

The Original Log Cabin Republicans?



Honest Abe and his alleged "cabin" boy Joshua Speed

BY HEATHER PEAKE

Last February, activist/ writer/ playwright Larry Kramer spoke before a Wisconsin audience about his work-in-progress *The American People*, a definitive history of gays in the United States.

During his presentation came an electrifying announcement: new evidence pointing to a romance between Abraham Lincoln and his friend Joshua Speed, in the form of letters and a diary allegedly found under the floorboards of Speed's former home. While he didn't produce the documents, saying only that they were in the hands of a private collector in Iowa, he did read some excerpts, quoting Speed as writing "he [Lincoln] often kisses me when I tease him, often to shut me up," and "[he] would grab me up by his long arms and hug and hug."

It was, said *The Advocate*, the "outing heard 'round the country."

In the flurry of media coverage, however, there was a conspicuous lack of dissent from mainstream historians. Perhaps they realized that arguing with Kramer was like trying to placate a pit bull with a squeaky toy, or that questioning would inevitably sound homophobic, defensive, or otherwise un-PC. In any case, few went on the record to point out the obvious: the history of Lincolniana is studded with hoaxes, and Kramer wouldn't be the first victim of such a con. Until these documents are produced and authenticated, they are speculative, at best.

Could they be authentic? Sure. Historians have long privately questioned the exact nature of the Lincoln-Speed relationship. In the absence of any real evidence, biographers have played it conservatively. After all, the only hint of a liaison between the two is a shared bed and some mutual foot-dragging on the way to the altar. Certainly there is no support at the

moment to support Kramer's claim that "Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Speed were in love with each other for all their adult lives..."

What we do know

Lincoln met Speed on April 15, 1837, the day he arrived in Springfield, Illinois. He walked into A.Y. Elis & Co, the general store Speed was then managing.

"He came into my store," Speed later told biographer William Herndon, "set his saddle-bags on the counter and asked me 'what furniture for a single

debt. I have a very large room, and a very large double bed in it; which you are perfectly welcome to share with me if you choose.' 'Where is your room?' asked he. 'Upstairs' said I, pointing to the stairs from the store to my room. Without saying a word, he took his saddle-bags on his arm, went up stairs, set them down on the floor, came down again, and with a face beaming with pleasure and smiles, exclaimed 'Well, Speed, I'm moved.'"

They shared that room for the next three years. The store quickly became a popular gathering spot for Springfield's

In the April issue of *Salon*, Larry Kramer is quoted as saying, "So much of the history that is shoveled into the world is bullshit we really have to invent our own." He's right: most of the history shoveled into the world right now is bullshit because people invent their own.

bedstead would cost.' I made some calculations, and found the sum for furniture complete, would amount to seventeen dollars in all. Said he: 'it is probably cheap enough; but I want to say that cheap as it is I have not the money to pay. But if you will credit me until Christmas, and my experiment here as a lawyer is a success, I will pay you then. If I fail in that I will probably never be able to pay you at all.'

"I looked up at him," Speed continued, "and I thought then as I think now, that I never saw so gloomy, and melancholy a face. I said to him: 'The contraction of so small a debt seems to affect you so deeply, I think I can suggest a play by which you will be able to attain your end, without incurring any

large population of up-and-coming young men. Lincoln and Speed also plunged into the local party scene, and, as gossip had it, became embroiled in a fight for the hand of a local belle named Matilda Edwards. This was soon over, as Miss Edwards had no interest in either man; Lincoln turned his attention to Mary Todd, to whom he eventually became engaged.

But Lincoln panicked on the way to the altar. In January 1841, as the wedding party assembled at her cousin's house, he broke the engagement to Mary, saying he was in love with Matilda, and fell into a near suicidal depression.

Speed, who was returning to live in his native Kentucky, took Lincoln with

him. Some time with the Speeds helped him regain his equilibrium, but knocked his friend off balance. Speed was then courting a local belle, "and strange to say something of the same feeling which I regarded as so foolish in him...took possession of me...and kept me very unhappy from the time of my engagement until I was married."

Eventually, everything worked out. Lincoln returned to Springfield and patched things up with Mary. In 1842, both men married; by 1844, both were fathers.

They kept up a regular correspondence until the mid-1850s, when time, distance, and politics caused their friendship to cool. Like many Kentuckians, Speed was pro-Union, but also pro-slavery, and Lincoln's increasingly vocal criticism of slavery did not sit well with him. By the time Lincoln was elected, Speed could congratulate him as a "personal friend" but a "political enemy."

The family worked hard to keep Kentucky in the Union, and Speed's older brother James became Attorney General in 1864. Speed last saw his sick, exhausted friend on a trip to Washington just a few weeks before the assassination. "Speed," he recalled Lincoln saying during their last conversation, "die when I may, I want it said of me by those who know me best to say that I always plucked a thistle and planted a flower where I thought a flower would grow."

What we don't know

Attempts to penetrate the sexual mores of another era usually end up reflecting our own hang-ups more than anything else. Today, two men sharing a single bed would be met with a raised eyebrow or a knowing wink. We would likewise look askance at a husband and wife sleeping in separate rooms.

But in the 19th century, living space came at a premium, and privacy was rare. Sleeping two or three to a bed was the norm. By the same token, Victorian couples with separate bedrooms wasn't a sign of frigidity – it was an indication of wealth and social status. Space and privacy translated to class.

So the evidence cuts both ways. Gay or straight, as a lawyer riding the Eighth Circuit, Lincoln spent many a night sharing a lumpy, flea-infested boarding-house bed with other men. The money he made on these trips allowed him to add an entire second floor – complete with dual bedchambers – to his Springfield home. Depending on your agenda, this could mean everything or nothing.

This isn't to say homosexuality didn't exist. To the contrary, it probably flourished in the mid-19th century, as increasing urbanization made it easier for potential partners to meet. Sometimes two men living together meant just that. Lincoln's predecessor in the White House, James Buchanan, is politely described as our only bachelor president. He shared quarters with fellow Senator William King for 15 years, until King's death in the 1850s.