

PART I **Humorist in the West**

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## 1 Life on the Salt River

The author's grandfather Samuel B. Clemens died in a house-raising accident at the age of thirty-five. While pushing a log up an incline, Clemens slipped and it crushed him against a stump. His carelessness, Mark Twain later hinted in *The American Claimant* (1892), may have been "induced by over-plus of sour-mash." Clemens and his wife, Pamela Goggin, had been married for eight years when the tragedy struck in 1805. It happened in Mason County, Virginia (now West Virginia), on the banks of the Ohio River, where the couple lived on two tracts of land covering more than a hundred acres. He was the father of five children, including Twain's father, John Marshall Clemens, the eldest, who was named for Virginia's most famous lawyer and the future chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, whom his parents may once have had the honor of meeting. His widowed mother, Pamela, moved to Kentucky and kept house for a brother. In 1809 she married Simon Hancock, an earlier suitor. Records preserved by Mark Twain himself show that Hancock quietly placed a lien on Samuel B. Clemens's estate for the cost of raising another man's children. This was in Adair County, just north of the Tennessee state line and near Fentress County and the site of the infamous "Tennessee Land" that would begin the Clemens family weakness for get-rich-quick schemes.<sup>1</sup>

John Marshall Clemens, a sensitive and perhaps unhappy lad, grew up with an emotionally distant stepfather after losing the love of his real one at the age of seven. He gradually replaced the memory of his lost father with the myth of Virginia aristocracy and, as an adult, subscribed

to the code of the gentleman who was stiffly dignified in his speech and manner. The type is rather mockingly reflected in a number of Twain's fictional characters, including Colonel Grangerford in *Huckleberry Finn* and Judge York Driscoll and his F.F.V. acquaintances in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, landed gentlemen who exploit soil and (slave) labor. Twain's disgust with such southern chivalry is amply depicted in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, in which Roxy tells her miscegenated son that he had no need to feel ashamed of his black blood because it was mixed with that of Colonel Cecil Burleigh Essex, who was of "de highest quality in dis whole town—Ole Virginny stock, Fust Famblies, he was."<sup>2</sup> John Marshall Clemens may or may not have been a warmer man than the type that Mark Twain portrayed in these novels. In *Following the Equator*, Twain remembered him as "a refined and kindly gentleman" who "laid his hand upon me in punishment only twice in his life." Yet an earlier recollection in chapter 18 of *The Innocents Abroad* describes a boyhood fear of "getting thrashed" for playing hooky. His father also cuffed adolescent slaves from time to time. Whereas young Sam was raised as a Presbyterian by his mother, his father "attended no church and never spoke of religious matters." He was "very grave, rather austere" and, probably because of his essentially fatherless youth, a brooder who was one source of Twain's later pessimism.<sup>3</sup> Much of Mark Twain's brilliant sense of humor derived from his mother's side and the spirit of a Kentucky belle named Jane Lampton (a family name sometimes spelled "Lambton"). The daughter of pioneer stock who had followed Daniel Boone into Kentucky and who were improbably related to royalty in England (the Earls of Durham), this vivacious young woman was known for her dancing and horsemanship. Her marriage to Clemens came about almost by accident. She had fallen in love with a young medical student, but because of a misunderstanding and to save face, in 1823 she abruptly married Clemens, then a legal apprentice.<sup>4</sup>

Mark Twain, arguably the most famous literary artist in the English language after Shakespeare and Dickens, ironically evolved from a sequence of male tragedies or at best disappointments. His father lived ten years longer than his grandfather, but he was hardly as successful, ultimately leading his family through an almost hand-to-mouth existence as one opportunity after another turned to little or nothing.

Marshall Clemens and his wife lived their first two years together

in Columbia, Kentucky, in Adair County. Shortly before the birth of their first child, Orion, in 1825, they moved directly south to Jackson County, Tennessee. The move was apparently sparked by a concern for Marshall's health, which required the cleaner air of the Tennessee highlands and the Cumberland River. This was in Gainesborough, but they soon moved into Fentress County to a little hamlet called Jamestown, which Marshall, now a shopkeeper, envisioned as a future metropolis. But his vision, like that of Twain's Colonel Sellers in *The Gilded Age*, was almost always fatally blurred. It was about this time that he began to purchase what ultimately amounted to seventy-five thousand acres of nearby land for less than a penny an acre. Nearly worthless then (and today) because of its rugged, hilly terrain, it was located south of the town, in the foothills of the Cumberland Mountains. Like Colonel Sellers, John Marshall Clemens hoped, however, that it would eventually become valuable and make the next generation of his family rich. Mark Twain regularly cursed that land and ultimately gave all his rights to it to Orion, who missed out on the few opportunities to sell it at any profit. In the 1880s, Orion and his mother sold it in bits and pieces to various people in the area for virtually nothing. Its only profit for the family came from the use Twain made of it in his works. In *The Gilded Age*, for example, it is the location for a technical school ("Knobs Industrial University") for ex-slaves that Congress is lobbied to finance.<sup>5</sup>

The Clemens family lived in this general area for the next decade. In 1831 they resided in nearby Three Forks of Wolf River, and soon afterward Clemens kept a store and established a post office at Pall Mall.<sup>6</sup> When they moved to Missouri in 1835, the couple had produced four more children and witnessed the death of one. Pamela Ann Clemens was the only one of Orion's siblings born before Sam who would go on to live a full life. Pleasant Hannibal (both names were ancestral) died in either 1828 or 1829 at the age of three months. Margaret Lampton and Benjamin Lampton, born in 1830 and 1832, both died before the age of ten. Henry, born in Missouri in 1838, would meet a tragic end on the river Mark Twain would make famous. The decision to move to Missouri was based on financial need, as this slave-owning family's number of slaves had been reduced from six to a single girl named Jennie. Everything was sold except the worthless Tennessee Land. The family initially returned

to Adair County, where they then took a steamboat down the Ohio River to the Mississippi.

The ultimate destination was Florida, Missouri, some 130 miles northwest of St. Louis. Jane Clemens's father and mother, Benjamin and Margaret Lampton, moved there first along with Jane's younger sister Patsy and her husband, John A. Quarles. Both families purchased government land. Quarles, Sam Clemens's favorite uncle, built a farm four miles outside the town in Monroe County. The Quarles family at the time consisted of eight children and fifteen or twenty slaves, including Aunt Hanner and Uncle Dan'l, the latter one of the prototypes for the slave Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*. Daniel was only three years younger than Quarles, and the two had grown up together in Virginia and Tennessee. Quarles would lose all his slaves and most of his other property in the Civil War, but he freed Uncle Dan'l in 1855.<sup>7</sup>

Very possibly, in the move to Missouri, Marshall and Jane Clemens responded to a letter similar to the one Si and Nancy Hawkins receive in the opening chapter of *The Gilded Age*, which, like the Clemens family relocation, begins in Fentress County and moves to Monroe County: "Come right along to Missouri! Don't wait and worry about a good price but sell out for whatever you can get and come along, or you might be too late." And so this American couple, destined to become the parents of Mark Twain, continued their westward migration, begun initially in Virginia, then passing through Kentucky, and going from Tennessee to the great Mississippi River Valley and the West. The family of now seven briefly considered St. Louis as the place of their next residence, but a cholera epidemic in the city persuaded them to follow their original plan, and so they proceeded higher upriver and considerably inland to the town of Florida, located on a ridge overlooking the north and south forks of the Salt River, which feeds into the Mississippi about ten miles below Hannibal.

Sam Clemens was born in Florida on November 30, 1835. "The village contained a hundred people and I increased the population by 1 per cent," he later joked. "It is more than many of the best men in history could have done for a town. . . . There is no record of a person doing as much—not even Shakespeare."<sup>8</sup> Time, however, has not been kind

to Florida. De Lancey Ferguson in his 1943 biography described it as a down-at-the-heel village. Today Clemens could have made an even bigger splash than he did in 1835. Its population has now dwindled to around nine or ten people, a mere crossroads consisting mainly of shacks and trailers. The racial make-up of this former slave-holding community is 100 percent white. Since 1984 the river area has been flooded to produce a series of lakes that form part of Mark Twain State Park. Somewhat ironically for this great chronicler of the Mississippi, a two-room shack in which he was purportedly born is preserved in its visitors' center because the actual spot of ground on which it originally stood is now under water.

But back then, the future for Florida was promising. The Quarles farm, for example, consisted of over 230 acres. Uncle John also ran a general store in town, and John Marshall Clemens became his partner before he purchased his own store from his father-in-law. Clemens also made several purchases of local land to the east and southeast of Florida and smaller purchases to the north of the town—almost 250 acres in all. By 1837, because of his increasing involvement in the civic affairs of the town and, no doubt, because of his Virginia bearing as a learned gentleman on the frontier with a knowledge of the law, he had become a respected member of the Florida community, though not exactly a prosperous one. The town needed more commerce if shopkeepers like him were to thrive as vigorously as their neighbors thirty-five miles to the east in Hannibal. It was a little too soon for the era of the railroad to make a little place like Florida hum, but there was the chance that the Salt River might be dredged and deepened with a series of locks and dams so that traffic from the Mississippi might include the town as a port for something larger than keels and flatboats. With such improvements, it was hoped, Florida, Missouri, could become a thriving commercial center.

Clemens and other town leaders formed the Salt River Navigation Company to raise federal funds for the dredging project. Senator Dilworthy and Colonel Sellers in *The Gilded Age* try the same thing with Congress, to no avail. The similar failure by Florida's delegates reflected the permanent backwater status of the town, as well as the unrealistic aspirations of Mark Twain's father, who had tried, as they used to say in

Missouri, "to row up Salt River."<sup>9</sup> Or in the phrasing of the state's most famous writer, his hopes had been sold *down* the river once again. Mark Twain had not only begun as the son of a failure but also had been born on the wrong river.

The writer therefore spent his earliest years not on the Mississippi exactly, but on the banks of the Salt River, or at least close by it at the Quarles farm. Although he lived in Hannibal during most of the year after 1839, when his father moved the family there to improve his business prospects, from 1843 to 1846 young Sam spent summers with his aunt and uncle—on a farm that he later moved to the "Creation State" of Arkansas as part of the setting for *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer, Detective*. "It was a heavenly place for a boy, that farm of my uncle John's," he fondly recalled in his autobiography. "The house was a double log one, with a spacious floor (roofed in) connecting it with the kitchen. In the summer the table was set in the middle of that shady and breezy floor, and the sumptuous meals—well, it makes me cry to think of them." This is the farm of Silas and Sally Phelps (Sam's Aunt Patsy, who reappears under her own name in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*) in chapter 33 of *Huckleberry Finn*. Tom and Huck have "dinner out in that broad open passage betwixt the house and the kitchen; and there was things enough on that table for seven families."<sup>10</sup>

It was on the Quarles farm that young Sam developed his "strong liking for the [Negro] race," which formed the basis for Huck's conflicted conscience in helping a fugitive slave. "This feeling and this estimate have stood the test of sixty years and more," he wrote in his autobiography. Yet, as he also remembered, "in my schoolboy days I had no aversion to slavery. I was not aware that there was anything wrong about it. No one arraigned it in my hearing; the local papers said nothing against it; the local pulpit taught us that God approved it, that it was a holy thing, and that the doubter need only look in the Bible if he wished to settle his mind." This view was doubtless reinforced for young Sam and his brother Henry by the devoutly religious nature of his mother and Aunt Patsy Quarles and the fact that the families owned slaves. Moreover, he seldom saw a slave abused on the farm or in town, but added keenly that "if the slaves themselves had an aversion to slavery, they were wise and said nothing."<sup>11</sup>

The Quarles place also makes a brief appearance in "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed," Twain's possibly fictional account about his brief career in a Missouri state militia at the start of the Civil War. Although he declined to enlist in the Confederate army after his state militia unit disbanded, two of his cousins—sons of John A. Quarles—served in the military for the South. Benjamin Quarles was a lieutenant in General Sterling Price's bodyguard, and Fred Quarles served as an officer in General Martin Green's command. Green served under Price during the capture of Lexington, Missouri; so the brothers probably served together more or less, and both survived the Civil War.<sup>12</sup>

Missouri was a border state in the American drama of slavery, and in discussing it in his autobiography, Twain reflects the dubious claim that slavery was relatively benign there. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Jim achieves manumission and presumably lives happily ever after. Yet Twain may reflect a truer picture of the conditions of slaves in Missouri in *Tom Sawyer's Conspiracy*, written almost twenty years later, at the end of the century when the Jim Crow era came to life and black lynchings in the South were mounting. *Tom Sawyer's Conspiracy* brings Miss Watson back to life, and the Duke and the King return from *Huckleberry Finn* as murderers instead of simply river con men. Jim is still free, but only from slavery, not discrimination. He is on trial for murder partly because of a prank Tom and Huck had pulled on a townspeople worried about a threatened invasion of abolitionists from across the river in Quincy, Illinois. Jim's young lawyer is intimidated by the town hatred for a freed slave. This is dramatically reflected in Tom, who "wouldn't be lawyer for a free nigger himself, unless it was Jim," whom he knows to be innocent.<sup>13</sup> In *Huckleberry Finn*, of course, the white man's secret is that Jim is free.

This literary assessment of the southern attitude toward blacks after the Civil War is complemented by the antebellum tragedy of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, in which Roxy, whose mixed race allows her to become Twain's only sexually provocative female, is "as white as anybody, but the one-sixteenth of her which was black out-voted the other fifteen parts and made her a negro."<sup>14</sup> Such democracy for the damned in this miscegenated hell guarantees her destiny as a slave in Dawson's Landing. Here Mark Twain looked back to his childhood and saw not the innocent

charm of small-town life with Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher, but a much darker Hannibal in which even skin color is not always the key to freedom, and getting “engaged,” as the two youngsters do in *Tom Sawyer*, leads to more than innocent kissing.

Like the patriarchs in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, John Quarles and John Marshall Clemens became, despite their conventionally religious wives, freethinkers and Universalists. And while young Sam was somewhat distant from his stolid father, he found his uncle, who was also fond of storytelling, more accessible. “I have not come across a better man than he was,” Mark Twain remembered. “I was his guest for two or three months every year, from the fourth year after we removed to Hannibal till I was eleven or twelve years old.”<sup>15</sup> The seeds of Mark Twain’s fondness for the tall tale as well as his pessimism can probably be traced as far back as Florida, Missouri. Uncle John may have been the first one to tell Sam Clemens the story of the jumping frog. His late-life despair possibly came, then, not only from John Marshall Clemens but also from John Quarles, who also could not reconcile the mystery of human destiny with strict religious dogma. Yet unlike his brother-in-law, Quarles was more successful at submerging this point of view in the gregariousness of town and country life as a shopkeeper, farmer, and even local politico, once serving as a justice of the peace in Monroe County. In *Tom Sawyer, Detective*, however, Twain almost turns Uncle Silas into a murderer.<sup>16</sup> By 1896, when this work was published, the fictional John Quarles has become a brooding, troubled patriarch instead of the sweet part-time preacher who says an extra-long blessing over the vittles. His wife—Sam’s Aunt Patsy—had died in 1850 after giving birth. Quarles himself had died in 1875. By the time Twain wrote the dark sequels to *Huckleberry Finn*, the world had changed for him dramatically. With the sudden death of his first daughter, Susy, in 1896, his past came back to him through a glass darkly. Even A. B. Frost’s illustrations in *Tom Sawyer, Detective*, unlike E. W. Kemble’s in *Huckleberry Finn*, which suggest the innocence of a time gone by, depict Tom and Huck as older than their adolescent conversations would suggest and locate them precariously on the verge of the twentieth century and the dawning of its deterministic philosophy.