

Locals can hear echoes of the past

Local link to Lincoln assassination topic of talk at Wild Cat

Cynthia Beaudette
of the Muscatine Journal

MUSCATINE, Iowa — It isn't every day that echoes of a historic conspiracy takes place in your own back yard, and the Friends of the Pine Creek Grist Mill want to share their discovery with area residents.

The Friends will hold their first Lincoln Conspiracy Day at 2 p.m. Sunday, June 10, at Wild Cat Den State Park's upper shelter.

Muscatine historian Gladys Mittman will present a free lecture using documentation centering on John Henry Stevenson, a man who said he was once imprisoned for his part in the Lincoln assassination.

Stevenson, who claimed his actual name was Michael O'Laughlen, was eventually buried on a hilltop at Wildcat Den.

Historical records show O'Laughlen, a childhood friend of Lincoln's assassin, John Wilkes Booth, was arrested following Lincoln's assassination and died in prison.

In a dictated biography, Stevenson said his death was faked and he was given a new identity by a group of men who knew he could lead them to Booth's wife who was living on a farm in Virginia. Booth, who had been involved with illegal activity such as weapon and ammunition sales, had amassed a small fortune in gold bricks and cash and it was hidden at his home, Stevenson explained.

Stevenson said his heavy drinking and unhealthy lifestyle led to poor health while he was still in his 40s. He met the Brandt sisters who were living in the area now known as Wild Cat

Den, while they were visiting family on the East Coast. The sisters, Emma and Clara, were known for taking people in and brought Stevenson to their home in Iowa and cared for him until his death 1890.

They later willed their property to the state and it is now Wild Cat Den State Park.

"We're going to talk about the John Henry Stevenson story and if people have questions they can ask them," said Mittman, who grew up on a farm in Wild Cat Den.

Friends of the Mill members said a packet of materials detailing historical documentation of the Stevenson/McLaughlen link

will be available for sale for about \$8.50.

Because of her connection to the area, Mittman was contacted by historian Leonard Guttridge, who co-authored the book "Dark Union," a fact-based book that describes a conspiracy theory surrounding the Lincoln assassination.

"I'm convinced John Stevenson was Michael O'Laughlen," Guttridge said during a recent telephone interview.

Wild Cat Den State Park is located just off Iowa Highway 22 between Muscatine and Montpelier.

— *Cynthia Beaudette*
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