

Eccentrics

Mark Twain: Not Necessarily Safe to Travel

By Chloe Lizotte

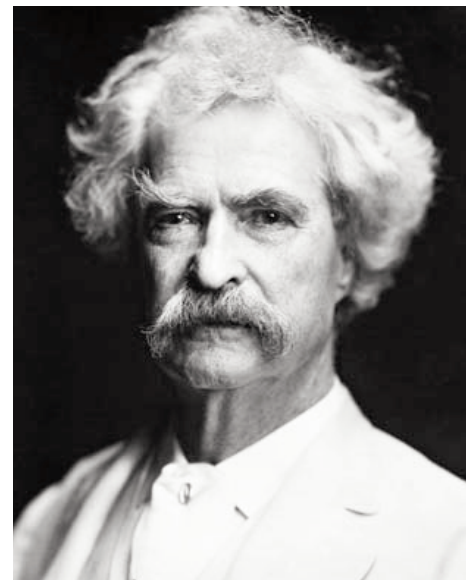
The name “Samuel Langhorne Clemens” is a mouthful of syllables nowhere near as easy to remember as short punchy pen names like Thoreau, Alcott, Emerson or Hawthorne. Perhaps this helps understand why Sam Clemens elected to adopt the more notable nom de plume of Mark Twain, taken from his earlier career, when the time came for him to begin writing stories and books. Born in 1835 in Missouri, Twain/Clemens had been greatly affected by the culture of the Mississippi River, dreaming as a boy of one day becoming a steamboat river pilot. At 22, while working as a steamboat apprentice in St. Louis, he learned that an essential part of driving a boat is awareness of the river’s depths at all times. To determine that the water is at least 12 feet deep and therefore safe for your boat to travel is to “mark twain.”

Later, in 1861, Twain relocated to Virginia City, Nevada where he began to work as a journalist. Initially as a correspondent for a San Francisco newspaper *The Call*, he eventually decided to leave Virginia City for fear of legal repercussions after he challenged the editor of a rival publication to a duel! Escaping to San Francisco, he soon grew bored of his work as a full time reporter for *The Call* and quit to contribute to a variety of newspapers and literary magazines. However, that too needed to end after about a year as many of his articles aimed his flaring temper at San Francisco’s police department, thus catching too much of the wrong kind of attention from local authorities. In the

safety of Tuolumne Foothills in California, where he attempted to do some mining, Twain retold on paper a story he heard from the locals, titling his retelling “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” This was his first taste of success in literature, finally bringing the name Mark Twain into the public eye.

Although he went on to write hugely popular books such as “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” in 1876 and “Huckleberry Finn” in 1885, Twain nonetheless found himself deeply in debt. A big reason for this was that he had invested large amounts of money in a new version of the typesetting machine. Convinced that this invention was a stroke of genius, he expected that he would not need to write another word to sustain himself once this remarkable new typesetter hit the market. Income from the profits of such a can’t-miss new product would be more than enough to keep him afloat financially and settle all his debts.

Unfortunately, Twain’s master plan went horribly wrong. He had also founded a publishing company that was losing money, which forced him to stop contributing money on the typesetter project so that he could shift attention to saving his company. But by this time he had spent more than \$200,000 on the typesetter, leaving him with not nearly enough money to also save the publishing company. The majority of Twain’s income had thus disappeared,



plummeting him into a debt from he could never recover.

Ever true to his sense of humor and irony, Twain, born in the same year that Halley’s Comet had appeared in the night skies, famously remarked in 1909: “I came in with Halley’s Comet in 1835. It is coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it... The Almighty has said, no doubt: ‘Now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they came in together, they must go out together.’” Eerily enough, his prediction came true. Mark Twain died in 1910, exactly one day after Halley’s Comet returned. Luckily for us on the planet Earth, Twain’s literature and legacy did not disappear with him, staying around much longer than the famous comet.

To learn more, visit The Mark Twain House & Museum in Hartford CT:
<http://www.marktwainhouse.org/neh/>

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