

March 29, 2013 Friday

Let's get honest with Honest Abe's hat

Editorial:

They're talking through their hat.

Seriously, people. The historians at the Lincoln Presidential Museum who claim they own one of Honest Abe's famous stovepipe hats don't have enough proof to hang a hat on.

And if we're wrong, we'll eat our hat.

Sorry. Enough with the puns.

But it is true, as Sun-Times Springfield Bureau Chief Dave McKinney reported this week, that the Lincoln Museum in Springfield is not playing straight with the public when it claims without reservation that the hat it has on display belonged to Lincoln.

The hat's already shaky provenance, revealed in early Sun-Times stories, got shakier still when McKinney reported that a New York appraiser had raised questions about the hat even before the museum bought it.

Bought it, we should stress, for $6.5 million.

"Of all the hats purported to have been owned by Lincoln, why is this one of the three accepted ones?" appraiser Seth Kaller asked in a 2007 email. "Who is William Waller, and why and when did Lincoln give him the hat?"

The museum, Kaller said, had better be ready to answer such questions.

Waller was an Illinois farmer. According to a 1958 affidavit by his daughter-in-law, Clara Waller, Lincoln gave Waller the hat in Washington, D.C., during the Civil War.

The hat is Lincoln's size and was made by his favorite Springfield hatter.

But there is no evidence William Waller was in Washington in 1858 and no explanation for why Lincoln might have given him the hat. Adding to the muddle, the state's official historian in 2007 decided - based on nothing, really - that Lincoln gave Waller the hat after an 1858 Lincoln/Douglas debate in Jonesboro, Ill.

People called him Honest Abe.

Honest Abe.