THE AWESOME ADVENTURES OF MARK TWAIN

One of America's favorite writers used his own exploits as fodder for his now classic tales

BY SUE DE PASQUALE

When tiny Samuel Langhorne Clemens arrived two months early, on Nov. 30, 1835, few expected him to make it past infancy. "When I first saw him, I could see no promise in him," his mother, Jane, would report years later. The sickly little boy was bedridden for most of his first four years. It was a sorry start, particularly hard to reconcile with the image of the rough-and-tumble young adventurer who emerged afterward. Clemens' boyhood exploits growing up in Hannibal, Mo., would serve as the inspiration for America's most-loved novels, including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.*

The original novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* is located at Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, as part of the Mark Twain Project Collection.

Known by the pen name Mark Twain, Clemens was many things over the course of his 75 years—steamboat pilot, silver miner, lecturer, humorist, essayist, anti-imperialist—but it was his gift for capturing in prose the spirit of 19th-century America that secured his status as a literary legend. "He was the first truly American writer, and all of us since are his heirs," William Faulkner has said. H.L. Mencken described Twain as "the true father of our national literature—the first genuinely American artist of the royal blood."

It may have been Clemens' early confinement to home—listening to the chatter of household slaves, the drawl of visitors to his father's general store—that honed his exquisite ear for dialect.

Samuel Clemens was 4 when his father's failing business prompted the family to leave the sleepy town of Florida, Mo., for the bustling portside city of Hannibal. For young Samuel, Hannibal was heaven. The feisty redhead became the leader of a scrappy pack of boys (a voracious reader, he was chief scriptwriter for their frequent make-believe escapades). The boys spent their summers running wild, chewing tobacco, pulling pranks and exploring the waters of the mighty Mississippi—despite the fact that Samuel couldn't swim. He would later report being rescued from near drowning up to nine different times.

After Samuel's dour father, John Marshall Clemens, died in 1847, his mother pleaded that he attend school, but he compromised by learning the ever-evolving printing trade. The golden age of the American newspaper was just dawning and Mark Twain was there from the start. Though he began by sweeping floors at the Hannibal *Gazette* (later the *Courier*), he worked his way up to setting type. At 15, he apprenticed with his older brother, Orion, the paper's new publisher. It was inside the ink-spattered walks of the *Courier* that Twain's sharp wit first found an outlet. His first piece, "A Gallant Fireman," blended fact with fiction to lampoon a young co-worker whose response to a Hannibal grocery store fire was to rescue a broom and a dirty towel.

After touring the East Coast for several years, Twain was lured back to the Midwest by the increasing popularity of the steamboat. He set out to "learn the river" as an apprentice to pilot Horace Bixby, who was later immortalized in Twain's classic book *Life on the Mississippi.* (He also earned his pen name. Steamboats needed a water depth of at least 12 feet to avoid running aground, so seamen would drop a weighted rope, with "marks" every 6 feet.

Twain means two—thus "Mark Twain" indicated the water was safe to navigate.)

Twain's riverboat years were a short-lived but idyllic time in his life. Sadly, they ended in tragedy when his beloved younger brother, Henry, whom he'd convinced to work on the river, was killed in a steamboat boiler explosion. "My poor Henry—my darling, my pride, my glory, my all … has [finished] his blameless career, and the light of my life [has] gone out in utter darkness," Twain, then 22, wrote to his family with the news of Henry's death.

The advent of the Civil War put an official end to Twain's river piloting days. With friend Will Bowen and some others, Twain reluctantly signed on with a local Confederate militia, the Marion Rangers. But his heart wasn't in it (he didn't abide slavery) and his military "career" with what amounted to a ragtag group of friends lasted only several weeks. He later wrote about the experience in an essay, "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed."

Determined to avoid the conflict of the war, Twain set out for the West, once again joining brother Orion, this time in Nebraska, and later Virginia City, Nev., where the two hoped to make their fortunes in silver mining. While that never happened, Twain did gather great fodder for a future book, the semi-autobiographical *Roughing It* (1872) and returned to the newspaper writing he had set aside by working as a humorist for Nevada's biggest paper, the *Territorial Enterprise.* He moved on to San Francisco in 1864 and it was there he penned the piece that would bring him his first real fame, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Picked up by the *New York Saturday Press,* it "set all New York into a roar," and earned praise from influential literary critic James Russell Lowell as the finest piece of humorous writing ever produced in America.

Twain was ready to return East, but first he embarked on a pleasure cruise for Europe, where he wrote about his encounters there in the highly satirical *The Innocents Abroad,* which became a best-seller. Twain arrived in New York, at 35, as a literary darling. On that cruise, friend Charley Langdon had shown him a picture of his sister, Olivia. Twain was smitten. Back in the U.S., he set out to find her and win her over—no easy task given how shy and refined she was. Gradually, though, she fell in love with him; some say it happened when she saw him on the lecture platform. The two married in 1870, embarking on a romance (including the birth of three daughters, Susy, Clara, and Jean, and a son who died as a toddler) that would carry them through the next four decades, until Olivia's death in 1904.

The Twain family spent the happiest years of their lives (from 1874 to 1891) in a sprawling, 19-room home in Hartford, Conn., with a spacious lawn, stable and coachman. Even before *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was published in 1876, Twain had begun work on a continuation, focusing on Tom's friend Huck. He wrote a sizable portion but then set the new book aside. "I like it only tolerably well, as far as I have gone, and possibly may pigeonhole or burn the manuscript when it is done," he wrote at the time.

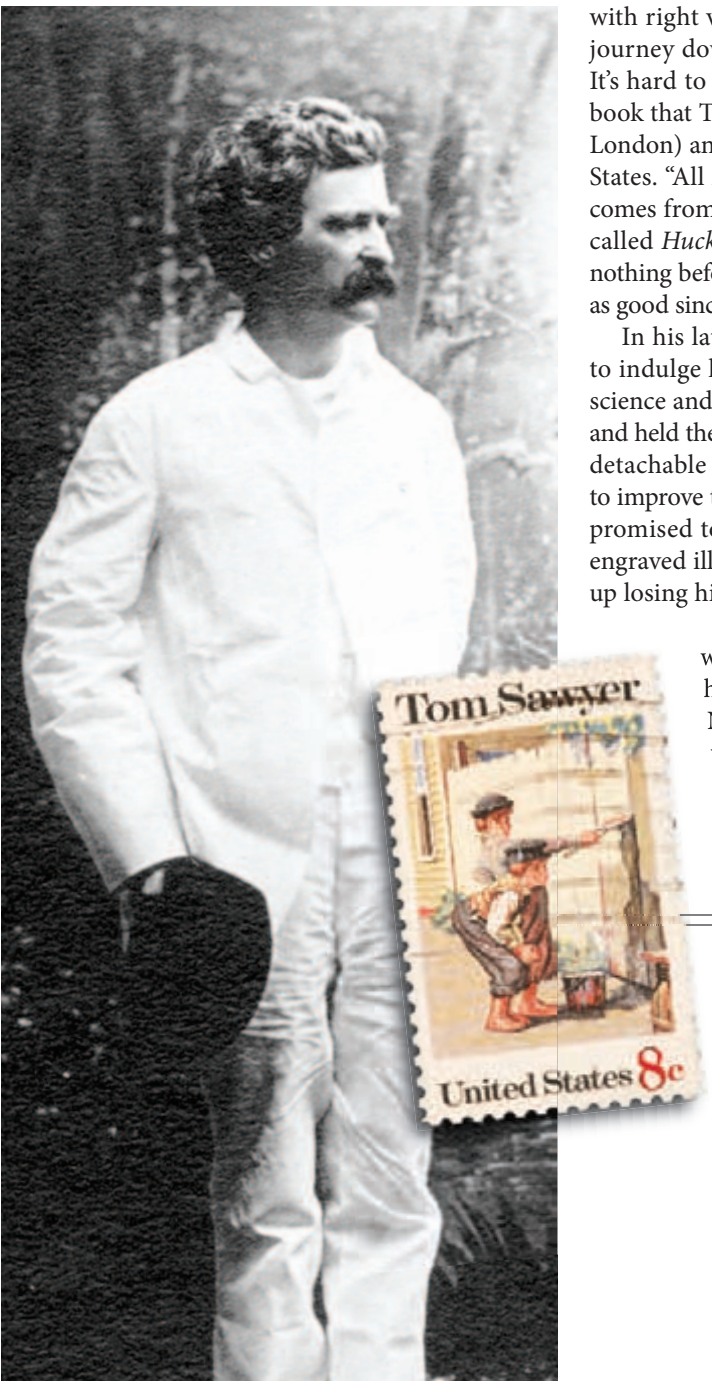
Thankfully, that never happened. Twain returned to Huck in 1883 and the book began to "write itself." "I haven't piled up [pages] so in years … Why it's like old times," he reported happily.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn masterfully depicts young Huck's grappling

For 17 years, the Twain family lived in a 19-room Victorian, Gothic-style home in Hartford, Conn. It now serves as a museum.

Quotable Quotes from Mark Twain

"I have never let my schooling interfere with my education."
"Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society."
"Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear—not absence of fear."
"A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes."
"It's not the size of the dog in the fight; it's the size of the fight in the dog."
"If you have nothing to say, say nothing."
"Always do right! This will gratify some people and astonish the rest."
"It is easier to stay out than get out."
"Actions speak louder than words but not nearly as often."



with right versus wrong in his rafting journey down the Mississippi River. It's hard to overstate the impact of the book that Twain published in 1884 (in London) and a year later in the United States. "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn.* There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since," wrote Ernest Hemingway.

In his later years, Twain found time to indulge his lifelong fascination with science and technology. He developed and held the patent on an "adjustable and detachable garment strap," and worked to improve the kaolatype, a machine that promised to speed up production of engraved illustrations (though it ended up losing him money).

Twain's passion for science was no doubt nurtured by his close friendship with Nikola Tesla, the scientist widely credited with making electricity a commercial reality. The two frequented the Player's Club, in New York City, and in 1894, Tesla famously invited Twain to his lab, where the first photos to make use of phosphorescent light were taken.

On a later lab visit, Twain served as a guinea pig to test Tesla's newly developed mechanical oscillator, an engine that produced alternating currents of high frequencies—as well as significant vibrations. Were there health benefits to be had from these vibrations, Tesla wondered? Twain gamely endured being hooked up and shaken ("This gives you vigor and vitality!" he shouted) until the laxative effect of the vibrations caused him to bolt for the bathroom. (See the biography on Nikola Tesla in the fall/winter 2009 issue of *BOSS* at *www.dixonvalve.com.*)

As the 19th century drew to a close, Twain became a staunch anti-imperialist, passionately against U.S. plans to annex the Philippines. "I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land," he declared to reporters. From 1901 until his death nine years later, he served as vice president of the American Anti-Imperialist League; through his dark-toned lectures and essays, Twain became a primary voice for dissent.

But today, Twain, a man who befriended presidents, industrialists and European royalty, is remembered much more happily—for his humor and his genius in depicting Americans as they really were.

"Mark Twain's way of seeing and hearing things changed America's way of seeing and hearing things," notes biographer Ron Powers. "As America's Shakespeare, [he] struck a template for the nation's voice into the 20th century and beyond."

wain, pictured here in his signature white suit, first achieved fame when e wrote "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," while working as a newspaperman in San Francisco. Norman Rockwell's illustration f Tom Sawyer was made into a stamp in 1972, left.