

The American Wordsmith

By Donna Bishop

Samuel L Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, was born in 1835 and grew up along the banks of the Mississippi River in the small town of Hannibal, Missouri. Sam's boyhood experiences were filled with the excitement of living in a bustling river town with the daily arrival of steamboats. His father died when Sam was 12 years old, ending his formal education. Sam found work as an apprentice printer at the Hannibal Courier. At the age of 15 he got a job as a printer and occasional writer and editor of a little newspaper. This early employment exposed Sam to a delight in words and the usage of words to express thoughts, and to entertain, to inspire and to persuade readers.

At age 21 Sam left the world of words to fulfill a childhood dream to become a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River. He loved this new career and successfully navigated the river for four years until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. He was young and needed money quickly so he heading West certain he could strike it rich prospecting for silver or gold. Neither panned out! Desperate for a regular job he became a reporter for a newspaper, the Virginia City Territorial Enterprise. It was during this time Sam adopted the pen name Mark Twain. This term was used by steamboat pilots. A twain is twelve feet which marked the depth of water that was safe for a steamboat to navigate.

Mark Twain became one of the best-know storytellers in the West. His distinctive writing style was friendly, funny, irreverent and often satirical. In 1867 he took a Mediterranean cruise and submitted humorous stories about his travels to newspapers throughout the country. These were later published as the bestseller, *The Innocents Abroad*.

Twain moved to New York and married. He set about the task of earning a lot of money through his writings and business endeavors. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was published and work started on a sequel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. These books are considered major classics of American literature. Twain made large sums of money but also lived a lavish lifestyle that ended in bankruptcy. He used his celebrity status to book a worldwide speaking tour to raise funds to satisfy his debts.

Many of his satirical words that entertained his audiences over 100 years ago remain relevant such as: "If voting made any difference they wouldn't let us do it." "Of all the things I have lost I miss my mind the most." "We have the best government money can buy." "Suppose you were an idiot and suppose you were a member of Congress. But then I repeat myself." "Actions speak louder than words but not nearly as often." His words of wisdom still carry truths: "Life is short, break the rules. Forgive quickly, kiss slowly. Love truly. Laugh uncontrollably and never regret anything that makes you smile."