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Sacramento scores prestigious 'With Malice Toward None' exhibit

Prestigious Lincoln exhibit arrives in Sacramento

By Chuck Barney
Contra Costa Times

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By Chuck Barney

STAFF WRITER

The years have been kind to Abraham Lincoln. Our gangly 16th president, with the funny-looking stovepipe hat, is one of the rare historical figures whose stature grows more robust as time goes by.

He continues to seize the spotlight in movies and books. He has been idealized and immortalized and turned into a larger-than-life superhero. And now in Sacramento, he is being celebrated in four special exhibits.

So fervent is our adulation of him that it sometimes seems as if he's more godlike than human.

"From the time we're very young, we all hear about him as the Great Emancipator, the man who kept the country from tearing apart," says Amanda Meeker, the deputy director and curator for The California Museum in Sacramento. "But our image of him tends to be a little two-dimensional."

Meeker, in recent weeks, has been overseeing the design and installation of a prestigious Lincoln-themed exhibit on loan from the Library of Congress. Opening on Wednesday, "With Malice Toward None: The Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Exhibition" traces the trajectory of Lincoln's life from prairie lawyer to preeminent statesman and examines the monumental issues he wrestled with during his presidency.

The exhibit, brimming with a wealth of priceless Lincoln artifacts, not only honors the most mythic of presidents, it essentially brings him down to Earth.

"It helps us learn a little about, and appreciate,

who he was as a man," Meeker says.

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Sacramento doesn't immediately leap to mind as a prime place to

learn about Lincoln. But for much of this summer, it will be a go-to spot for just that.

In addition to the "Malice Toward None," Lincoln-inspired exhibits are being showcased at three venues in the River City, including the California State Railroad Museum, the California State Capitol Museum and the Leland Stanford Mansion State Historic Park.

The exhibit at the Railroad Museum focuses on how Lincoln was instrumental in determining the future role of American railroads. The presentation at the Capitol explores California's political and military connections to the Civil War and the importance of the state's gold in preserving the union. Meanwhile, the exhibit at the Stanford mansion has the most tenuous connection to Lincoln as it follows the development of the original Transcontinental Railroad's western route via a series of vintage photographs.

In all three cases, the sites themselves are worth exploring, especially if you're a Sacramento newcomer. The dazzling Railroad Museum is a must-see for train buffs and sits on the north end of Old Sacramento State Historic Park, with its cobblestone streets and horse-drawn carriages. The four-story Stanford Mansion is a prime example of Victorian-era elegance, and the Capitol is, well, the Capitol.

But the true summer mecca for Lincoln aficionados will be The California Museum, a downtown facility that opened in 1998 with an initial purpose to showcase materials from the State Archives. In recent years, the mission has expanded and the attempt to attract world-class exhibits has intensified.

"With Malice Toward None" fits that bill. The California Museum is the first of only five institutions selected to house the exhibition after its run in Washington, D.C. and is the only West Coast site on the tour. Sacramento won hosting honors over San Francisco and Los Angeles largely because Union Pacific Railroad, the national sponsor of the exhibition, pushed for its inclusion.

"Everyone around here is all abuzz. We're ecstatic to have it," says Claudia French, the museum's executive director. "It speaks to the credibility the museum has gained and the partnerships we've built."

Visitors to the exhibition enter through four Doric columns designed to evoke the Lincoln Memorial and immediately feel the history. In a section dedicated to Lincoln's early life, prime showpieces include the 1828 grammar book Lincoln used to teach himself proper English and a rocking chair from his law office.

The exhibition, covering 3,000 square feet, is studded with such sacred objects, all of which pack a potent visceral power. Sure to draw plenty of attention is the 156-year-old Bible used in Lincoln's first Inauguration — the same velvet-bound Bible upon which President Barack Obama took the oath of office.

Among the close to 200 other items on display are:

- Lincoln's draft of the Emancipation Proclamation.
- Originals or facsimiles of several speeches, including the Gettysburg Address.
- Letters written by Lincoln to various friends, generals and the first lady.
- The contents of the president's pockets the night he was assassinated.

- Lincoln's autopsy report.

The latter items might send a shiver through some visitors, or even come across as morbid. French, however, believes they "help make him real and humanize him."

Central to the exhibit are the many examples of Lincoln's writing. As literary critic Adam Gopnik wrote, "His hand and pen were the axis of his experience," and to see the language and eloquence of his work is fascinating.

"As you read his words, it's remarkable how they continue to resonate today," French says. "... And not unlike today, it was a tough time to be president. It just deepens your appreciation for the many challenges he faced."

French and her staff are making efforts to enable as many people as possible to enjoy the Lincoln presentation. The museum recently expanded its hours to be open on Mondays and also will welcome visitors on the Fourth of July. A Lincoln-themed movie night is being planned for sometime next month, as well as arts-and-crafts sessions for youths.

"With Malice Toward None: The Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Exhibition" runs through Aug. 22.

Reach Chuck Barney at 925-952-2685 or cbarney@bayareanewsgroup.com. Also check out his blog at blogs.mercurynews.com/aei/category/tv.

If You Go

Four Lincoln-themed exhibits are being showcased in Sacramento:

"With Malice Toward None: The Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Exhibition"

- WHERE: The California Museum, 1020 O St. 916-653-7524; www.californiamuseum.org
- WHEN: June 24-Aug. 22
- ADMISSION: \$8.50 general; \$7 students and seniors; \$6 youths ages 6-13. Children ages 5 and under are free.

"The Rail Splitter and the Railroads: Lincoln, the Union and the Golden State"

- WHERE: California State Railroad Museum, Old Sacramento State Historic Park. 916-322-8485; www.californiastaterailroadmuseum.org.

- WHEN: Through Feb. 15, 2010

- ADMISSION: \$8 general; \$3 youths ages 6-17; children ages 5 and under are free.

"Our Union Forever: California's Role in the Civil War"

- WHERE: California State Capitol Museum, 10th and L Streets, State Capitol. 916-324-0333; www.parks.ca.gov/lincoln.

- WHEN: Through March 23, 2010

- ADMISSION: Free.

"Walking the Grade: Contemporary Views of the Pacific Railroad"

- WHERE: Leland Stanford Mansion State Historic Park, 800 N Street. 916-324-0575; www.parks.ca.gov/lincoln.

- WHEN: Through March 31, 2010

- ADMISSION: \$8 general; \$3 youth ages 6-17; children ages 5 and under are free.

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