
MARK TWAIN VISITS TENNESSEE

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Mark Twain visited Tennessee a number of times but surely not so often as is claimed. It is sometimes said, for instance, that he visited Jamestown, coming back to see the land his father bought while living in Fentress County in the 1820s and 1830s. But such claims ignore Twain's plain statement in his autobiography: "I have written about Jamestown in *The Gilded Age*, a book of mine, but it was from hearsay, not from personal knowledge."¹ Apparently the visits made to Fentress County by Twain's older brother Orion Clemens gave rise to the belief that Twain himself had been there. From time to time intriguing stories about other Twain visits to Tennessee have appeared, some verifiable and some supported by no source other than that in which they were originally published.

A prime example of the latter is the account given by Lela McDowell Blankenship (1886-1966) in *When Yesterday Was Today*, posthumously published in 1966, in which she relates that her father Jackson McDowell met Sam Clemens in a Nashville print shop. McDowell made a trip to St. Louis, apparently in the early 1850s, and was delayed a week at Nashville, waiting for a steamboat. His daughter represents him as saying:

In that time I found a suitable place for the children and found a few days' work at a printing shop where I learned to set type. There I met a young man of similar age but apparently of much greater experience than I with whom I fell in company. His name was Samuel Clemens, and he was amusing and instructive in an extravagant sort of way, telling tall tales but being friendly and helpful. I liked him in spite of disbelieving much he told.²

Mrs. Blankenship's footnote affirms: "Jackson McDowell often talked of Sam Clemens who was of his own age and similar background, being born only a few miles over in Missouri. Jackson never spoke Clemens' name without a chuckle of remembrance." The narrative of Jackson McDowell -- which may have been written by Mrs. Blankenship, since it is not clear that this is an actual quotation from her father -- continues with his visit to St. Louis and his return to Nashville. There, he says, he

again met up with the young man from Missouri, Sam Clemens, who was a much better travelled young man than I. He told of ways and means to see the world with headquarters in Nashville. Sam Clemens could tell the biggest tales, many of them complete lies or fabrications to interest people, but he was good company. Clemens got me a job of type-setting, and the printing process was of great interest to me.³

A third encounter allegedly came when the two met while McDowell was on his way to the Western gold fields. "I stopped in Nashville," Mrs. Blankenship has him say, "and might have stayed, but my original interest was bolstered by more magic tales by Sam Clemens, whom I met again in the print shop." These meetings are not

satisfactorily dated, but in reference to the Western trip McDowell says, "I was gone all the Summer of 1854. . . ."4

The 1853 Nashville city directory lists several printing offices: those for newspapers (the *Daily American*, *Nashville Gazette*, and *Republican Banner*) as well as others, such as the Ben Franklin Book and Job Office. But was Sam Clemens really employed by one of them? The evidence quoted, coming from the daughter of the man who supposedly experienced it, is striking, though some shadow is cast over it by the fact that more than 110 years passed between the event and the published account of it. Still more damaging is the fact that no Twain biographer seems ever to have found evidence of Sam Clemens working in a Nashville print shop. He was so employed in Hannibal, St. Louis, New York, Philadelphia, Muscatine (Iowa), Keokuk (Iowa), and Cincinnati in the 1850s and may have been at Nashville. But proof is lacking.

An account of a Twain visit to Tennessee written by a man who claimed to have witnessed it appears in the autobiography of Opie Read (1852-1939), author and lecturer and Nashville native. Read was, so he says, a student at a classical school called Neophogen College in Gallatin, Tennessee, when the humorist came there to speak:

It was a delight when Mark Twain came to give a lecture, not in the restricted Hall of Ideas, but in the spacious chapel. Walton [the college president] had objected to Twain's coming, terming him a man of uncouth expression . . . but he gave way to our importunity, listened to a few sentences and walked out to meet Aristotle among the trees. I knew that the humorist had worked in a printing office, and after the lecture I told him that I was a compositor and was typesetting my way toward education; and pleasantly he responded, "Yes, whatever that may mean." He went with a party of us to my room where we sat smoking cob pipes and enjoyably listening to his talk. "Real knowledge lies in the close attention we pay to little things," I remember his saying. "Once I saw a mighty elephant seeking to doze off, to dream, doubtless, of his monstrous ancestors, but a fly kept him awake." Ah, how wiser was he than our book-founded president.⁵

A somewhat different, much more humorous account of the event was offered in Read's posthumously published *Mark Twain and I* ten years later:

We, the students of the somewhat exaggerated classical institution, Neophogen [sic] College, Gallatin, Tennessee, were fondly looking toward the coming of Mark Twain to deliver us a lecture. President Walton expressed his sensitive concern, "After the lecture you are to sit in a room with the great humorist. I warn you not to light your pipes, for I understand that Mr. Clemens has a contempt for tobacco."

When the thrilling talk had been given, the elder students invited Mark Twain into a small room. "We are going to shut the windows and smoke the humorist out," said one of the leaders.

Soon we began lighting our pipes. After a few moments when some of us began to cough, Mark Twain inquired, "Are you fellows smoking sawdust? Wait a minute, I think I have some regular tobacco."

With that he took from his pocket a big pipe, crumpled off tobacco from a black Kentucky twist and puffed upon us clouds of suffocating smoke.

When we had coughed our way out of the room we saw Mark Twain silently laughing, as he walked beneath the trees.⁶

One may well ask why, if the second account is true, Read did not give any hint of it in his autobiography. And why was the mood of President Walton so changed that he is solicitous of the comfort of "the great humorist" when before he was quite contemptuous of him? We may also question why in the first account the students gather in Read's own room, yet in the second version it is merely "a small room."

Local tradition concerning the Twain lecture is at variance with both of Read's printed accounts, since it holds that President Walton locked the humorist out, forcing him to deliver his lecture on the lawn to a crowd of students and those who happened to be passing at the time.⁷ Read's autobiography, as we have seen, states that the lecture was given in the college chapel.

But did Mark Twain really lecture at Neophogen College? Aside from the fact that no mention is made of such an event in any of the standard Twain sources, there is the problem of the dates to the visit. Neophogen College was chartered in 1873 and ceased to exist in 1878.⁸ Twain appears to have spent those years almost entirely in New England, New York, and Europe.⁹ There seem to be these possibilities: (1) Read was deliberately lying; (2) Read's faulty memory attributed to Twain a lecture actually given by someone else, or by Twain at another place; or (3) the man who spoke at Gallatin was an impostor.

Opie Read had other stories to tell about the presence of Mark Twain in Tennessee. At the beginning of one we hear that "The old 'Joe Wheeler' carried Mark Twain and our party along the picturesque Tennessee River as we churned toward Chattanooga." In another we hear that "The cooling breezes swept across a Tennessee hotel veranda as Mark Twain and our party awaited the arrival of a carriage that was to take us to a Chautauqua tent." On still another page of *Mark Twain and I*, he recalls that "On the shady side of an old brick hotel in Nashville, Tennessee, Mark Twain sat in a big hickory chair tilted back against the wall." On this occasion Read claims to have introduced to Twain "a gaunt old fellow of the hillbilly type" who said he had come to hear him "talk in the hall tonight" and wanted him to "sling" a joke at him. The old man also remarked that this was the first time he had been over twenty miles from home. "Do you mean to tell men," said Twain, "that you've never been outside the United States?" When the man affirmed that he had not, Twain declared, "Oh, yes you have. How about the time Tennessee seceded from the Union?"¹⁰ Again there seems to be no supporting evidence for Read's story; indeed, there is no evidence that Twain ever lectured at Nashville. It is possible that Read used the name of his birthplace simply because the anecdote needed to be set in some Southern city.

Read's mention of a "Chautauqua tent" leads us to consider a more recent but very brief statement in Radcliffe Squires' biography of Allen Tate that Monteagle was "established in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as an 'Assembly Grounds' where edifying lectures were given along the Chautauqua line. Mark Twain and George Washington Cable both lectured there."¹¹ It is true that Cable lectured at Monteagle; Twain and Cable for a time appeared together on the lecture platform. It is very likely that the impression thus arose that Twain had been at Monteagle too. All of the evidence I have seen indicates that though Mark Twain spoke in such far-away places as India, South Africa, and Australia, he almost never lectured in the American South. And when he did it was in the upper South -- Kentucky, Virginia, Maryland. He seems never to have spoken in the leading Southern cities and certainly not in Tennessee. This, at least, is the witness of all scholarly sources.

The only Tennessee city which seems to have a provable association with Mark Twain is Memphis. During his years as a riverboat man, 1857-1861, he must have visited it a number of times. Indeed, it once served as his

address, for on March 9, 1858, he wrote to Orion and Mollie from St. Louis:

I got your letter at Memphis as I went down. That is the best place to write me at. The post office here is always out of my route, somehow or other. Remember the direction: "S.L.C., Steamer Pennsylvania, Care Duval & Algeo, Wharfboat, Memphis."¹²

It was the *Pennsylvania* which was to bring about Sam Clemens' most famous experience -- a heartbreaking one -- in Memphis. In chapter 20 of *Life on the Mississippi* and in his autobiography, he told the story of his brother Henry's death there, following an explosion aboard the *Pennsylvania*. The accident occurred about six o'clock on the morning of June 13, 1858, near Ship Island, some sixty miles below Memphis. Half an hour after the explosion, the ship caught fire and burned. Henry Clemens, third clerk, was among those taken to Memphis, to be cared for in the criminal court room of Exchange Hall, which had been converted into a hospital. Sam Clemens arrived on the scene two days later and remained at Henry's bedside until his death. In a letter addressed to his sister-in-law Mollie Clemens, June 18, 1858, Sam recounts the terrible story of the incident in which 300 lives were lost and praises Memphis for the assistance she has rendered the wounded: "But may God bless Memphis, the noblest city on the face of the earth. She has done her duty by these poor afflicted creatures."¹³ In *Life on the Mississippi* Mark Twain simply recorded that Henry's injuries were too great and that he died from them. But in the autobiography he states that Henry was actually recovered and out of danger when an overdose of morphine, ignorantly administered, killed him. Twain also recounts in the autobiography his prophetic dream sometime before the accident in which he saw Henry dead in a metallic coffin, wearing Sam's suit, with a bouquet of roses on his chest, all white except for one red rose in the center. According to Twain, the dream vision was duplicated at Memphis in every detail.¹⁴ Twain's account in *Life on the Mississippi*, chapter 20, offers further praise of Memphis as being "experienced, above all other cities on the river, in the generous office of the Good Samaritan."

A later visit to Memphis was both shorter and happier. In the spring of 1882, seeking material for what became *Life on the Mississippi*, he took a trip on the river, at first traveling as C. L. Samuel, since he did not wish to be recognized. He states at the beginning of chapter 33 that his idea was "to tarry awhile in every town between St. Louis and New Orleans," but this had to be given up. On April 22, 1882, he wrote his wife from on board the *Gold Dust*, telling her that he would reach Memphis that night and explaining that since his identity had been discovered "it would be nonsense to stop at Memphis, now, & fall a prey to the newspapers."¹⁵ Clemens did not intend to pass up Memphis entirely, for he promised to telegraph his wife from there on the next morning, April 23. Chapter 29 of *Life on the Mississippi* records his brief stopover in the city.

Still remembering Memphis' kindness to him and Henry and to the others who had been aboard the stricken *Pennsylvania*, he was high in his praise of "the Good Samaritan City of the Mississippi." "It is a beautiful city," he wrote, "nobly situated on a commanding bluff overlooking the river." Its streets he found "straight and spacious, though not paved in a way to incite distempered admiration." Mention of the town's perfect sewage system brought him to thoughts of the yellow fever plague of 1878 and caused him to include a three-paragraph quotation from Ernst Von Hesse-Wartegg's *Mississippi-Vahrten* (Leipzig, 1881) describing the city at that time. Twain also cites the uncomplimentary view of Memphis given in Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1831) by way of contrast with the aspect it presented in 1882. "We drove about the city," Twain tells us, "visited the park and the sociable horde of squirrels there; saw the fine residences, rose-clad and in other ways enticing to the eye; and got a good breakfast at the hotel." No mention is made of a fact recorded in the notebook kept by Twain's secretary, that he was recognized at the hotel by a lawyer who had noticed the Clemens name on the register. A piece of unfurnished business is mentioned in chapter 49, where we hear of a young man buried in Memphis who heroically stayed at the wheel of a burning steamboat long enough to ground it in shallow water:

There were two hundred persons on board, and no life was lost but the pilot's. There used to be a monument to this young fellow in that Memphis graveyard. While we tarried in Memphis on our down trip, I started out to look for it, but our time was so brief that I was obliged to turn back before my object was accomplished.

In an autobiographical dictation of 1906 Twain recounted the story of William C. Youngblood, a pilot on the *John J. Roe* who barely escaped with his life after landing his burning boat, remaining at the wheel until everyone else was ashore.¹⁶

From Memphis Twain travelled south to New Orleans and then back up the Mississippi. No mention of passing or visiting Memphis on this northward journey is made in *Life on the Mississippi*. The only record which seems to have survived is one in Twain's notebooks that he left Memphis at ten o'clock on the morning of May 10, 1882.¹⁷

The only other Tennessee places which Mark Twain mentions having seen occur in *Life on the Mississippi*: "the wooded mouth of the Obion River," "the famous and formidable Plum Point," Fort Pillow, the Devil's Elbow (above Memphis). The 1864 attack on Fort Pillow by Confederate forces called forth bitter remarks from Twain, who accepted the Northern version of what occurred. To him it was the only true "massacre" in American history, surpassing all such events since the time of Richard the Lionhearted. No such feeling is shown in regard to what he calls "the most famous of the river battles of the Civil War," that at Memphis in which Horace Bixby (the "lightning pilot" who taught Sam the river) was the "head pilot of the Union Fleet" and Montgomery, under whom he had also served, was commodore of the Confederate Fleet.

We can see now that Mark Twain's acquaintance with Tennessee was slight. He knew the extreme western edge of it, along the Mississippi, and he knew Memphis fairly well in the days before the Civil War. If he really worked at a Nashville print shop, lectured at Gallatin, or travelled to Chattanooga, such events have never been accepted by Twain biographers or presented in any scholarly work. There may be some truth in them; but until proven, these stories must be classed with the reports of Twain's death: "greatly exaggerated."

NOTES

¹*The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Harper, 1959), 18.

²(Nashville: Tennessee Book Co., 1966), 57.

³Blankenship, 58.

⁴Blankenship, 58-59.

⁵*I Remember* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1930), 29-30.

⁶(Chicago: Reilly & Lee, 1940), 9.

⁷Walter T. Durham, *A College for This Community: A History of the Local Colleges . . .* (Gallatin, Tenn.: Sumner

Co. Public Library Board, 1974), 68. Durham recounts the story of Twain's visit to Neophogen, relying almost entirely on Read's account in *Mark Twain and I* and with no mention of the account in *I Remember*. Conversely, the account in Robert Lee Morris, *Opie Read: American Humorist* (New York: Helios Books, 1965), 40, makes use of *I Remember*, without reference to *Mark Twain and I*.

⁸Durham, 55, 72. Neophogen opened in Gallatin in 1874.

⁹Paul Machlis, *Union Catalog of Clemens Letters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), for example, lists no Clemens letters for those years written anywhere near Tennessee. Only four letters are known to have been sent by Clemens from Tennessee during his entire lifetime, all in 1858-59.

¹⁰These stories appear in *Mark Twain and I*, 71, 42, 72.

¹¹*Allen Tate: A Literary Biography* (New York: Pegasus, 1971), 156.

¹²*Mark Twain's Letters*, ed. Albert Bigelow Paine (New York: Harper, 1917), I, 38.

¹³*Mark Twain's Letters*, I, 41. The whole matter of Henry Clemens' death is dealt with fully in Edgar M. Branch, *Men Call Me Lucky: Mark Twain and the Pennsylvania* (Oxford, Ohio: Friends of the Library Society, 1985). Note especially Twain's letter to a Memphis woman who helped care for the wounded, dated October 25, 1876 (38-39). In it Twain anticipates an 1878 journey down the Mississippi.

¹⁴*The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, 98-101.

¹⁵*The Love Letters of Mark Twain*, ed. Dixon Wecter (New York: Harper, 1949), 208.

¹⁶*Mark Twain's Notebooks & Journals* (Berkeley: Univ. Of California Press, 1975), II, 457, n. 80.

¹⁷*Mark Twain's Notebooks & Journals*, II, 476.

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