

A Good Back Stretch for a Storyteller

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"You're not going to believe this," my wife Adrienne announced as she dropped a stack of books on the kitchen table. We had just started to hatch a new collaboration on a historical piece to follow *Summer of Treason: Philadelphia 1776*.

We envisioned a piece that I could tell for the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth in 2009. Before Adrienne's library trip, we had determined to concentrate on the Gettysburg Address, hoping to personalize this iconic speech. We were looking for a soldier whose story would bring Lincoln's words to life.

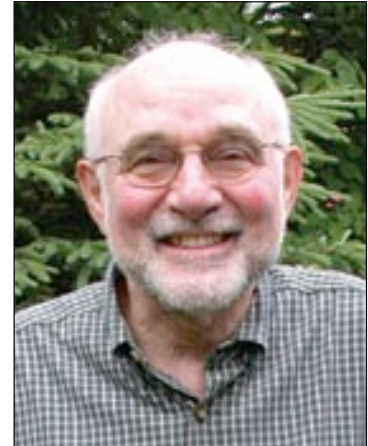
"Not only did I find a soldier who fought and fell at Gettysburg," Adrienne said, "he also kept a detailed diary. His name was Isaac Taylor, and as a member of the First Minnesota Volunteers, he fought in a crucial, sacrificial battle on Gettysburg's second day."

We knew then that we had the centerpiece of our Lincoln story. A year later, we are completing our latest hour-long historical piece, *Abraham and Isaac: Sacrifice at Gettysburg*.

Abraham and Isaac will be my seventh such effort. I happened into this kind of storytelling when Ron Turner asked me to tell the story of the Johnstown Flood of 1889 at the city's centennial commemoration. I said to him, "Ron, I don't know the story of the Johnstown Flood. They should tell me the story."

It takes chutzpah to do historical writing. I usually know very little about the subject I am tackling. I hate to admit this, but when I started on the story of the Dead Sea Scrolls, all I knew about them was that they were old, religious, and had been found near the Dead Sea. However, by the time I finished the piece, I was able to tell it at the gala opening of the Dead Sea Scroll Exhibit at the Van Andel Museum Center in Michigan. In my audience were the chief translator of the scrolls and the head of the Israeli Antiquity Authority. I knew my stuff by then.

That is the chief joy of this work. Doing the research is exciting. You are learning new things. There have been so many aha moments over the years: finding a diary from a fighter pilot in World War I that became the backbone of a story; realizing that my great aunt was in Budapest at the same time as Raoul Wallenberg; discovering the poignant tale of Benjamin



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is an internationally acclaimed storyteller, an author, and an award-winning teacher. Many of his best-loved stories deal with growing up and raising a family in Chicago. He is also known for his original historical pieces and his signature versions of Jewish and literary tales. His work has garnered awards from ALA, Parents' Choice, and Storytelling World. He has taught storytelling at the Kennedy Center and Disney World, and received commissions from NASA, the Smithsonian Institution, Historic Philadelphia, the Van Andel Museum Center, and Johnstown, Pennsylvania.



Franklin and his son William, who had remained the Royal Governor of New Jersey and was imprisoned during the Revolution. Consider me, an English major, writing about the Mars rover landings for NASA and ISC. That story was almost all aha moments.

The latest special moment occurred in our piece on Abraham and Isaac. It concerned Isaac Taylor's Civil War diary. At the end of the transcription of the diary, published in 1944, the historian wrote about the diary's last few words, written in an unfamiliar hand. "It seems likely that another survivor of the charge made this record in an effort to reconstruct the events of the fatal day for the Taylor family."

However, we had discovered from another book on the First Minnesota that those were Isaac's own words. After Isaac died, his

brother Henry, who fought alongside Isaac and buried his brother, had written their sister Sarah, "On a half sheet of paper in his diary you will find a memorandum till four p.m. July 2nd. I wish you would copy that in this book when it arrives. He speaks there of 'H. & I take a cup of coffee...' I made a cup for him and myself and this was the last we ate and drank together."

That last sentence captures one of my main reasons for writing historical stories. You are witnessing for people whose stories have mostly been forgotten. It is humbling to understand in your gut that history is real and that you are writing about real people.

Another joy is crafting the piece. As you do the research, the story begins to take shape. However, you have to be a sculptor and hammer away again and again

before the real story emerges. It is good to have help in that hammering; friends and test audiences who will provide honest feedback. If you are as lucky as I am, you will have a smart, beautiful collaborator.

This work takes lots of time, which makes getting a commission ideal. Five of my histories have been commissioned. I undertook the two that have not—one on Raoul Wallenberg and the latest on Abraham Lincoln—because I knew it would be inspiring

to spend time with these great men.

Earlier I mentioned that it takeschutzpah to take on a subject you know little about. Perhaps it takes even more to begin with an unfamiliar subject and end up telling the finished story to experts. However, people experiencing storytelling for the first time are usually blown away. The first audience for my story on the Mars rover landings was the staff at the Jet Propulsion Lab, the scientists and engineers who had lived the story. So I was nervous. When I finished, Rob Manning, who was in charge of landing the rovers on Mars, said three things that any storyteller would love to hear. "First," he said, "I can't believe you got the story right. But more importantly, you caught the feeling and you didn't need any visuals."®