

# WHITE TOWN BROWSING

Perusing Mark Twain's legacy  
in his boyhood hometown

These things may be true.  
They may not be true. But  
they are interesting. That is  
the main requirement in a  
village like that.

—MARK TWAIN, SPEAKING OF HANNIBAL, MO

It's the witching hour in Hannibal, Missouri, and down by the levees, a freight train is passing through town. The whining *skree* of its brakes dissolve ghostly harmonics across town that sound like someone bowing a saw or rimming a champagne flute with a wet finger.

The stroke of midnight rings-in what would have been the 175th birthday of Hannibal's most treasured native son, Samuel Langhorne Clemens—known to the world by his *nom de plume*, Mark Twain. It's been a banner year for the local-boy-made-good. The year 2010 marked 100 years since his death, officially green lighting the publication of *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, thus lifting the century-old moratorium Twain imposed so that, while composing it, he was free to shoot from the hip and “draw a man without prejudice” and “have no fear of hurting his feelings or

those of his sons or grandsons.”

As a boy, the hypnotists and charlatans who stepped off the steamboats and bewitched jaw-dropped crowds with their hocus-pocus mesmerized the young Twain—so much, that he would take to the stage as a volunteer subject and get in on the hoodwink. It was here, on the snake-oiled stage, where Twain first enchanted crowds and sank his teeth into pantomime's sweet reward, publicly revealing his imaginative gift for fabrication and showmanship.

Just like those slippery ringmasters, capable of bending one's disbelief in the supernatural, there lingers in the publication of Twain's beyond-the-grave missive faint chimerical vapors of a man returning from the dead.

Perchance he do just that, and take a knobby, paranormal stroll in his white suit down the cold November streets of his hometown to revisit some old haunts and see what all the fuss is about, I've chosen an appropriate place to bunk-down for the night should Mr. Twain appear.

Tonight, I am sleeping on the second floor, above the viewing parlors at the James O'Donnell Funeral Home in Hannibal. With me, I have Twain's autobiographical tome, and I intend to spend this blustery night absorbing his words and any phenomenon that may or may not happen.

Earlier today, James O'Donnell (who goes by Jim) met me at a coffee shop on Main Street. Jim is a married man, father-to-be in his mid-thirties and with his wholesome boyish features, freckles and red hair parted to the side, you could swear you saw him once

in a Norman Rockwell painting. He's a fifth generation funeral director and his family has been in the business since the late-1800s when his great-Irish-uncles came to Hannibal, a town Twain once referred to as "the white town drowsing." In 1901, his great uncles purchased what was then a two story, Italianate brick mansion on "millionaires' row" from the Cruikshank family, the opulent lumber barons of Hannibal. Save for a few additions the funeral home looks structurally much like it did over the last century and with its trimmed hedges and coat of white paint it resembles a block of wedding cake.

Though Twain's corpse never passed through the O'Donnell Funeral Home, those of many honorable, if not quirky, Hannibalians have. In a sideshowish yarn, certainly reminiscent of Mr. Twain's more exaggerated fish stories, Jim O'Donnell spun an anecdote that he swears is no tall tale.

"At one time Hannibal was home to the fattest man in the world. Dad told me that my great grandpa would haul him around in his old pick-up truck when he needed to get from point A to point B. And of course, the story goes that he was buried in a piano case."

While given the funeral home's royal tour, save for the obvious off-limit rooms in the basement I dared not ask to see, Jim pointed to a photograph of a painting and said, "That's her." In the picture, a towering woman looms over her much shorter mother.

Earlier, Jim explained in his soothing, flat Missouri drawl, "At the funeral home, we've got a picture of this woman, and I don't know how she's related to us, but at one time she was the tallest woman in the world—seven foot eight and a half. I've yet to find it, but supposedly we have one of her shoes on the third floor of the funeral home."

The third floor was Jim's great aunt's domain as a child. To this day, those rooms remain eerily untouched, with its dusty threadbare quilts, rickety furniture and antique radio now heirlooms frozen in time.

"My great aunt Helen insisted that it be left just the way it was in her childhood, same as it was in the 1920s and 1930s. We don't want to piss her off, so we leave it be."

Sandwiched between aunt Helen's vintage boudoir, the basement embalming rooms and the empty parlors a floor below, I'm staying put tonight, here on the second floor—Jim's office, where there are books such as *Death*

*to Dust: What Happens to Dead Bodies* and a small statue of Anubis, the black-jackal headed Egyptian god associated with mummification.

While swan diving into *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, the hiss of the steam pipes spook me, as does Old Glory writhing and clanging on the flagpole outside, and every so often, I look over my shoulder, just to make sure I'm alone.

For years Twain's distaste for the yawning, vanilla confines of predictable cradle-to-grave narrative riddled his autobiographical attempts with hiccups. The correct way to pen an autobiography, he said, "was to start at no particular time in your life; wander at your free will all over your life; talk only about the thing which interests you for the moment" and "drop it the moment its interest threatens to pale..."

While bucking the shackles, he even managed to shake free of the pen. "With a pen in the hand," he states, "the narrative stream is a canal; it moves slowly, smoothly, decorously, sleepily, it has no blemish except that it is all blemish."

Most of his autobiography is dictated, in a manner more suited to Twain's flow. What springs forth from the pages are the words of a leisurely man talking directly to you, as his mind's river flows over every pebble at every bend at every switchback. You can picture Twain orating across the room, pacing near the hearth, thumb in belt-loop, smoking a cigar and following tangents as if they were dandelion seeds drifting in the wind. The effect is uncanny and I find myself laughing out loud.

Into the wee hours Twain regales me with tales of near drowning, dueling in Nevada's mining country and feigning injury to woo his wife. He saves his most lacerating words for critics, lawless railroad tycoons and the "uniformed assassins" in the U.S. military, as well as capitalist, Christian America whom he calls "nothing but a shell, a sham, a hypocrisy" that has forgotten its "ancient sympathy with oppressed peoples struggling for life and liberty." Contemporary and relevant, it's no stretch to say Twain's political views would have clashed with today's Fox News acolytes. He says, "oftener than otherwise what the general body of Americans regarded as the patriotic course was not in accordance with my views."

It's drafty here in the funeral home and I have a busy day ahead of me, so I should get some shut-eye. Twain's ghost has yet

to come-a-knockin' so I layer-up with long underwear and skull cap and curl-up in the fetal position under a mound of blankets on Jim's leather couch. A shiver ripples down my spine as I turn off the last light in the funeral home. Falling asleep, I have vaguely Asian dreams of fleeing erupting volcanoes, only to find that as it burns holes in my T-shirt, the lava feels pleasant like bathwater. "That mass of him is hidden—it and its volcanic fires that toss and boil, and never rest, night nor day. These are his life, and they are not written, and cannot be written." I read this quote the next morning. Maybe Twain *did* pay me visit. After all, he was a fond gondolier in the canals of dreamland.

I was always heedless. I was born heedless; and therefore I was constantly, and quite unconsciously, committing breaches of the minor properties, which brought upon me humiliations which ought to have humiliated me but didn't.

—MARK TWAIN

It's the following night, an hour before the celebrity gala at the Mark Twain Museum. My press credentials did not win me an invitation to the private, donor-only dinner party. Therefore, in these lean times, I'm eating leftovers out of a Styrofoam box while parked along the banks of the Mississippi. The heater in my old-nag of a truck is blasting, but the remnants of my morning biscuits and gravy are jellied and cold. Should they belong to squad cars, the headlights in the rear-view mirror have me on edge, looking over my shoulder. How could any cop take me seriously as a writer while parked down by the river, eating cold leftovers in a rusted truck strewn with dirty clothes and empty coffee mugs?

To pocket more local color, earlier today, in his chamber, I visited the Honorable Judge Robert Clayton, a Hannibalian who occasionally moonlights as a Twain impersonator. After thirteen years of sitting on the bench, he is retiring next month, and it showed in his wry, jocular spirit. He chuckled while amusing me with the Tom Sawyerish hijinks of his youth.

**SAVE THE DATES FOR THESE PROGRAMS OPEN TO ALL**

**FRIDAY, JANUARY 14, 7-9pm**

*Common Ground's Jim Kenney:*

**ANATOMY OF A WIKILEAK**

What should we think of Julian Assange? Is the Wikileaks phenomenon a cultural positive or a global negative? What is a Wiki? And how does Wikileaks work? Transparency? Security? Journalism? Espionage? And what does it mean to live in an age of Internet insecurity? Join Common Ground's Jim Kenney for some answers to these questions.

**FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 7-9pm:**

*Common Ground's Ron Miller:*

**THE AMBIGUITY OF ATHEISM**

What exactly is the essence of this multi-form proclamation of non-faith called "atheism"? And how can a person of faith engage in a meaningful dialogue with this protean non-creed so prevalent in current books and conversations? These questions will guide our discussion.

**FRIDAY, MARCH 11, 7-9pm:**

*Common Ground's Jim Kenney:*

**EINSTEIN'S OPPONENTS**

Today, the Theory of Relativity—along with Quantum Mechanics—is the essential substrate of modern theoretical physics. But when Einstein first took the world stage, he had many resolute detractors. Researcher Milena Wazeck (NYU) has recently published a comprehensive study—"Einstein's Gegner" ("Einstein's Opponents")—of the anti-relativity group that was active in the 1920s and of one of its most outspoken members, the physicist Ernst Gehrcke. It's a fascinating story, particularly in light of the parallels between the tactics of those who denied Einstein's theory in the '20s and those of creationists and climate-change skeptics in our own time.

Programs are held on 2nd floor (James Parlor) at 77 W. Washington St., Chicago. Refreshments. Doors open at 6 pm, programs begin promptly at 7 pm.

**SWEDENBORG LIBRARY**  
77 W. Washington St. Room 1700  
Chicago, IL 60602 (312) 346-7003  
SwedenborgLib.org

"When I was about 15 or 16 and we heard a beer distributor had dumped a load of beer into the river because it had spoiled and they couldn't sell it. My friends and I took my dad's runabout on the river and dropped anchor. Three of us dove in about 15 feet of water, and retrieved about 100 cans of this beer. And it was absolutely the worst, spoiled stuff."

Clayton is most proud of the 35 years he spent in Hannibal practicing law. In days before the public defender system, part of his obligation was to accept criminal appointments without compensation, often representing colorful characters. Once he lawyered an alleged hooker's murder charge down to a seven-year manslaughter sentence.

"The judge told that girl, 'You should be thankful for what your attorney has done for you.' And she said, 'Judge if you'll let me take him into the jury room for a couple hours I'll show him just how thankful I am.'" The judge

**Biographies are but the clothes and buttons of the man—the biography of the man himself can never be written.**

—MARK TWAIN

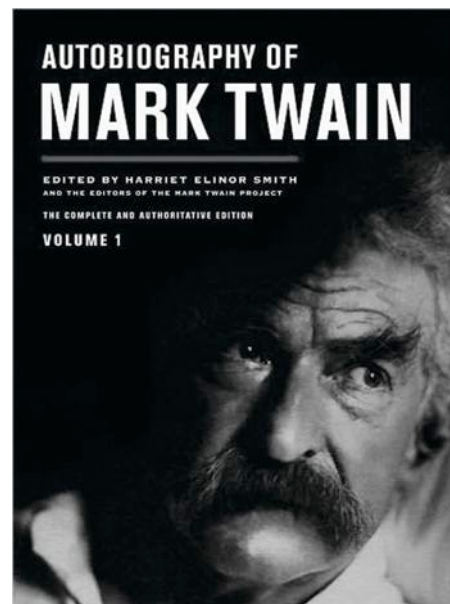
turned red as a summer strawberry.

Time to don my thrift store suit for the gala. I have no place to properly change, so I strip down in a public restroom across from the restaurant where the private dinner is being held. In the windows are the warm silhouettes of well-fed donors.

Dumpsters and the wooden, back-alley balconies of Main Street buildings flank the men's room. It's not hard to imagine harlots of the 19th century in flowing robes, bathed in red light, dangling over those verandas and luring river-men from the warf.

In the back stall of the men's room, while standing pantless in my stocking-feet, I hear a click and everything goes dark. To activate the motion sensor, I open the stall and flail my arms around like a monkey on-fire, and the lights jump back to life. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Plaid boxer shorts, pale chicken legs and mismatched socks. I shake my head, again wondering how I could explain myself should an officer drop by to relieve himself while making his rounds.

Once suited and zipped-up, there's time to kill, so I grab a drink across from the Mark Twain Museum, at a bar appropriately named Rumor Has It. The limousines that have been curbing-up to the museum all night have kept the barflies busy spinning the rumor mill with reckless abandon. Clint



Eastwood, Jimmy Buffet, Garrison Keillor, Brad Paisley, Allison Krauss—all rumored to be stepping out of a limo, any minute now. These names, at least, make sense. They all have lent their voices to the Mark Twain Legacy Album, an homage to Twain in word and song, produced by Grammy-Award winner Carl Jackson whose tracks I'll be listening to momentarily. But rumors of a Christina Aguilera arrival? Of all the grapevine whoppers I've heard over the last 24 hours, that one, most ridiculously, beats all.

The limousines have convinced me an open collar just won't do, so I pull a necktie out of my jacket pocket. While knotting it in the bar mirror, a man next to me slurs, "Ya goin' to th'parrrty? Howja git 'nvited?"

Errantly, I tell him I'm writing a story for a Chicago magazine.

"Chicago!" he says, wrinkling his brow. "That mean ya voted fer Obama?"

"No," I say. "I couldn't vote at the time. Felony tax evasion."

I don't know what came over me, but I felt moved to deal the man a fib. Chalk it up to that wily prankster Mark Twain who once said, "I would rather tell seven lies than make one explanation."

Besides, my lie floated on deaf ears. The moment it left my mouth, the man lit a cigarette, ordered another drink and resumed his conversation with the pregnant woman sitting next to him.

*Nic Halverson is a freelance writer and Indiana native currently based at the end of a gravel road in Columbia, MO.*

Read more about Nic's adventures in Hannibal, MO! online at: [mindfulmetropolis.com/blog](http://mindfulmetropolis.com/blog)