

“Tales from the crypt.” Time 137(July 1, 1991):27.

The first U. S. President to be assassinated was Abraham Lincoln—or was it Zachary Taylor? Last week the coroner in Louisville exhumed the body of the 12th President, who died on July 9, 1850, five days after consuming a large amount of iced cherries and milk at a sweltering Independence Day celebration at the Washington Monument. Back then, Taylor's sudden death was attributed to gastroenteritis. But Clara Rising, a Florida writer who is researching a book about Taylor, believes he may have been murdered.

Samples of Taylor's hair, bones and fingernails will be tested for traces of arsenic poisoning. If any are found, they would strengthen Rising's theory that Taylor was killed by pro-slavery Southerners angered by his support for the admission of California and New Mexico into the Union as free states. Said Dabney Taylor, the President's great-great-great grandson: “Rumors have been running through the family for years. I'm just glad somebody is finally going to do something about it.” The prime suspects: Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky, Vice President Millard Fillmore, and two unnamed Georgia politicians.

Heard, Alex, “Exhumed innocent: the grave-digging craze,” New Republic 205(August 5, 1991):12-13.

...The media treated the Taylor exhumation as a grim but whimsy-laden event--the kind of tale newspapers tend to illustrate with creepy Victorian woodcuts--but they didn't to do a good job of explaining Rising's "case" for exhuming Taylor. Speak with Rising, and you get a strong sense that she's a nice, intelligent woman who watched one too many episodes of *Murder, She Wrote*. In 1990 she traveled to Louisville to pick up a prize for her historical novel In the Season of the Wild Rose, which deals with Confederate general John Hunt Morgan. She stayed with Dr. William Gist and his wife, Betty, who own the Zachary Taylor boyhood home. "We started talking about how odd it was that everything Taylor worked against was passed after he died," Rising recalls. "Henry Clay's Compromise of 1850 was dead as long as Zack Taylor lived."

The Compromise of 1850 admitted California to the Union as a free state, and left the slavery status of New Mexico and Utah to be determined after they entered the Union. Rising's theory was that Taylor could have been murdered by Southern secessionists because he supported a slave-free California and New Mexico. Rising had been intrigued by phrases in the Taylor literature--"the full implications of his death have not been explored"--but the real jolt came when she encountered an 1850 edition of Henry Montgomery's The Life of General Taylor, which contains a detailed account of his final hours. ("Green matter was thrown from his stomach at intervals...that peculiar coloration of bile that indicates the dissolution of patients thus seized.") Rising showed the book to Dr. William Maples, a forensic anthropologist at the University of Florida, who said the deathbed passages "were consistent with" arsenic poisoning. From these origins the project whizzed through official channels, with the county coroner and the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs pointing to Rising's "evidence" for criminal actions.

The tests were negative, and with the benefit of hindsight one notices unheeded guffaws from real historians like Elbert Smith, a retired professor of history at the

University of Maryland and author of The Presidencies of Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore. "The whole premise was mistaken," says Smith, easing into a gentle-but-firm lecture. "Rising says they decided to kill Taylor so the Compromise of 1850 could go through. In fact, after Taylor died, Clay's bill ended up coming out exactly like Taylor would have wanted." As for the arsenic symptoms, "His doctors gave him calomel, which is almost all mercury. Wouldn't you throw up with that in you?"...