

26 Mississippi Memories

Even before Twain made so much money on the play, he was becoming rich from his books. By the end of 1874 the American Publishing Company had bound a total of almost 245,000 copies of *The Innocents Abroad*, *Roughing It*, and *The Gilded Age*.¹ By the time *Colonel Sellers* closed its first season in New York in January 1875, he was awash in memories of the South, which flooded his imagination and would form the basis for *Tom Sawyer*, *Life on the Mississippi*, and *Huckleberry Finn*. These works would bring him not only more money but permanent literary fame. His recollections of boyhood had possibly been stirred by the family plots he had devised for *The Gilded Age*. (He began *Tom Sawyer*, a much more extensive narrative about childhood, six months before joining forces with Warner on the political novel.) He was now a southerner living in the North, and yet the South kept inserting itself into his consciousness. This upheaval of memories began in 1872, and greatly intensified during his fourth summer at Quarry Farm when he heard about the “troubles” of Mary Ann Cord, a former slave and then his sister-in-law’s cook in Elmira, and wrote about them for the November 1874 *Atlantic* in his newly built octagonal study in the woods a short walk from the house at Quarry Farm. The publication was his first appearance in the prestigious magazine.

“A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It” was a frame story told in black vernacular by a slave mother who, having been sold away from her seven children, was reunited with one of them during the war. Writing it may have stimulated or refocused Twain’s thinking

about both blacks and slavery, subjects merely italicized in the public mind after the Emancipation Proclamation. It was also one of his earliest experiments with a black dialect. He published something very similar later the same month in the *New York Times*, a sketch entitled "Sociable Jimmy," which features a ten-year-old black whose medley of free associations at least vaguely recalls Twain's earlier use of the digression story, such as in "His Grandfather's Ram." Both "A True Story" and "Sociable Jimmy" feature black characters who brought back to life for Sam Clemens vivid memories of Uncle Daniel and the others on the Quarles farm in Florida, Missouri. These African American voices were an essential part of the fabric of Mark Twain's greatest art, which was now beginning to emerge.² Only a month before these publications, on October 24, his Mississippi River memories had surged on yet another front during a walk around the Hartford countryside with Joe Twichell. Sensing the sure success of "A True Story," Howells had been eager for more from Twain's pen, but it wasn't until Sam started reminiscing with Joe about his steamboating days that he realized he had more material for the *Atlantic*. "What a virgin subject to hurl into a magazine!" Twichell had exclaimed,³ and so it was.

Mark Twain's seven articles on the subject were almost unprecedented. An anonymous article in *Harper's* in 1870 entitled "Down the Mississippi" devoted only a few sentences to the profession of piloting. Another piece in *Scribner's* may have been—along with the conversation with Twichell—part of the impetus for Twain. Edward S. King's contribution to a series entitled "The Great South" appeared in October 1874. King alluded to the "quaint, dry humor" of the pilots and their fondness for storytelling. He also mentioned Mark Twain specifically as one of those who had served an apprenticeship on the river. Having stumbled on the dramatic possibilities of *The Gilded Age* through Densmore's script, Twain may have reacted in a similar manner to King's article, thinking that somebody was stealing his thunder. He had indeed considered writing a book on the subject as early as 1866. In 1871 he told his wife while on the lecture circuit, "When I come to write the Mississippi book, *then* look out!"⁴ Whatever the case, it was always Mark Twain's destiny to write about the Mississippi River.

One measure of the enthusiasm with which the "Old Times" pieces

(adapted later as the material for chapters 4–17 in *Life on the Mississippi*) were received is how quickly and widely they were copied by the other journals and newspapers around the country. This pirating before American magazines began to copyright their materials also took the form of a small book by an unscrupulous Canadian publisher using Twain's title. (Belford Brothers would give Twain more of the same when *Tom Sawyer* appeared.) In asking Twain for the articles, which ran from January to August of 1875, Howells had hoped to boost the *Atlantic* circulation (perhaps to recover from the drop in the subscription rate after Stowe's disastrous article on Byron in 1869), but the magazine may have sold even fewer copies than before, because the Twain articles sent to newspapers were in many cases republished verbatim instead of merely serving to advertise the *Atlantic*. Such exploitation was simply the result of popularity; it had plagued him on the lecture circuit, too, when newspapers had often printed his lecture nearly verbatim before the audience in the next town could hear him deliver it.

Although the articles formally set out to describe the "science" of piloting (which they did for a reading audience that knew relatively little about the antebellum culture of the Mississippi River), the main draw for readers today is the nostalgia that Twain evokes in these pieces, for he was indeed living in that past again when he sat down to write. "When I was a boy," he began, "there was but one permanent ambition among my comrades in our village on the west bank of the Mississippi River. That was to be a steamboatman." He captured the point of view of the boy on the river in that era who would eventually morph into the hero of *Tom Sawyer* and culminate in the narrator of *Huckleberry Finn*. One by one, he wrote in the *Atlantic* series, all other boyhood ambitions disappeared before the possibility of life on the river. These village boys might hope that God would allow them someday to become pirates, but when this fantasy faded, "the ambition to be a steamboatman always remained."

The sense of the river's sanctuary lay in the fact that it was securely in the past. That evocation of escape is at its most profound when it embraces Huck and Jim adrift on the river under the stars, safe if only temporarily from the greed and bigotry of the land. Such scenes suggest America's comparative innocence before the Civil War. Afterward, with the expansion of the country's influence throughout the world, it was

well on the road to the loss of agrarianism and the greed of capital.⁵ Even *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), which reflects Twain's later cynicism about America, is one of his most vivid and compelling works because it is set before the war, when the country was shaping the future artist's vision. And it must be remembered that Twain's audience was reading these works on this side of the Civil War. Contemporary readers, of course, might share the author's sense of personal nostalgia, having experienced their own youth during the same time period, but the bigger pull was its invocation of a better past, one in which they always finally did the right thing.

Twain was writing in the era of literary realism, the same period in which Howells's protagonists could still grapple successfully with right and wrong and not be ruled exclusively by hereditary and environmental forces. It is only in the later chapters written for *Life on the Mississippi* that this spell is broken, when the account includes a view of the river and its life *after* the war and the demise of the steamboat. In the *Atlantic* articles, on the other hand, we find the basis for Twain's other strong works. Here the Mississippi Valley of the 1840s comes alive for really the first time in his oeuvre. Hannibal returns as the fictional St. Petersburg, and the Mississippi River comes back, carrying all the glory and greed of its antebellum culture. Here we get an eye-level view of life from a teenager growing up in Hannibal. It would be practice for the point of view he later created in *Huckleberry Finn*, which mixes reality with illusion to show us the absurdity of the commonplace. The narrator resents, for example, the boy in town who is the first to become an apprentice engineer on a steamboat. This envied youth had, we are told, both money and hair oil. The narrator here is the same one who gave those lectures around the eastern states, except now the travel book takes us not to Europe, the Nevada territory, or Hawaii but back to the sanctity of boyhood. Indeed, during his second lecture tour in 1871-72, he began writing that lecture on the boy. But "An Appeal in Behalf of Extending the Suffrage to Boys" was perhaps too full of political sarcasm to succeed, and he scrapped it even before giving it. His aim had been to poke light fun, or "good-natured satire," at woman's suffrage, a movement that he later supported.⁶

Sam had naturally learned the river “like a book,” but that was important only insofar as he managed to become an acceptable if no better than average river pilot. He had also learned the river well enough to set *Huckleberry Finn* along its winding stream. He learned to read like a book all the people who made up the river’s carnival of life—not only the deadbeats who conned their way from St. Louis to New Orleans and back but also the ignorant folk in all those hamlets and ramshackle towns along the river. “Old Times on the Mississippi” was clearly a dress rehearsal for the adventures of Tom and Huck, or the bad boy who never came to grief and the good boy who did not prosper, in the sense that it crystallized the backdrop of their dramas.

It is somewhat ironic that Twain complains that learning the science of piloting undercut the romance of the Mississippi. “Now when I had mastered the language of this water and had come to know every trifling feature,” he writes in what became chapter 9 of *Life on the Mississippi*, “all the grace, the beauty, the poetry had gone out of the majestic river!” If this loss were in any way real, it could only be in the later chapters of the book, which recount Twain’s visit after the war and the death of the steamboat industry. For in reconstructing the life of the pilot before the war, he presents a picture of relative, if not absolute, freedom. Not only was the pilot paid as much as the vice president of the United States, but he outranked all the officers on the boat, including the captain, as long as the vessel was underway. Even the details of piloting in those days are romanticized, or at least exaggerated. Most pilots were risk takers (something Mark Twain was not, at least as a pilot), and many serious accidents occurred on that busy stream of commercial traffic. Yet it is the romance of it all that is transferred to the world of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. T.S. Eliot, another famous American writer who hailed from Missouri, called the Mississippi “a strong brown God” in his *Four Quartets*. The river was a living presence whose currents in Mark Twain’s world carry readers back to childhood and innocence.

In “Old Times” Twain first recovered this world that became the setting of his other river novels, including *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. In what became chapter 11, he talks of the “small-fry craft” that steamboat captains dismissed as “an intolerable nuisance.” One of these resembles

Huck and Jim's raft, run over in chapter 16 of *Huckleberry Finn*. He even anticipated the novel's two frauds or false claimants to royalty in the deckhand who was either "an earl or an alderman" (chapter 5 of *Life*). In what became chapter 12, there is the puppy-love bragging and posing we find in *Tom Sawyer*. When the "pretty girl of sixteen" visits the pilothouse with her aunt and uncle, both the youthful narrator and another cub pilot vie for her attention. This other cub pilot, like Huck on the raft in chapter 16, dives deep enough during a mishap to keep from being killed by the boat's paddle wheel.

Mark Twain, too, was diving deep into his memories of the Mississippi Valley before the war. As we shall see, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* bears the marks of a number of books he was working on simultaneously, with his usual fits and starts, not just the river books but also *A Tramp Abroad* and *The Prince and the Pauper*. Yet the river had the main hold on his imagination. When he expanded "Old Times" into *Life on the Mississippi*, he was defeated in his effort to recapture the magic of the earlier chapters in the *Atlantic*. In the chapters following the material from "Old Times," he turns his autobiographical tale of youthful aspirations and naiveté into an adult travel book. But the true traveling was to be found in the combination of the river with his past before the age of fifteen, the age at which, he once told the widow of Will Bowen, he would have been happy to have been drowned.⁷

At the time of the preparation of *Life* in 1882, the most important part of that memory was already well under way in the composition of *Huckleberry Finn*. That year he pulled the "raft passage" out of his novel and inserted it in *Life* "by way of illustrating keelboat talk and manners, and that now departed and hardly remembered raft life." It became chapter 3 with the title "Frescos from the Past," signaling the nostalgic nature of the boy's personal history. It is the episode (now officially restored to *Huckleberry Finn*, after the discovery in 1990 of the long-lost first half of the holograph of Twain's novel) in which Huck swims out to a barge full of inebriated raftsmen to discover whether he and Jim have already passed Cairo and thus missed their escape route from slavery up the Ohio River. Written in the tradition of the tall talk of the Old Southwest, this passage features two "prodigious braggarts,"

drunkards who exaggerate their ferocity until a much smaller raftsmen calls their bluff. The raft scene introduces Huck for the first time in his own right and out from under the shadow of Tom Sawyer. It is told in Huck's voice, the same one that will tell the sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, which had been narrated in the third person. Here is Huck's actual debut in American literary history.

The raft scene probably just as well belongs in *Life on the Mississippi*, where it gives one of the more dramatic depictions of river culture, for in *Huckleberry Finn* the passage of more than five thousand words strikes some readers as a digression containing nothing essential to either plot or theme. And while its achievement in depicting the local color of that bygone era is at least equal to that of A. B. Longstreet (in *Georgia Scenes*) or Thomas Bangs Thorpe (in "The Big Bear of Arkansas"), it is also unoriginal in the sense that it follows too rigidly the formulaic structure of the vernacular tales that precede it. Twain warned his publisher to keep it out of the novel's prospectus (a volume of sample chapters that vendors of subscription books carried to potential buyers in the hinterlands), because he feared that including it there might cause the new book to be perceived as a "reprint" of *Life on the Mississippi*. Later, in the effort to slim down *Huckleberry Finn* to make it more of a physical match for *Tom Sawyer*, for which it was advertised as a sequel, the publisher urged that the raft scene be removed from the printer's copy even before typesetting began.⁸

The important point in all this is that the fully formed Huck Finn first surfaced in *Life on the Mississippi*—a story of a general past that gives us our initial glimpse of his personal history, which would become the subject of an American classic. The Huck of the raft scene was first created in the summer of 1876 during the first phase of the composition of *Huckleberry Finn*. Although at the outset he appears to the public as Tom Sawyer's sidekick in *Tom Sawyer*, the true Huck wasn't far behind. But this river rat with a conscience would have to go through several more modifications or transformations, in Twain's other works of this period that served as part of the foreground to *Huckleberry Finn*, before emerging in his own right.