

LINCARNATIONS

The Newsletter of the ASSOCIATION OF LINCOLN PRESENTERS

VOL. 4, NO. 1

SPECIAL ISSUE: *The Sanity of Mary Todd Lincoln*

SPRING, 1995

President Lincoln led his wife gently to a window one day and pointed toward an asylum for the insane in the distance. "Mother," he told her sorrowfully, "do you see that large white building on the hill yonder: Try and control your grief or it will drive you mad, and we may have to send you there." -- Abraham Lincoln to Mary Todd Lincoln in 1862, shortly after the death of their son, Willie. As reported by Elizabeth Keckley in *Behind the Scenes*, pp.104-5.



Mary Todd Lincoln
As a bride
In the White House

Mary Todd Lincoln
As a matron
As a widow

Mary Todd Lincoln was insane when she spent four months in an Illinois asylum, concludes Mark E. Neely, Jr. and R. Gerald McMurtry in their new book, *The Insanity File: The Case of Mary Todd Lincoln*. However, Mrs. Lincoln showed no signs of severe mental illness during the remainder of her life. "We argue . . . that she wasn't railroaded, that she was insane in the spring of 1875," says Dr. Neely. His work draws on a collection of Lincoln family letters found at Hildene. They suggest that Mrs. Lincoln once asked someone to kill Robert and that she also threatened to kidnap her grandson. "The strain Robert . . . must have been under," observes Dr. Neely, "has never been fully appreciated."

LINCOLN HERALD, vol. 86, No.2, Summer, 1984, p.118.

"If there had been a fair trial there is a strong probability that Robert Lincoln's petition would have been denied. Mrs. Lincoln demonstrated her sanity at the time of the trial by her conduct, as noted by all the newspaper reporters. Even Leonard Swett, who had long been convinced of her insanity, had last minute doubts on the day of the trial."

The Trials of Mrs. Lincoln. by Samuel Schreiner, Jr., pp. 321-2:

"It is never easy to say when twilight ends and night begins. For our purposes we class Mrs. Lincoln's mind as insane after 1865." Mrs. Abraham Lincoln by Dr. William A. Evans (New York: Knopf, 1932. p.305).

Mary Todd Lincoln

by Bev Nelson

(A Mary Todd Lincoln Portrayer from Lincoln, Kansas)

I ran a blind test to determine Mary's "madness". The circumstances were as follows:

I enrolled in an Abnormal Psychology class at Cloud County Community College, taught by Robert Logan, M.A., a practicing clinical psychologist. We were discussing manic-depressives, schizophrenics, personality disorders, and the means of diagnosing mental disorders.

The accepted first step in diagnosing mental illness is known as a "reality check". Does the subject know her name, the date, and where she is? Does she know and understand that any deceased members of her immediate circle are indeed dead? Does she hear voices or see apparitions? Mary never lost her awareness of who she was, when she was living, where she was - therefore, she passed the reality check. She knew her dead ones were dead. Neither voices nor visions appear anywhere in her story.

The compulsive buying and the obsession with poverty seem manic, but are they? She saw her stepmother left impoverished following her father's death, and the purchases she made may have been compensation for the pain of being snubbed by others, first as a bride in Springfield, then as an "uncouth Westerner" in Washington. Excessive, yes; in need of control, yes - lunacy, no.

The Todds were known for their outspokenness and their volatile tempers. Add the unresolved grief over her mother's death and the normal frustrations of everyday life, and an emotional powder-keg is fused for Mary.

Lastly, the rages, the outbursts, the jealousy appear to have been cyclical. PMS, perhaps, followed in the course of a difficult life by widowhood about the time of menopause.

Mr. Logan's suggestions before he knew the subject's name was consult a doctor, start estrogen therapy, as well as B-12 (calms the nervous system), and then psychotherapy with a competent therapist and possibly a grief support group.

When I divulged her name, Mary Todd Lincoln, he said, "My God - I always thought she was insane."

I did the experiment partially out of curiosity, and to be sure my portrayal of this poor, bedeviled woman was accurate. Robert Logan confirmed my suspicions - Mary had her problems, but she was not mad.

I sincerely hope that when I portray Mary, she sounds like a woman whose every dream came true, then turned to dust before her very eyes, an intelligent, loving, passionate, tragic soul.

March 17, 1995

Dear Dan,

Please convey to the ALP my heartfelt thanks and deep appreciation for the great honor of winning the first annual Mary Todd Lincoln award.

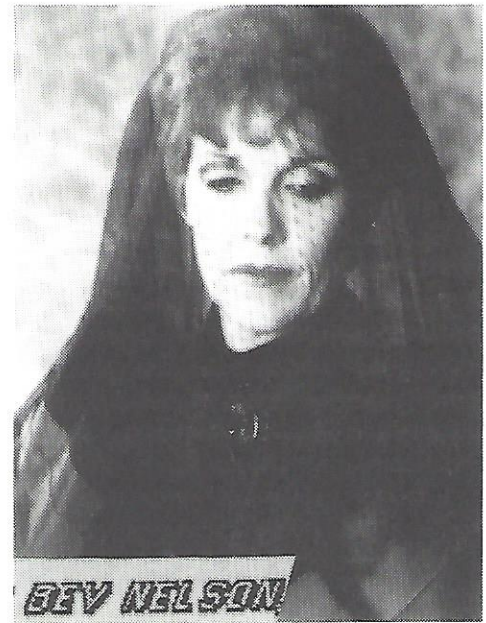
To belong to the ALP is to walk with giants - to be so honored by this membership is both thrilling and humbling. I can think of no greater experience.

To my sister Marys - come join me, and to all the Abrahams - there's room for each of you. I'm looking forward to our next reunion - to see all of you again. Please accept my sincere thanks.

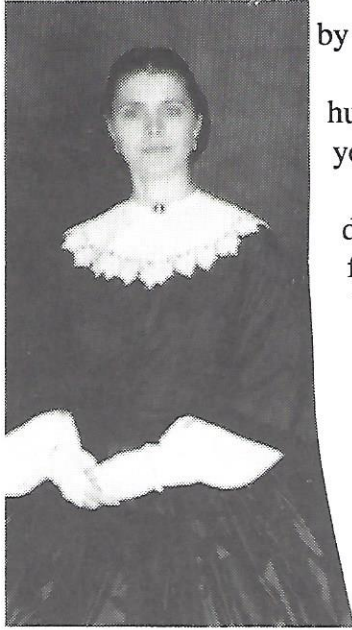
Very truly yours,

Bev Nelson

Lincoln, Kansas



Mary Todd Lincoln



by Donna Daniels (a Mary Todd Lincoln portrayal from Illinois)

Mary Todd Lincoln - not nearly as much is known about her as her famous husband, yet the mere mention of her name triggers a knee-jerk reaction: "Oh yeah! She's the one who was crazy!"

But was Mary Lincoln really crazy - or, at least, as crazy as they say? The definitive answer to that question may never be known, but it has certainly fueled decades of lively discussion. She was certainly exhibiting some bizarre behavior - behavior that, if observed today, we might label "eccentric" but not necessarily lock the person up for it. Was it only the 19th century perception of this behavior that led her son, Robert, and a Chicago jury to declare her "a fit person to be placed in an institution for the insane"?

Mary, of course, did not believe herself to be insane, but rather a victim of wrongful imprisonment - persecuted by her sole surviving son because he couldn't wait to get his hands on his inheritance. Robert's defenders maintain that he acted to protect his mother from herself. Notwithstanding that Abraham Lincoln's estate, at his death, totaled nearly \$110,000,

Mary never felt that she had enough money. She believed herself to be in poverty. Yet, she converted \$50,000 into bonds which she sewed into her petticoats and wore on her person. Robert knew this, and may have feared that if it became common knowledge, she could be physically attacked and robbed or swindled out of it - and Mary was an "easy mark".

Her great weakness was spiritualists and mediums, in whom she had begun putting more and more of her trust each time a member of her family was "taken" from her. By the time of the insanity trial (May, 1875), she had lost three of her four children and her husband, and thought nothing of traveling all over the country in search of the medium who would finally be able to help her contact her "loved and lost". In the 19th century, simply believing in spiritualism was enough to get you locked up. Technically Robert didn't even have to give her the "courtesy" of a trial!

The "evidence" that was presented at her trial seems unsubstantial by today's standards. Her physician was called to testify that she had complained of headaches which felt as if wires were being pulled through her eyes. (Today, migraine headaches are not considered proof of mental instability.) Several other doctors, who had never even examined her, testified that based on what Robert had told them about her, they felt that she was, indeed, insane. (Today that's called "hearsay", and it is not admissible in court.)

Of course, the primary evidence against Mary was her spending habits - and admittedly she was a spendaholic. But this was how she cheered herself up when she was having a bad day. She often called shopping "my only available pleasure in this miserable existence." Besides, she reasoned, "What business is it of Robert's what I spend my money on? I don't criticize him for making bad real estate investments, but he wants to lock me up for buying curtains!"

Still, Mary was not the only woman during this time who suffered. Why should she be so unable to cope? There are many theories about what might have caused Mary to get that way. To me, the most obvious is that three of her children died very young and her husband was killed before her eyes. I don't think I could handle that myself, and I wonder which of us could. Still, that may be too obvious, too simple. Let us consider some of the other reasons that have been suggested.

It is possible that Mary's problem stemmed from the fact that there was a history of inbreeding in her family. Mary's parents were cousins, and inbreeding had been going on for several generations. In fact, there were other members of the Todd family who were considered to be mentally unstable. It

Continued on page 4

Continued from page 3

is the existence of these family members that lends credence to this particular theory.

As mentioned before, Mary suffered from migraine headaches. The primary treatment for pain in those days was laudanum, a mixture of opium and alcohol. Today we know that consuming large quantities of drugs like these over a prolonged period is likely to cause some sort of psychosis, but this was not known in the 1860's and 70's.

It has even been suggested that Mary's bizarre behavior was actually due to PMS and/or the Change of Life! One lady claimed to have charted all of Mary's most embarrassing episodes, and indicated that they all followed a clearly discernible monthly cycle. The menopause argument could have merit, for Mary was in her mid 50's when things started going badly for her. Actually, this line of reasoning would fit in well with the doctrines of medical practice in the 19th century - women were considered to be weak minded creatures because of their female anatomy, and almost all emotional or psychological problems were attributed to it. Doctors were quick to diagnose mental illness as "female troubles." To them, it was one and the same.

But has anyone considered the possibility that Mary was not really insane? Author Jean Baker has. In her 1987 biography of Mary Lincoln, she makes a rather convincing case that Mary was a woman ahead of her time. She was too well-educated and too interested in politics for her own good, and she ruffled too many male feathers. Baker attributes Mary's trouble to an inner conflict between her ambition to do more and be more, and her acknowledgment that it was not proper or ladylike to have this ambition. Baker, admittedly, has a feminist slant to her writing, as well as a tendency to apply 20th century standards to 19th century behavior and attitudes, which is not entirely fair.

That brings us back to our original question. Is it the difference in standards which makes it impossible to determine if Mary was crazy or not? Most Lincoln scholars today tend to agree that she may have been at least temporarily insane. In any event, she was confined at Bellevue Place for only four months, and did not die in an asylum.

In my years of portraying Mary, I have found her to be a very complex and tragic woman, but not any "crazier" than many people who pass for "normal" today. True, she did some very embarrassing things which often got her into trouble and which she regretted. I think all of us can relate to that. She lived to be sixty-three years old, and yet her entire life has come to be judged on four months during the summer of 1875. Which of us would care to have our entire lives judged by only four months? Perhaps it is best, in the long run, not to judge Mary's sanity, but to consider her with more sympathy and understanding.

First Convention of Association of Lincoln Presenters January 21, 1995

Thirty-seven Abrahams and nine Marys had a grand tour of the home where Mary Todd Lincoln grew up in Lexington, Kentucky. Mary would be pleased that her family home has been so well preserved. At the Todd home, Dan Bassuk exhibited one of his prized possessions, a gold locket containing some of Mary Lincoln's hair.

"Within ten minutes the all-male jury had reached its decision: 'We the undersigned jurors in the case of Mary Lincoln are satisfied that Mary Lincoln is insane and is a fit person to be in a state hospital for the insane - that her age is 56 - that the disease is of unknown duration - that the cause is unknown - that she is not subject to epilepsy - that she does not manifest homicidal or suicidal tendencies and that she is not a pauper.'

Years later one juror recalled that in view of the lack of any other evidence, 'there seemed to be no other course than for us but to find the lady guilty as charged.'"

Mary Todd Lincoln by Jean Baker, p.325.

Interview with Nancy Nilsson, Playwright of "Very Truly Yours, M.L."

by James Keeran, Reporter for the ALP

Rockville, MD. 1994. Listening to the lyrical drawl in her voice, one has no difficulty believing Nancy Nilsson when she says, "I must confess. I have never been a Lincoln fan. I do not hold Abraham Lincoln in the high esteem that most people do." But this playwright can become quite passionate when she speaks of another Lincoln, perhaps a Lincoln often overlooked, and one whom Nancy Nilsson does hold in High esteem - Mary Todd Lincoln. "She was a woman before her time," says Nilsson, the Maryland playwright responsible of the full-length, one-woman play "Very Truly Yours, M. L." Nilsson is not so taken with Mary Lincoln that she cannot see her problems. "We don't know that a few hormones might have helped her," she said. But she credits the wife with much of the husband's success. "She pushed, encouraged, did everything in her power to see that he got to the highest office." And perhaps Mary didn't stop there. She also had a hand in writing "Very Truly Yours, M. L." the playwright believes.

Nilsson wrote the play specifically for actress Nancy Grosshans in 1986, although it is available for other actresses now. She had already written a one-woman play for Grosshans, "The Autoassassination of Delia Horne Lassiter" and it was absolutely outrageous and off the wall, about a woman in an asylum who has a party and kills her guests. "Grosshans said this is probably not her cup of tea," and Nilsson agreed. Initially, however, she disagreed with Grosshans' suggestion that she tackle Mary Todd Lincoln. "I'm tired of hearing about her being crazy and about her being stingy and ruining Mr. Lincoln's life and all that stuff." But the suggestion wouldn't leave. She thought, "There's another side to this lady and I'm gonna try to find it." Nilsson needed a "hook" for the play, she said, and she found it in the idea of having Mary dressing for the theater on April 14, 1865. The play is set in the First Lady's dressing room. The action

is Mary speaking to her visitors, the audience, about her life and the issues of the day. And it ends when she finishes dressing and leaves for Ford's Theater.

Nilsson said she researched the life of Mary Todd Lincoln only up to that point so she could not include anything past that moment in her play. And then she wrote. "I think it took me about three and a half weeks to write this," she said. The words simply flowed. "Nancy (Grosshans) and I are convinced . . . that Mary said yes to the project." In the published script, Nilsson has written a poem titled, "For M.L." which explains what the play is all about:

We give her one last time to laugh
To visit, to remember, to be gay.
We suspend her between the yesterday and
tomorrow,
And let her heart speak for itself
Without regret, without repentance, with
out restitution.
We give her one starburst night of love
Before she weeps forever.

It set the tone perfectly for a play about a woman whom the playwright holds in great respect, for in "Very Truly Yours, M. L." we see a Mary who embraces her life in the White House and refuses to apologize for any of it.

*A visit with Mary Todd Lincoln
as she dresses for the couple's night out
at Ford's Theatre*



Very Truly Yours, M.L.

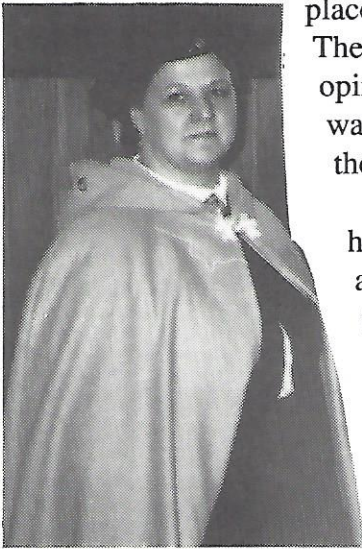
A Theatrical Conversation in Two Acts

Nancy M. Nilsson

MTL-Sane or Insane?

by Sheri Teller

(a Mary Todd Lincoln portrayer from Michigan)



Until I started researching the life of Mary Todd Lincoln, I too had the misunderstanding of her place in history. In my research I found authors who liked and disliked Mary. There has always been a question of her insanity. This makes her, in my opinion, one of the most misunderstood ladies in history. Even as a child, she was described as a "spring day: sunny and bright one moment, dark and stormy the next."

What many people do not realize is the amount of grief and tragedy Mary had in her life. At the age of seven losing a mother who made Mary feel safe and loved, to her adult life losing three of the four children she brought into this world. Then to have her husband assassinated while sitting next to her, would probably push most of us over the brink of reality.

To draw the conclusion that Mary was insane is largely a matter of perception. By the standards of her time, I'm sure that she could have been perceived as being insane. But the medical profession at the time was in its infancy. The fact that she lost half of her body weight and her eyesight near the end of her life, suggests she could have been the victim of diabetes. Her mood swings also can be attributed to this condition by the inconsistent blood sugar levels that would have been present. The fact that her autopsy revealed a tumor in her brain could also have been the reason for the mood swings.

One fact often overlooked is Mary's age at the time of becoming First Lady in the Executive Mansion. Being forty-two brings up the question of her "change of life". What did the medical profession at the time know about this time in a woman's life? It was probably passed off as the "vapors" or "that time of the month".

One other factor that stands out in the writings about Mary is her use of medication. In several references I find that she took all of her medications, put them into one glass, stirred them together and drank it all at once. The prescription drugs that Mary obtained from several physicians could have caused the hallucinations so often experienced by Mary. Mary was not ignorant of some drugs' effects by any means. She once tried to commit suicide shortly after Lincoln's death, only to be stopped by a druggist who recognized what she was thinking of doing.

As for being committed by her son Robert, I believe Mary had become an embarrassment to him with her behavior. The press would not leave her alone, and every thing she did was incorrect. Therefore, it was easy for Robert to have her committed. It's interesting to note that the judicial system only held "trials" to pronounce someone insane if the family had money. A less "well-off" individual would not have had the luxury of a trial. After Mary was found to be a "lunatic" and committed to the care of the asylum, I am sure that all the medications she had been taking were stopped and a new regime set up. This is why I believe that it was more of a drug problem than a question of her sanity. In my opinion Mary was not insane but more a victim of a medical community that did not understand the workings and diseases of the body or the interactions of medicines.

Differences in lifestyles, experiences, upbringing can color one's perception of sanity and reality. As a Living Historian portraying Mary Todd Lincoln, I find myself at every event being asked the age-old question: "Are you really crazy?" My typical answer is: "Yes. But aren't we all a little bit?"

Book Review of The Insanity File: The Case of Mary Todd Lincoln

by Mark E. Neely, Jr. and R. Gerald McMurtry

Reviewed by Linda Levitt Turner

Robert Todd Lincoln was an intensely secretive man, especially on the subject of his unhappy and unstable mother. He destroyed almost every document concerning her and every one of her letters that came into his possession - except for one packet of material that he carefully preserved and locked away in a cupboard at his Vermont home, knowing that someday it would be found. It has finally been found, and shortly before the death of Robert's last descendant in 1985, the authors of this absorbing new book were granted exclusive access to what was labeled simply "The Insanity File."

The file contained a raft of correspondence dealing with Robert's controversial decision to have his mother committed to a hospital for the insane in May of 1875 after a public trial and with her successful campaign four months later to obtain release into the custody of her sister and brother-in-law in Springfield. Other documents concerned his meticulous management of her finances during the year-long conservatorship which ended with a second hearing declaring her "restored to reason" and the bitter estrangement between mother and son that lasted virtually until the end of her life.

Mssrs. Neely and McMurtry, distinguished Lincoln scholars, have made judicious use of this privileged material. They have not only incorporated it into an immensely readable narrative, shedding new light on the characters and motivation of all concerned, but have expanded upon it in numerous ways. They delve deeply into the practice of medical jurisprudence in 19th century America discussing the particularly demeaning position of women whose sanity was in question, the primitive treatment provided by even the most expensive, private institutions, and the dawning realization that "cures" could rarely be effected by such treatment - all of which places a family tragedy in its proper historical and sociological context.

To those who have questioned the need for a humiliating public hearing, the authors provide a definitive answer. In 1875 Illinois, no person of means could be deprived of control over his or her property or personal freedom without resort to jury trial. They admit that Mary Lincoln was denied sufficient notice to prepare a defense but frankly acknowledge that Robert's purpose was to get through the formalities as painlessly as possible and provide his mother with immediate care as advised by every one of the respected physicians he consulted.

The history of Mary Lincoln's behavior in the months prior to the trial is well known: the orgiastic spending sprees and the instances of delusion and hallucination attested to by disinterested witnesses driving her only living son half wild with anxiety and shame. The authors state categorically that, whatever her condition in earlier or later years, she was insane in the spring of 1875. They are undoubtedly correct, although one might dispute the validity of what they deem her "admission of insanity" - an oblique remark to a relative, relayed at second hand.

Certainly Robert was no saint, but it is hard to blame him for wishing to preserve his mother's modest fortune and to get her out of his life and out of his hair - if only to save his marriage and his own sanity. Which of us would have acted differently in his unenviable position?

The Insanity File is not without its flaws. The authors occasionally lapse into overstatement that borders on melodrama; the fact that Mary was caught handling a pistol and muttering threats against Robert hardly constitutes "planning her son's murder." And, although they begin by proclaiming their objectivity, they end by taking sides. That is perhaps understandable given the new evidence; what is less understandable is their manner of dealing with those of us who have attempted to wrestle with this thorny subject in the past - without, needless to say, the benefit of "The Insanity File." To correct the errors, refute the theories, and expose the biases of one's predecessors are essential parts of the historian's task. But Mssrs. Neely and McMurtry seem to have done so with a sense of relish and self-satisfaction which strikes a discordant note in an otherwise outstanding achievement. (*Lincoln Herald*, vol. 88, No.4, Winter, 1986, page 175-76.)

America's First Woman Lawyer: The Biography of Myra Bradwell.

by Jane M. Friedman, 1993.

Reviewed by Dan Bassuk, Ph.D.

Here is a scholarly book by a professor of law that sheds light on Mary Todd Lincoln's "insanity," and puts The Insanity File on trial. Although only the third chapter pertains to Mary Lincoln, the prologue describes the author's discovery of the Bradwell-Lincoln correspondence, and chapter four reveals the unfortunate fate of these letters in the flames.

Chapter Three is entitled "'She Is No More Insane Than I Am,' Bradwell Secures the Release of Mary Todd Lincoln from Bellevue Place Asylum." It unravels the saga of Mary's incarceration and liberation, describing the roles of Robert Lincoln, Myra Bradwell, Mary's sister, Elizabeth Edwards, and Dr. Patterson of Bellevue Asylum. It traces the plan of Myra Bradwell to obtain the release of Mary Lincoln, and the duplicity used by Robert Lincoln to keep his mother confined. Finally, we see how Myra produced an "Emancipation Proclamation" that coerced Robert and freed Mary. Here is "must" reading for all presenters of Mary Todd Lincoln and those interested in her trial.

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membership renewal due
April 15, 1995
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THE ASSOCIATION OF LINCOLN PRESENTERS is a non-profit association dedicated to the proposition of supporting and encouraging the presenting of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln to the American people. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. Membership in the ALP is \$20. Annual renewal is \$5.00 and \$7.50 for an Abe-Mary team. Life membership is \$100.

Officers in the ALP are Dr. Daniel Bassuk, President; Max and Donna Daniels, Vice-Presidents; Patricia Thomas, Treasurer; Associate editor, Ted Zalewski; reporter, James Keeran; media specialist, John Kemple. Address inquiries and correspondence to Daniel Bassuk, 1143 River Road, Neshanic, New Jersey 08853, or call (908) 369-7648.

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