

Sidedoor Season 3, Episode 17: Abraham Lincoln: Prankster-in-Chief

[INTRO MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Haleema Shah.

Haleema Shah: Few American presidents have captured our imagination the way that Abraham Lincoln has. Lincoln's stooped figure appears in more films than any other president. If you haven't seen him in Steven Spielberg's 2012 film, *Lincoln*, he's exactly who you've been promised: noble, stately and well-intentioned...

[CLIP OF LINCOLN The Hollywood version]

We are stepped out on the world stage now, with the fate of human dignity in our hands! Blood's been spilled to afford us this moment - Now! Now! Now!

Haleema Shah: We know the story of Lincoln's presidency during the Civil War. And, his assassination at Ford's Theatre. But, we hear way less about the 16th President's teen years. You know? Before he stepped out onto the world's stage. So, this time on Sidedoor, we're bringing the least told moments of Lincoln's to your ears. But, instead of telling our story through curators and researchers; we're stepping outside of our comfort zone and onto our own kind of stage. We're trying out a new sound for the series. You can think of it as dramatic documentation...re enactment...theatre. And, this is a big step for us. So, we hope you'll let us know what you think. So, without further ado...Here's Abe. Honest as ever. Getting into some wholesome schennighans; and, pulling a prank on his mom who just discovered his handy work.

Ma: Thunder and tarnation. Who's been walking all over my fresh whitewashed ceiling? If I lay my hands on the one had done it I'll skin' em alive. Abe! Abraham Lincoln!

Abe Lincoln: You call me, Maw? What's wrong Maw?

Ma: Come in here!

Abe Lincoln: What's wrong, ma?

Ma: You know well enough what's wrong, come in here!

Abe Lincoln: Why Maw, look at the ceiling.

Ma: Don't drop your jaw down on your chest as though he'd never seen it before.

Abe Lincoln: Why Maw..

Ma: Don't give me that "why maw" business. Look at the size of you - 15 years old and playing these tricks. Abe Lincoln, stop gawking at the ceiling and look down here at me. And, wipe that grin off your face. How did those footprints get up there? Walkin' up this side of the wall across, across the ceiling, across the other side? Look at me. How did they get there?

Abe Lincoln: I guess I done it, Maw

Ma: All right. Abe. How did you get them footprints up on the ceiling?

Abe Lincoln: Miss Pike will tan me if I tell.

Ma: Miss Pike, what's she got to do with it?

Abe Lincoln: I used her young'un to do it.

Ma: You used her? Abe Lincoln. You better talk and talk fast.

Abe Lincoln: I let young Pike walk through the mud puddle outside. Then, I turned him upside down. Walked the feet across the ceiling.

Ma: Abraham Lincoln. I ought..I ought to..to tan your...

Abe Lincoln: You ain't mad, Ma.

Ma: Course I'm mad. Abe, look at me. Why do you do things like that to your maw?

Abe Lincoln: Shucks, I didn't mean nothing.

Ma: You an awful good boy, Abe. You are strong and willing and you've got a little brains too. Now clean those footprints off the ceiling and don't do it no more. You hear?

Abe Lincoln: All right, Ma. I'm sorry.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: That was Act 1 of Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from...! Abe Lincoln isn't the only prankster around here....This isn't the future of Sidedoor. In fact, it's kinda the past. In 1938, Sidedoor's grandfather was born... except, it wasn't a podcast. It was "The Radio." And our venerable ancestor was named "The World is Yours."

[MUSIC Clip from The World is Yours]

Men have searched the earth, the air, even the sun and stars, in their never ending quest for knowledge. And, now, in an NBC educational picture, The World is Yours, the United States Department of the Interior Office of Education brings you the wonders of that unique establishment, the Smithsonian Institution dedicated to the increase and diffusion of knowledge.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: *The World is Yours* was the Smithsonian's first-ever radio show. It broadcast weekly on NBC, and, was funded by the Works Progress Administration. The presenters you hear were out-of-work actors and musicians; and was funded by the Works Progress Administration as an effort to create jobs for out of work artists during the Great Depression....So, in this April Fools Sidedoor Special, we thought we'd sneak into the Smithsonian time capsule: the Sidedoor of yore. And... it's... really...something.

Haleema Shah: My first reaction was likely similar to yours: this is kinda ridiculous. But... kinda fun, too? It's a look at how Americans were talking about their own complicated history in 1938, and you'll notice that some language - and definitely some of the attitudes - don't stand the test of time. For example, the female characters are either completely silent...or squawking at Abe Lincoln. And a lot of time is spent talking about how ugly Abraham Lincoln is...a lot... weird.

Haleema Shah: If you're up for a little time-traveling, imagine yourself sitting on the floor of your living room with your family, gathered around the radio, listening to this broadcast... and don't miss out on the very end. There's a twist that took me completely by surprise.

Here's the rest of the story, after a quick break.

[MUSIC]

[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: When we left off, teenage Abe Lincoln had just admitted to borrowing the neighbor's child to leave footprints on the ceiling as a practical joke. The narrator comes in with a little background on his early life...and a sobering physical description.

Narrator: Yeah, I knew Abe Lincoln. Once you saw Abe, you sort of couldn't forget him. He was the gangliest, awkwardest fellow that ever stepped over a 10 rail snake fence. He had to duck to get through the door. Appeared to be all joints, Abe did. Them eyes of his - soft and sad, like a sheep going to slaughter. Yet, they had a certain kind of look in em. A look that seemed to say that he was onto himself. Folks where he lived at used to say there's something peculiar some about Abe, and I guess there was. Lots of times he broke out laughing when others didn't see nothing to laugh about. They'd look at him kind of strange..the folks would. But, his ma just let it pass as a sign of these thoughts workin' their own way. She was kind of proud of Abe, his ma was. Of course she wasn't his real ma. His real ma died when he was only a tyke. Near broke Abe's heart, that did. That did probably helped to pour all that suffering into his eyes....But his new maw fit him in nice and easy and loved him like you would an ugly ducklin. That was Abe alright. Ugly Duckling. Everybody said so. But, I reckon they never looked hard at his eyes. Them eyes didn't seem to match with the rest of his raw bones and hulking strength. Most of the time they was sad, as though they was seeing things others couldn't. And, other times, they light up as though he was actually enjoying life....'course that's was when he was playing those tricks of his'n. like that day they are in Indiana where they lived.

Abe Lincoln: Hey Maw, what does "predestination" mean?

Ma: Lordie, what made you think of that?

Abe Lincoln: I just saw it in a book I was reading, that's a powerful big word.

Ma: Predestination. That's just a highfalutin way of saying that something is going to happen and you can't do nothing about it. Like, say, God has things all planned out for you and you just have to do them. It's in there, Abe. In your head and your heart to. You just couldn't change it if you tried.

Abe Lincoln: Then, according to that, God is headin' me for something and it just aint within my power to stop it.

Ma: That's right.

Abe Lincoln: Ma, there's another word right here: independence.

Ma: That's what your grandpa fought for, Abe, only 30 or 40 years ago. We won our independence from England. Now, we are an independent country, and you and me are independent people.

Abe Lincoln: Independent. How bout those negro people which belonged to the Addisons up the road. They Independent?

Ma: No, not really. They're slaves, Abe. A slave ain't got no rights and no independence. But, them kind of things ain't worth worrying about.

Abe Lincoln: I just was wondering.

Ma: That's why you're wanting it to be no ordinary farmer Abe. Keep on wonderin'. And remember, face beauty is only skin deep. Soul ugliness goes through to the bone. Don't mind what nobody says about your looks.

Abe Lincoln: Aw, they don't bother me. I know I'm sort of ugly. Even Paw says so.

Ma: Don't pay your Paw no mind, or anybody else who may say things like that. You just get as much book learnin' as you can. There's plenty of room for it in that big head of yourn.

Abe Lincoln: Gosh ma, it's time for me to start hiking if I'm going to get to school on time.

Ma: Yes, you better hurry! And here's a potato for you to gnaw on if you get them hungry! And be sure to carry your shoes as far as the school. They don't grow on trees, you know.

Abe Lincoln: All right..bye, Ma.

Ma: Bye, Abe.

[MUSIC]

Narrator:...And there he go. Walking up the road...whistling that one tune whistle of his. Great big rumble head buried in a book...looking up only when he had to think about some special line in it. Folks long ago could always tell it was Abe by that great, big lumbering gait of his...picking up the dust with his number 11 feet. They'd look out at him and shake their head. They'd say...ah there's something peculiar some about Abe. Oh yeah, I forgot to say the Lincoln's moved out of Indiana to another county in Illinois when Abe was about 18. Six foot four in his bare feet. An old

man. You had to be in that country. Wise and hard, too. But, Abe took the country in stride. And, when he got to be 19 or 20...he couldn't stand Illinois longer. He'd been wondering for years what it was like out there...on the horizon. Where the moon set every night. So, Abe tied up his few belongings in a red handkerchief; brushed the tears out of his maw's eyes as she kissed him goodbye...headed up the road towards the places he wondered about. For the long. Long legs eatin' up the dusty road. Him whistlin' that tuneless song of his to keep the tears back. Abe was leaving home. New Salem, Illinois was the name of the place he started to work...clerkin' in the village store. Watching trade with one eye and reading with the other. But, New Salem or Hades couldn't change Abe. He was the same sad and comical string of bone and muscle who left the wilderness. A few pennies, a dream in his heart, a rag bag of thoughts...you never could expect to tell. Well, in a little while, everybody in those parts got to know him because of the way he took all gummers and wrapper matches and spun those yarns of his. Yeah...He'd lean back in that rickety old chair in the office store. His feet hooked onto the rung of the thing...knees under that boney chin. Hands to wave, or push upon, or slap his knee when he laughed. Like one day at the store. The boys were all sitting around..listening to him spin one. Everybody laughin'. Carryin' on.

[LAUGHS]

Shopper: Where'd you hear that?

Abe Lincoln: Just thunk it. I mean...I just thought it up.

Shopper: You go again..changing your words around. Now, what is it? Is it thunk or thought?

Abe Lincoln: Well, the book says, there ain't no such word as thunk..so thought must be what I thunk.

Shopper: That's the book. What's the name of it, Abe?

Abe Lincoln: You really want to know?

Shopper: Yeah. Ain't ashamed of your reading matter..are ya?

Abe Lincoln: No, well, boys....The name of the book is English Grammar in Familiar Lectures Accompanied By A Compendium; Embracing A New Systematic Order of Parsing, A New System Of Punctuation, Exercises In Syntax, And A Key To The Exercises Designed For The Youth Of School And Private Learners by Samuel Kirkham.

[LAUGHTER]

Shopper: If you don't read on...What good is all 'em things, Abe?

Abe Lincoln: Makes talking sound better, if you know what's in this book.

Shopper: Any good stories in it?

Abe Lincoln: 'course not. Just tells you how to speak

Shopper: Aww shucks. I know that already.

Abe Lincoln: Just quit it, fellas. I got a customer.

Shopper: Fellas, let's play a trick on Abe. Hide his book on him.

Fella: Wanna get skinned? Abe will kill you from here to the old creek if you kept his book.

Shopper: Aww shucks..Abe Lincoln wouldn't hurt a flea.

Fella: Don't you think it. Abe Lincoln can lick any man in this country. And, don't think he'd stop just 'cause you're old enough to be his paw.

Shopper: Well, that ain't true. He ain't never tackle nobody that wasn't his size...no matter what.

Fella: Well, I ain't taking no chances.

Shopper: You know what, fellas? Abe's a fool in a way, though...always peerin' in them books. Says he wants to get knowledge.

Fella: Well, we all have our faults, I guess. Abe's good-hearted, though. My old woman says, he's the good heartedest fella she ever knew.

Shopper: Ah. Nature kind of played a dirty trick on Abe.....giving him such a big heart done up in such ugly trimmins'.

[LAUGHS]

Fella: My old woman said, Abe will amount to something, some day. I asked her what. She thought he'd ever amount to outside of bein' champion rascal and storyteller. And, what do you think he said? She said...he's gonna be president of the United States. Imagine...Abe...a president?

[LAUGHS]

Little Billy: Hey, hey you in in the back...with the straw loafers. Where at can I find this Abe Lincoln?

Shopper: Why..that's him over there behind the counter.

Little Billy: You Abe Lincoln?

Abe Lincoln: That's me.

Little Billy: I can lick you?

Abe Lincoln: Can you?

Little Billy: You bet I can. I'm Little Billy from Norfolk and Money Run. I can out run, out jump, out swim, charm, spit less, drink more whiskey....than any man in these parts.

Abe Lincoln: What's your grudge against me, Little Billy?

Little Billy: Well, you're homelier than me...that's what. I swore found a man homelier than me, I was gonna make catfish bait out of him....And, you're it.

Abe Lincoln: Am I homelier than you?

Little Billy: I didn't believe it myself 'till I saw you. But, it's true...and you can't get away with it.

Abe Lincoln: If I'm homelier than you...here's the knife....Cut me up.

[LAUGHS]

Little Billy: Hey. You makin' fun of me?

Abe Lincoln: Not exactly.

Little Billy: Now, lookey here. How am I gonna fight you if you keep laughin'?

Abe Lincoln:...I'd...I'd sure like to cooperate, Billy.

Little Billy: You'd like to what?

Abe Lincoln: Cooperate. I'd like to join in....make your stay pleasant.

Little Billy: Oh well, that's alright. I thought you were maybe stealing my thunder by bein' homelier than me...well, I guess you ain't. Let's shake and have a drink.

Abe Lincoln: I don't drink myself..maybe, the boys will join you.

Little Billy: What do you say, you lafayette bums? Drink?

[SHOUTS CHEERS]

Shopper: 'Come on, Abe. Tell Little Billy about the time you and Clem Jenkins went to the coon huntin. Lordy, Little Billy, you'll die laughin'. Tell 'em, Abe.

Narrator: Yeah, that was Abe all over. He could laugh his way out of more arguments than any man could count. But, he couldn't laugh his way out of the scrapes he got in. You see, Abe wasn't very smart when it come to money. He trusted too many people. That's what sent the store into bankruptcy...and, him, too. You see, after a while, he got to own part of the store. Then, he got so interested in learning and reading; half the time the place was closed. Well, when it went under, Abe's partner skun out. But, not Abe, though. He stayed and faced the music. The people never forgot him for it, neither. Said it was mighty honest of him to do it. Out of a job for the first time in his life...he surprised everybody saying he was runnin' for the illinois legislature. His first dabble in politics. Nobody thought he had a chance. Matter of fact, he didn't. Never even came close to gettin' in. He had a taste in politics.and liked it. After that, Abe just drifted around New Salem...one thing to another. He was getting along to about 26. So far, he wasn't what you'd call a howling success. About 1,000 dollars in debt, not caring about anything else 'cept readin' and learnin'. Lord knows what for...they used to say. Ain't doin' him any good. Then, well, I wasn't gonna tell about this. Guess you heard it anyway. About Abe and Anne Rutledge. About the time Anne fell in love, girls never paid much notice of him. They was too busy laughin' at his jokes....or his boney awkwardness to take him very serious. Well, Anne Rutledge was beautiful, ain't no other words. She was beautiful. Abe adored her, too. That's what made him take it so hard when she went like that. Malaria it was. He sat with her two night. Finally, when the last spark of light winked out of her frail, little body... Abe just seemed to go to pieces. His eyes looked like a poor little mongrel pup, whose been beaten 'till he couldn't stand it no longer. At night, he'd sit by the fire and stare into it. His eyes...just dead things. Seein' nothin' 'round him. Was useless to try to talk to him. He'd just look at you with that lost, heartbroken stare...sayin' nothing. But, the folks of New Salem held out their arms to Abe and took care of him. Tryin' to help him fight off that terrible hurt. But, they knew, that no matter what they did...Abe was a changed man. You could tell it in his eyes. Finally, seems as though Abe was getting along better. He got himself elected to the illinois legislature. Then, a few months later, at 28, Abe left New Salem forever. Said he was going to Springfield to hang out his shingles. Abe was a lawyer. Full fledged, with seven dollars in his pocket and 1,000 in debt. And he kept dabbling in politics; and, finally, there was talk that a certain Mary Todd had her eye on Abe. Goin' round town tellin' everybody what a great man he was gonna be. She had confidence in his talking powers. Most of all, she had confidence in herself. She knew that if she married that man, she could send him places. Well, you know what happened...they got married. Not long after that, Abe was sent to Washington...a congressman. Seems like she was really doing him some good. But, wasn't any different from when he came back from when he was gone...only a little more stooped. He was earning his name...Old Abe.

[MUSIC]

While the whole country was talking about states' rights and slavery and all 'em things that was important. Abe stayed in his own little bailey weights. Thinking them things out for himself...not

cutting out any great figure outside his home state. Mary, that's his wife, she got kind of impatient with him sometimes. Especially about the time him and Stephen Douglass was runnin' against each other for senator. But, he didn't seem to mind. Like the day he was sittin' In the parlor. Sittin'. Thinkin'. Mary comes stormin' into the room. Mad as sin she was.

Mary: Abe. Abraham Lincoln.

Abe Lincoln: Oh, lord. What is it, Mary?

Mary: Look. Look at this ice bill.

Abe Lincoln: Don't shake it in my face that way.

Mary: Don't you see what it says? One dollar fifty-two cents of ice. That Will Sheaver knows very well we haven't bought that much ice.

Abe Lincoln: Will wouldn't lie to you, Mary.

Mary: There you go. No wonder there's so much debt in this house. You trust everyone as though they were your brother.

Abe Lincoln: What am I supposed to do?

Mary: Go out there and tell him we won't pay a cent more than one dollar. Go on. Get your long legs off of that chair and get out there.

Abe Lincoln: Alright. Never can relax around here....Hi, Will.

Will: Hi, Abe.

Abe Lincoln: What is the Mrs. at you for this time, Will?

Will: Now, look, Abe. I hate to always be causing this trouble. But, well, just look for yourself. Don't that say a dollar and fifty-two cents there in my book? 10 pounds of ice..Friday. Five Monday. 10 Wednesday.

Abe Lincoln: Alright, Will, alright. How much? One dollar and fifty-two, cents?

Will: That's right.

Abe Lincoln: Here you are. But, don't you dare let Mary know.

Will: Thank you, Abe.

Abe Lincoln: Warm today. Business must be good.

Will: Oh..fair to midland. Heard your speech last night.

Abe Lincoln: Yarh, I saw you and the Mrs. How is she?

Will: Oh, pretty good. Said if I don't vote for ya...she'll scuff me.

Abe Lincoln: Think I'd make a good senator?

Will: Yes. Think you had it all over Douglass last night.

Abe Lincoln: That's sayin' a lot, will. Stephen Douglass is a good man.

Will: Yes, he is. You cornered him last night.

Abe Lincoln: Ahh, maybe. Douglass is too smart to stay corned for too long.

Will: The papers are full of last night's speeches. Here's one about...no no...ain't meant that.

Abe Lincoln: What's the matter, Will? Something I hadn't seen?

Will: It's nothing. It's nothing. An editor runnin' off again.

Abe Lincoln: Read it. What is it?

Will: Well, it says.... In his campaign against Stephen A. Douglass for senator last night, Mr. Lincoln's argument was truly ingenious. He has, however, a sort of a clownish-ness in his manner, which does not become him. It is a...a show for effect. I wouldn't pay no attention to that loudmouth Heathrow, Abe. Awww, shucks...when you get up there to talk. People always say you talk their language. And, it's so true. A couple of funny stories makes the hard facts easier to take.

Abe Lincoln: You like the stories, Will?

Will: Ah, sure, I do. Lordy. You wouldn't be you..unless you were like...you know what I mean, Abe.

Abe Lincoln: I know what you mean, Will. The editor thinks I get my speeches outta Joe Miller's Joke book, though.

Mary: Abraham Lincoln. Sitting off here, chinnin again.

Abe Lincoln: I was just reprimanding Will, Mary. I..uh...Don't let it happen again. You hear me, Will?

Will: Oh, Oh. I'm awful sorry, Mr. Lincoln. It won't happen again.

Mary: You ain't foolin' me, Abe Lincoln. Come in here. What did I tell you about talkin' to the servants? Heavens. What will the neighbors think of ya?

Abe Lincoln: I was just askin' him how his wife was.

Mary: Do you hafta sit on the steps askin' that? You runnin' for senator and hob nobbin' with the likes of Will Seaver.

Abe Lincoln: What's the matter with Will Seaver?

Mary: Look at your tie...crooked? And, by the way, Abe Lincoln, did you see what that man said in the newspapers about you? Calling you a clown. The idea. See the impression you're givin' people? I don't know what I'm gonna do with you...I swear.

Narrator: Well, Abe didn't say much about what the newspapers said about him. He never showed it affected him. He just kept right on the same old way. Shucks. Telling stories and looking comical was just as natural on Abe like the little mole on his cheek. Douglass got ot the ears of people with his talk. But, Abe got to their hearts. He was their kind...and showed it. But, that didn't help much when the legislature was picking out the senator...'cause they picked out Douglass. Abe lost out plenty of times before...the store back out in New Salem, Anne, and he'd been laughed at plenty, too. He only shrugged his big shoulders and kept on. Then, came the news that jilted almost everyone out of their seats...was 1860 when the news broke, and pretty soon, it had spread all over the country. Abe was nominated for president. Everybody was askin' who this long armed, shaggy headed fella Abe Lincoln was. After a while, the Republicans began to think they had made a mistake. But, you saw how things turned out. Abe got elected. Lots of people hated him, too. Saying he was a lucky politician and all that stuff. They were just taking their disgust with the whole mixed up country out on him. The southern states was fumin' somethin' awful with lots of talk about succession and the slave question. Well, Abe walked right into office with all those things to worry about. You know how that turned out, too. The war. With Abe takin' lots of the blame for it. When word come and it was over, people forgot all that in their joy and they stormed up Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House shoutin' his name

[SHOUTING CROWD]

Abe Lincoln:Folks. Folks. You want a speech, but, I cannot make one at this time. There is one thing I will do, however, you have a band with you. There is one piece of music, I have always liked. For the last few years, it has not been so popular....here in the north. But, now,now by

virtue of my prerogative as president and as commander in chief of the army and navy, I declare it contraband of war and our lawful pride. I ask the band to play Gitney.

[MUSIC]

Narrator: Some folks say..if he hadn't be shot, he'd compose all the stars and stripes in the country. Years later, they were sayin', that by dyin', he'd help to save the world....I don't know. I knew him all his life. He made plenty of mistakes, and, he had plenty of faults. But, nobody ever said that he didn't give everything that was in him for the things he believed in. There was something to that predestination thing his ma told him about..back there, when he was a tyke. Perhaps there was. What's that? How do I know all these things? I'd have to be Abraham Lincoln to know all these things that I told you? That's right? I would, wouldn't I? That's right.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: Wait, what? The call was coming from inside the house? Abe Lincoln was the narrator.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: You've been listening to an April Fool's special edition of Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. *The World is Yours* aired for six years and was considered one of the most successful educational radio programs of the time. In its first four years, the show received over half a million letters! If you want to let us know what you think, you don't even need a stamp. You can just leave us a review on Apple podcasts. And If you want to find out more about *The World Is Yours*, there's a great article about it by the Smithsonian Archives. You'll find a link to that article at si.edu/sidedoor.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: Sidedoor is made possible by funding from the Secretary of the Smithsonian, as well as the Smithsonian National Board. And thanks to listeners like you – your generous support helps make all the amazing work you hear about at the Smithsonian possible. Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Jason Orfanon, Lizzie Peabody, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, and Greg Fisk. Extra support comes from John Barth and Genevieve Sponsler. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Haleema Shah: If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org. I'm your host Martha Washington...Just kidding..it's Haleema Shah. Happy April Fools Day, and thanks for listening.

[MUSIC OUT]