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Head over heels for Lincoln's hat; 'People would go crazy for something like that'

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD -- The state is trying to acquire a significant private collection of Abraham Lincoln artifacts whose centerpiece is an iconic stovepipe hat worn by the 16th president and valued by one expert at $5 million.

Talks are ongoing with renowned Lincoln collector Louise Taper on a deal that potentially could greatly expand the number of precious showpieces on display at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield.

**NEGOTIATING WITH COLLECTOR**

"She has one of the largest private collections and certainly something we've been eyeing for some time," said Jill Burwitz, a museum spokeswoman. "But with any negotiation, this is all very sensitive. This could be derailed at any moment or could bring the attention of another buyer with deeper pockets than the state."

Besides the hat, Taper has obtained scores of Lincoln-related artifacts, including the blood-stained gloves and handkerchief he carried at Ford's Theatre the night he was assassinated. Taper also owns numerous letters written by Lincoln's killer, John Wilkes Booth; a White House chamber pot; a clock from Lincoln's Springfield law office, and furniture built by Lincoln's father.

"The Taper collection is without equal in terms of Lincolniana still in private hands," said Richard Norton Smith, former director of the Lincoln library and museum and now on the faculty at George Mason University. "It certainly would overnight, I suspect, double the number of artifacts that are on display in the current museum."

The stovepipe hat, which was worn by Lincoln during the Civil War, was on loan to the Lincoln library and museum when it opened in 2005 and has been exhibited at the Chicago Historical Society, now known as the Chicago History Museum.

Its value could be $1 million to $8 million. The Chicago museum's longtime chief historian, Russell Lewis guesses it could fetch $5 million at auction.

"It's so emblematic of Lincoln," he said. "People would go crazy for something like that."

Taper has deep ties to Lincoln groups in Illinois and has maintained a long friendship with the state's historian, Thomas F. Schwartz. She serves on the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum Foundation board.

Taper, who lives in Beverly Hills, Calif., has amassed Lincoln artifacts for about 30 years. Her interest in Lincoln was spurred when she read to her children a book about Lincoln's marriage.

**MUSEUM FOUNDATION COULD HELP**

In a 1999 essay for American Heritage magazine, Taper said she began collecting artifacts after landing a job with a manuscript dealer in Beverly Hills who paid her with valuable documents. From there, she was hired to work on a television production of Carl Sandburg's Lincoln biography and was involved in tracking down historical details. Taper did not return calls.

It is not known how the state would pay for the artifacts, though the Lincoln foundation could be a financing partner. The foundation has raised millions of dollars for the Lincoln library and museum. State bond proceeds also could be used.

"We're not there, and we have no deal. I can't tell you anything," said Susan Mogerman, the foundation's chief operating officer.

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**BIG BUCKS FOR FAMOUS HATS**

$350,000: 2003 price for hat of cricket legend Sir Donald Bradman.

$130,000: 2005 price for Napoleon's beaver-skin bicorn hat.

$86,250: 2007 price for cowboy hat owned by John Wayne.

$43,000: 1988 price for hat owned by Winston Churchill.

$35,000: 1997 price paid by major leaguer David Wells for Babe Ruth's hat.

$20,315: 2006 price for fedora worn by Al Pacino in "The Godfather."

Sources: Heritage Auctions, highnoon.com,scotsman.com, usatoday.com, funtrivia.com, theage.com.au Note: Hats sold in foreign currency have been converted to U.S. dollars at current exchange rate.