

Abe Lincoln's Steamboat Kittens

While a great battle raged, three tiny, mewling cats helped ease the war-weary President's anguished mind

By MARYA SAUNDERS

ALL HIS LIFE, Abe Lincoln was irresistibly attracted by the beauty and the independent spirit of cats.

Many stories are told about this, but one of the best is the tale of Lincoln's three battlefield kittens. This is what happened:

In the spring of 1865, the Civil War was drawing to a close. The Confederate army was preparing for the final battle near Richmond, and General Grant relentlessly was pressing the attack.

Heavyhearted over the blood yet to be spilled, President Lincoln decided to visit Grant near the battlefield, bringing his 11-year-old son Tad along for company.

At the Union camp, Lincoln talked with the generals and then visited the wounded. In the telegraph hut, he was studying battle dispatches when he heard a plaintive cry. He and Tad looked about, and then Tad dropped to his knees. Peering under a cot, he pulled out three small, mud-caked kittens.

The officer of the hut explained that their mother was dead. Lincoln picked up one of the mewling kittens and wiped its eyes with his handkerchief. "Poor kittens," he said. "But thank God you're only cats and cannot understand the terrible battle going on nearby."

The President and Tad left, but they often would stop at the telegraph hut and play with the kittens. When the Presidential party moved on, Tad begged his father to let him take the kittens. Lincoln found it hard to refuse the boy's request, and so the kittens were bundled into the carriage.

In the days that followed, the President visited the battlefields around Richmond and watched through field glasses as Confederate and Union armies fought each other on the wet spring fields. In the evening, he would return to camp, his deep-set eyes dark with exhaustion and sorrow.

Alone in his tent with Tad, he would watch the three white kittens, now frisky, well-fed balls of

fluff, frolic in his stovepipe hat. Later, as the kittens purred in his lap, his tired face would relax.

The President completed his tour of the battlefields, and he, Tad, and the kittens boarded the steamboat *River Queen* for the trip back to Washington. The atmosphere on the boat was now charged with excitement. Rumors of General Lee's surrender were everywhere.

A good deal of the trip, Lincoln sat in the sunlight at the bow of the boat, resting while Tad and the kittens frisked on the deck. Shortly before their arrival, the President gently explained to the boy that the busy White House would not be a proper place for kittens. He would make arrangements for them to stay aboard.

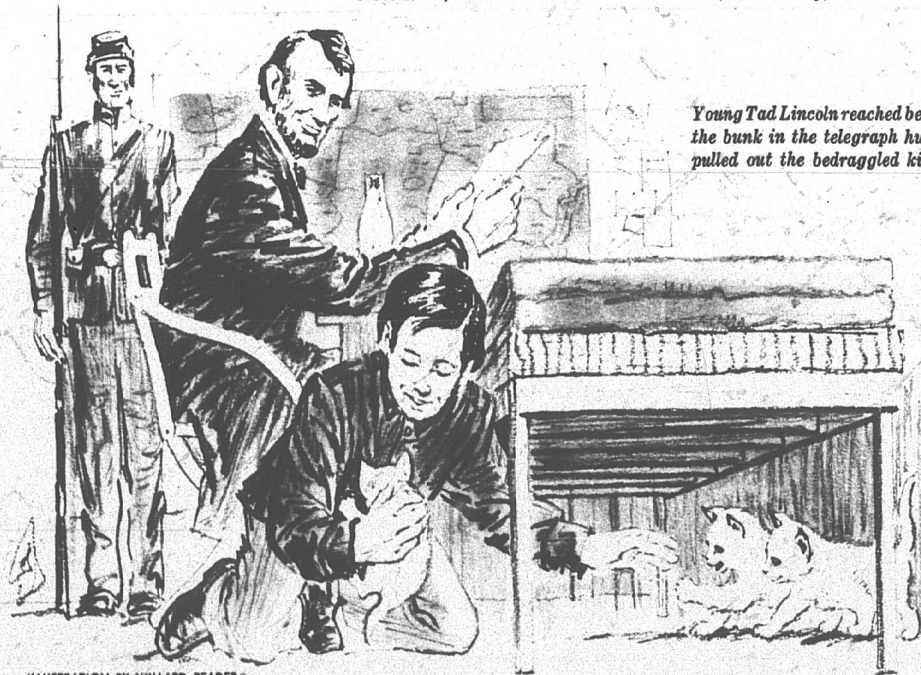
TAD SEEMED DELIGHTED, but when the boat docked and the President went to his cabin to pick up his papers, he found the boy in tears. Between sobs, Tad explained he had heard two soldiers say that cats on a boat are bad luck and the kittens should be drowned. "We can't let that happen," cried Tad.

The President frowned. Perhaps he was thinking of the battlefields he had seen, the dead soldiers. "You're right, Tad," he said. "There's been enough of killing. This is what we'll do. We'll give the kittens an official title so no one can hurt them."

Reaching for a card, he scribbled an executive order. The three kittens were designated "Official Mouse Catchers of the Steamboat *River Queen*." Clutching the note, Tad flew out of the cabin to present it to the captain of the boat.

President Lincoln stood at the door of his cabin with one of the kittens cupped in his large hand, and it is said he whispered softly, "Let there be an end to dying, let there be an end to pain."

There was. That day, Palm Sunday, April 9, 1865, the news reached Washington as the *River Queen* was docking: Lee had surrendered his army in Virginia. The terrible War between the States was over.



Young Tad Lincoln reached beneath the bunk in the telegraph hut and pulled out the bedraggled kittens.

ILLUSTRATION BY WILLARD READER

COVER:



Icy winds may whistle across the frozen lakes and streams, but that won't stop an ice fisherman when he can pull in a wiggling fish. The photograph is by Frank Klune.

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