

Portrait of a River Town

The Mississippi. For hundreds of years this great muddy river served as a symbolic and physical barrier. As the 1800's began, the river formed the western boundary of the United States. But after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, settlers began crossing the river in greater numbers, and about this same time, the river itself became a route for commerce.

It started with flat boats and keelboats. Floating timber and grain from the northern states down the river to the Gulf of Mexico. But trade was limited. Until in 1811, steamboats were introduced onto the Mississippi, and cargo was able to move upstream as well. Before long, new trading centers were springing up all along the river. In Missouri, river towns like Cape Girardeau, St. Louis and Hannibal prospered as the steamboats came of age.

Early steamboats on the Mississippi had to take great care to avoid running aground on sand bars. The ledsmen, or leadsman job was to measure the depth of the river with a lead weight and continually call it out.

Mark! Twain! Mark 3 means 3 fathoms, which is 18 feet, and that tells a pilot not to worry, anything more than 2 fathoms is safe water. We're approaching the town of Hannibal, about a hundred miles up the river from St. Louis. Founded in 1819, Hannibal came of age as a river town in the 1840's and 50's. We're going to learn about Hannibal in the steam boat age, through the eyes of its most celebrated resident, Samuel Clemens, also known as Mark Twain.

Tom Sawyer, one of the best loved children's stories in the world, was inspired by Clemens's own experience growing up in Hannibal. When the Clemens family arrived in 1839, Sam was just four years old. In those days, everything that happened in Hannibal was connected to the river, and the arrival of a riverboat would have brought the whole town out.

In the 1840's when steamboats arrived in Hannibal, this was a big occasion for the people. You didn't have long distance roads, so anybody traveling any distance traveled by the river. This might be friends coming to visit, it might be new people moving into the community, a minister on his way through to another town...everyone came by the river. In addition to all of these people coming, all of the goods that a community needed came in by river. Whether this be the cloth material for making new clothes, dishes for the table, the hammers and nails that were needed for construction, all of the manufactured goods came in by the river as well. So when the call "steam boat a coming" went out, it was a signal that a lot of activity was to take place on the riverfront. There is an 1847 newspaper account from Hannibal, that describes that during that year there were a 1,020 steamboat arrivals in town. As we have a long dry season where the boats can't navigate the river, this meant that on many of those busy days, there might be as many as 10 to 15 boats arriving in a single day. That account also notes that boats carried away more than a million dollars worth of produce, which is quite a sum for that early in the town's history.

Young Sam was entranced by the river and by the steamboat culture. It's like a shimmering thread running through all his books. You know, we have this one man to thank for giving us such a vivid picture of life in a Mississippi river town. What does that tell you about the study of history?

There are Mark Twain memorials all over Hannibal. Here are his two best-known characters, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Clemens based Tom's character on himself, and Huck's character on his best friend Thomas Blankenship. Many of Tom and Huck's adventures were inspired by real events in the life of Sam Clemens. Come on, let's see some more of the town.

Sam's life in Hannibal was not an easy one. His father, John Clemens, was an entrepreneur, but most of his business ventures failed and he was frequently in debt. In 1846, he was elected justice of the peace, and this was his office.

But soon after that, he died, leaving the family penniless and forcing ten-year-old Sam to go out and learn a trade.

Sam Clemens first worked here in Hannibal as an apprentice typesetter in one of the print shops. As the youngest typesetter he was known as a printer's double, and part of that work involves setting the type for the newspaper. And as one stood in front of the type cases, one had to know where all of the letters were and pick them up one at a time to spell out a word, then add a space between the words, then begin the spelling out of the next word, and so on, until you had the entire story set in type. Well, a few years later, while still in Hannibal, Sam began working for his brother's newspaper. And during that time, he had his first opportunity to put his own writing in print. This started by some very simple news stories, but once while his brother was out of town, this gave him the opportunity to be in charge of the paper and he started a series of stories, describing the antics of a rival news paper reporter who was very unsuccessful, and ended up with an unsuccessful attempt at drowning himself. During this time, his brother's news paper office suffered a fire, and they moved most of the printing equipment here to Mark Twain's boyhood home, and the newspaper was actually put out from the home for a period of time. The Clemens family had moved here when Sam Clemens was about 7 years old, and he lived here through age 17. So these are those growing up years, and many of the escapades that Sam had while living in the house, are the stories that we remember that are so well-illustrated in Tom Sawyer.

This is the bedroom where Sam and his brother Henry slept. In the adventures of Tom Sawyer, Tom would lie awake at night, listening for the sound of a cat. When Tom heard Huck meowing, he'd shimmy down the drainpipe and they'd be off for some all-night adventure up on Cartath Hill, or down by the river. We can only guess as to whether Sam and his friend Tom Blankenship did the same.

Just like the real Sam Clemens, Tom Sawyer was always finding clever ways to work things out the way he wanted. When his Aunt Polly made him white wash the fence as punishment, he first tried to pay one of his friends to do it for him. When that didn't work, he thought of something else. By pretending that painting a fence was about the best thing a boy could want to do on a Saturday afternoon, he managed to trick the other boys into doing all his work for him, and pay him for the privilege.

This is the Mark Twain outdoor theater here in Hannibal, where favorite stories from Tom Sawyer, are performed by a cast including many young actors.

My name is Sarah Miller and I play Mrs. Harper...

My favorite scene is the mommy scene, I get pushed back by Pat Thin...

The favorite scene is the white washing scene...

The steam boat would come in, it would probably be really, real exciting.

I want to camp - on this, it's pretty fun....

I never knew that history could be so fun....

Altogether, there's a cast of 19, including Mark Twain himself.

When I was a boy, there was but one permanent ambition, amongst my comrade in our village on the west bank of the Mississippi river, and that was to become steamboat men.

Steamboat's a comin'! Steamboat's a comin'! Steamboat's a comin'!

As soon as the steamboat was sighted, carts, men, boys, all hurryin' from many corners to a common center, the wharf. Assembled there, the people fastened their eyes upon the boat as the wonder, they are seen for the first time.

Hoonnk!

In 1857, at the age of 21, Samuel Clemens boarded a river boat and set off for Brazil. But he never made it. Instead, he achieved his boyhood ambition and started an apprenticeship as a river boat pilot. Were it not for the outbreak of the Civil War, he might have been a pilot all his life instead of a writer, and the knowledge of our Missouri heritage would have been poorer for it. Oh yeah—and the reason he chose Mark Twain as his pen name?

Mark! Twain! Means two fathoms, or 12 feet, a welcome sound for any pilot.

Mark! Twain!