

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, September 19, 2016

**The Rivalry:** For 80 plus performances on Broadway in 1959, a play featuring the events surrounding the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 was not exactly a resounding success. Richard Boone portrayed Abraham Lincoln.

Always an admirer of Lincoln, I was delighted when the Breck's Mill Players of Wilmington staged this two-act play about 10 years later in their small theater on the third floor of Breck's Mill along the Brandywine, just downstream from the Hagley Museum. I encouraged members of our "Game Group" to go, and we thoroughly enjoyed it. Like the Wilmington Drama League and the Lyceum Players, the Breck's Mill Players were excellent amateur performers, many of them very prominent people in the community. When they staged "The Rivalry," this was indeed apparent.

The famous sculptor Charles Cropper Parks played Lincoln, and Louise Prickett, the wife of prominent Wilmington attorney William Prickett Jr., played Adele Douglas, the wife of Senator Stephen A. Douglas. Jim Beaver, a teacher in one of the Pennsylvania school districts touching Delaware, was Senator Douglas, and C. Douglass Buck Jr., president of the New Castle County Council, was a drunken Republican politician. There were only about two others in the cast.

The actual details of the debates are well known. Between August and October 1858, seven planned debates took place across Illinois, the first being at Ottawa and the last being at Alton. Douglas was one of the most prominent politicians in Washington, running for his third Senate term and definitely having his eye on the presidency. A northern Democrat, he found himself caught up in the slavery issue and the extension of slavery into the new western states fast joining the Union. He had nowhere to go but to straddle the issue, arguing that to do nothing was less likely to cause bloodshed and was therefore the practical solution. Lincoln was nominated by the brand-new Republican Party to oppose him, and he saw an opportunity to gain recognition by challenging Douglas to the series of debates. Both men had known each other since the 1830s, when they had served together in the Illinois legislature at Vandalia, before the state capital was moved to Springfield. In the November election that followed the debates, Lincoln received more popular votes, but U.S. Senators were then elected by their State Legislatures, and Douglas was re-elected. When asked how he felt, Lincoln replied: "I feel like the small boy who stubbed his toe. He was too big to cry, but it hurt too much to laugh" (fellow-Illini Adlai Stevenson repeated Lincoln's statement when he was defeated by General Eisenhower in 1952, giving credit to its originator). Nonetheless, the famous debates received national attention and helped both men receive their parties' nominations for president in 1860.

"The Rivalry" was based on the interaction of the candidates during the debates, some of it fiction. Mary Lincoln did not accompany her husband around the state, but Adele Douglas was with her senator. Often Lincoln and Mrs. Douglas would meet in a hotel lobby, and she grew very fond of him, especially enjoying his humor. These encounters and others like them, plus the political capers of those who followed the senatorial campaign, made this an interesting and humorous play.

Unfortunately, the State Fire Marshal determined that Breck's Mill was a firetrap, and the Breck's Mill Players went out of business. The mill building still stands and the Montchanin Post Office is on the first floor (it's about two miles from Montchanin).