

LINCOLN LORE

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FOLKLORE OF AN UNFOUGHT DUEL

Any highly dramatic episode is bound to gather through the years an interesting collection of folklore. The unfought duel between Abraham Lincoln and James Shields, with an armistice declared before hostilities began, offers a good illustration of this conclusion. Inasmuch as this bulletin is being published during the same week in September that this ludicrous incident in the life of Lincoln occurred in 1842, it seems timely to compile some of the stories relating to it. They can be presented most satisfactorily through four approaches: polemics, weapons, position and aftermath.

The incidents directly responsible for the proposed duel were a series of contributed articles ridiculing Shields which appeared in the *Sangamon Journal* at Springfield, Illinois. Although Lincoln had prepared but one of the monographs, to protect others he assumed the responsibility for all.

Col. Thomas B. Thorpe, an editor and magazine contributor of some note and a Whig contemporary of Abraham Lincoln, in an article featuring the Lincoln-Shields affair stated: "What eventually brought about a disagreement between these gentlemen was never certainly known. . . . It is not difficult to imagine that Mr. Lincoln may have got off one of his telling stories at the expense of his friend that might have been at the moment construed into a personal affront." This was a pretty good guess.

A contributor to the *Alton Republic* in 1893 states that Shields had a custom of squeezing the hand of the young lady he might be escorting which caused Mary Todd to remark that if "he presumed to press her hand too ardently she would write him up . . . true to his habit he did press her hand very warmly" and true to her promise she did write him up in the *Sangamon Journal*.

Another version of this hand squeezing was released in 1891 by Judge Solomon of Iowa who claimed to have received the information from John J. Hardin, a cousin of Mary Todd: "One night he (Shields) was at a dance, and in waltzing with one of the sweet girls of the town he squeezed her hand as she thought a little too ardently and she rewarded him by sticking a pin into him and leaving the floor. Others of the party saw the act and Shields became the laughing stock of the assembly." According to the Judge, the next issue of the Springfield paper contained, "a very laughable poem describing the incident and ridiculing Shields. Shields swore that the writer of the poem was Lincoln and swore to be avenged."

James Grant Wilson in *Putnam's Magazine* for February 1909 states that Stephen A. Douglas gave him this reason for the challenge being issued: "Lincoln, Shields and himself were rival candidates for the hand of Mary Todd. After the campaign had been carried on for several months it was announced that Abe Lincoln was the accepted suitor. But Shields insisted on paying attention to the young lady, much to her annoyance as well as to Lincoln's." It was this attention paid by Shields, according to Douglas, which was responsible for the article lampooning Shields which appeared in the *Sangamon Journal*.

Stories relating to the choice and use of weapons are likewise humorous. It was Lincoln's privilege to select the weapons which he specified as follows: "Cavalry broadswords of the largest size, precisely equal in all respects and such as are used in the cavalry company at Jacksonville."

Nicolas B. Jonas of Enid, Oklahoma who claimed to have been an eye witness to the episode was interviewed for the press in February 1929. He stated: "The duel was to be fought at night with single shot muskets.

Shields was first to fire but his bullet went wild. Lincoln took deliberate aim. Something hit Shields in the chest. Red spurted everywhere, the witness says. Shields dropped to the ground and an excited group rushed to his side. They found that Lincoln had loaded his gun with poke berries."

Bill Souther a reporter who saw the preparations for the duel states in a 1909 newspaper: "The bundle of sabers had been laid down near the log where Lincoln was sitting. Lincoln reached out and took up one of the weapons. He drew the blade slowly from the scabbard" and Souther said: "It looked as long as a fence rail. . . ."

Again referring to the Douglas reminiscence as reported by Wilson, the Senator stated that while preparations were being made for the duel "Lincoln to warm himself began mowing the grass. When Shields saw the giant figure swinging a long sword like a scythe, he leaned against an elm and fainted with fright! and so ended the bloodless duel."

Another one who was present claimed that Lincoln "stretching himself to his full height (normally 6 ft. 4 in.) clipped a twig above his head. There was not another man of us who could reach anywhere near that twig and the absurdity of that long-reaching fellow fighting with cavalry sabers a man who could walk under his arm came pretty near making me howl with laughter."

The position each was to occupy when fighting is clearly laid down by Lincoln in these words: "A plank ten feet long, and from nine to twelve inches broad to be firmly fixed on edge, on the ground, as the line between us which neither is to pass his foot over upon forfeit of his life. Next a line drawn on the ground on either side of said plank and parallel with it, each at the distance of the whole length of the sword and three feet additional from the plank; and the passing of his own such line by either party during the fight shall be deemed a surrender of the contest."

A. G. Morrill prepared an article published in 1917 in which he described the position of the contestants as follows: "A board was laid on the ground, and across this the combatants were to fight, each keeping always on his own side." The associated drawing illustrating the contest shows Lincoln standing on the broad side of one end of the plank and Shields on the other end as if the duel was to be fought entirely by the participants standing on the plank.

The same Col. Thorpe already mentioned as a contemporary of Lincoln refers in this manner to the position of the duelists "the fight to be across a barrier four feet high and four feet wide, and the duel to cease at the 'first blood.'" An illustration of Col. Thorpe's article shows two parallel structures four feet apart, four feet high and about eight feet long made of logs. Lincoln is portrayed standing impressively above one of the barriers and Shields barely able to lift his saber behind the other.

Two friends of Lincoln and Shields, John J. Hardin and R. W. English who arrived at the dueling grounds just before the hostilities were to begin were largely responsible for bringing about a reconciliation.

A person well acquainted with the episode states. "No one in the crowd was in earnest except Shields," aboard the boat in which the party was returning to Alton, "a wag, to impress the crowd waiting on the river bank, took a long cloak folded it around a pillow sat down beside the effigy and began to fan it." Lincoln is said to have remarked "It's not my body for the legs are not long enough. An Alton correspondent wrote: "That night the entire party from the capital made merry over the outcome of the duel until they left for their homes."