president's body from its tomb in Springfield during Election Night when the townspeople would be more concerned with the tightly contested presidential race between Rutherford B. Hayes and Samuel Tilden than goings-on at the graveyard.

The purpose of the plot was to use Lincoln's corpse as leverage for a \$200,000 ransom and the release of Ben Boyd, a counterfeit engraver so skilled that it is said one of his plates for a \$5 bill was so perfect it passed 300,000 undetected bills through one Chicago gang alone.



Bryce Stenzel



Web photo

Pictured is the train that carried Abraham Lincoln's body on a 12-day, 1,600-mile route from Washington, D.C., to Springfield, Ill. In his book "Abe Lincoln's Graveyard Ghouls," Jack Koblas wrote that it was "the grandest funeral spectacle in the history of the world."

As portrayed in Stenzel's re-enactment, the plot is foiled when Swegles alerts a group of Secret Service agents who are waiting at the graveyard. (In those days, the Secret Service was established solely to combat counterfeit currency. Coincidentally, Lincoln died the very same day he created the Secret Service.)

Though the robbers were not successful, the event touched off a deep paranoia that such a plot could be attempted again. In 1901, after being temporarily removed to other burial locations, son Robert Lincoln ordered his

father's coffin to be placed inside a cage and encased in cement 10 feet below the ground.

"The vein is rich on Lincoln," Stenzel said. "There is so much on him — sometimes it's almost overwhelming."

Since he began writing in 1996, Stenzel has produced nearly 20 stage works focusing on Lincoln's life and legacy. In recent years, he's produced all of them with the help of Lincoln's Traveling Troupe, a group of committed youths who portray all the roles.

Stenzel formed the Troupe in 2009 with the intent of handing down his love for history. He said he wants youth to see that history is "anything but boring."

"While they may not major in history as adults," Stenzel said, "I do believe the experiences these young people have had role-playing these historical characters has given them a genuine interest in history that they will hold on to for a lifetime."

If You Go

What Book talk and re-enactment to benefit the Boy in Blue Memorial Project
When 1-3 p.m. on Saturday
Where Summit Center, 518 S. Fifth St.
Schedule 1 p.m. — Author Jack Koblas

discusses his book "Abe Lincoln's Graveyard Ghouls" 2 p.m. — Bryce Stenzel and Lincoln's Traveling Troupe present a re-enactment based on Koblas' book
Admission \$5 for adults, \$2 for children ages 5-16, and \$12 for a family (two adults, two children)