What happened to the copper statue that used to stand on Penn Avenue in Wilkinsburg at Ardmore Boulevard? I heard he was stolen once and returned. Now he is gone again. Who was he?

— Susannah Rojo, Monroeville

Sooner or later every president gets knocked off his pedestal. Often it's the sniping of revisionist historians, or some embarrassing DNA evidence, but Wilkinsburg's statue of Abraham Lincoln has suffered more indignities and hapless accidents than even Gerald Ford.

According to Discovering Pittsburgh's Sculpture by Marilyn Evert, Lincoln is an unusual statue of copper sheeting, one of seven copies of a work originally sculpted by Alfonso Perlzer for the W. H. Mullins Co., Salem, Ohio. The firm also produced a 100-foot-long pickle once mounted on the roof of Pittsburgh's Heinz factory. The seven-foot-tall Lincoln was unveiled June 9, 1916, as part of a borough-wide festival celebrating the town's emancipation from several recently eliminated dangerous railroad crossings.

Some 50 Civil War veterans attended, as did the schoolchildren who donated dimes to help pay the $800 cost of the statue. At a speech later that evening, a prominent citizen used the occasion to urge another reunification, though hopefully one less bloody than the War Between the States: the annexation of Wilkinsburg by Pittsburgh.

Not even Lincoln could bring the two Allegheny County municipalities together, however, and the years to come would not be kind to the copper president. One night in May 1982, nearly the entire statue — from the ankles up — disappeared. Suspicions were that Lincoln had not stepped down voluntarily any more than he had in real life, and these were confirmed 10 months later. A Monroeville couple described by a newspaper as having been "carried away after drinking beer," had chiseled the statue off at the ankles. They then buried Lincoln "in a shallow grave," as Evert puts it, on a Westmoreland County farm. There he lay for nearly a year until the woman confessed and led police to the site. Lincoln had been crushed under the frame of an abandoned bulldozer placed above him, but the couple agreed to pay $10,000 for repairs; in exchange, the police never pressed charges or identified them.

The statue was returned to its pedestal in 1984 without much fanfare, which would have appealed to the austere Lincoln. But in September 1992, it fell from the pedestal again, this time "of its own volition," says James B. Richard, who chairs the Wilkinsburg...
Historical Society’s statue committee. Some unknown force — possibly vibrations from passing traffic — again broke the statue off at the ankles. It was found shortly afterward by a neighbor who carried it to the police station on a Port Authority bus.

The statue spent the next several years in the Wilkinsburg borough building; photos show a somewhat despondent Abe propped in a corner, one palm open in a gesture of reasoned argument, as if he were holding up his end of the Lincoln-Douglas debates with some storage lockers across the hall.

But Abe will go marching on. The statue has been restored by James Shipman, who reattached Lincoln’s feet and constructed an inner frame of metal tubing to give him a backbone. The Historical Society, based at the Wilkinsburg Public Library, has raised $17,000 of the $23,000 repair bill. A rededication ceremony was held Monday, April 30, at Wilkinsburg High School’s athletic field: among the presenters were Lincoln impersonator James Getty of Gettysburg. Plans are to return Abe (the statue) to its original pedestal soon after.

The statue spent last fall visiting Wilkinsburg schools to not only generate interest and pride in the statue, but to help teach about the Emancipation Proclamation, the Gettysburg Address, and the 13th Amendment. Every student got a copy of the Constitution, and like their predecessors in 1916, were encouraged to donate coins.

“The idea wasn’t to collect huge sums of money, but for kids to feel involved in it,” says James Richard. “So somebody will say, ‘Hey, I better do something,’ if it comes off the pedestal again.”

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