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Having absolutely nothing to do recently, I found myself aimlessly wandering through the 1,321 pages of *Mark Twain's Notebooks and Diaries* (1865-1888).

It was an enlightening experience.

Twain (a.k.a. Samuel Clemens), if alive today, would probably be hosting *The Tonight Show*. Mark Twain was an interesting combination of Groucho Marx, W.C. Fields and Jerry Seinfeld. Picture that! He was a genius comic who loved to make people laugh. It was said about Twain that he wrote "vigorous masculine journalism." I think that about fits him. He certainly knew enough swear words, drank enough

whiskey, played enough cards, smoked enough "seegars" and hung around with his cronies enough to have a rough edge. But, he was also very bright and he knew well how to temper his humor to his audience.

Samuel Clemens was born in 1835. In 1859, he became a pilot on the Mississippi River. This experience plus his years spent in California's Gold Country were to color his writings for life. In 1863, he began writing sketches for the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*. Twain had not struck it rich in the mines and eventually rode down to San Francisco to become a reporter for the *San Francisco Call* at \$40 per week.

He would later label this job as "a fearful drudgery, des-



Mark Twain aboard ship

STORIES FROM THE PAST

Mark Twain: A Commentary

by History Editor Skip Sommer

titute of interest." He lasted less than a year, then left for the sanctuary of "Jackass Hill", a sylvan paradise in the Sierra Foothills owned by an old crone of his who "took in" writers and artists. He "wrote some, drank some, mined some and traveled some." He visited Calaveras County and Angels Camp, later to be very important in his first literary success.

Mark Twain caught the travel bug in a big way. Much of his life was spent touring the world and writing about it. He was easily bored and constantly needed to find new stories to tell. While he traveled, Twain wrote for many newspapers and magazines. He also wrote his novels. But he never forgot Virginia City and, for many years, would send articles back to the *Territorial Enterprise*.

Twain's "Tim Smiley and His Jumping Frog" (later to become "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County") was written in 1867 and sent to the *New York Saturday Press*. It was widely reprinted and caused a demand for more from the fledgling writer. Twain loved the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) and returned there many times. His first trip was in 1866 aboard the steamer Ajax - twelve days over and twelve days back.

Here are some excerpts from Mark Twain's notebooks about his early travels:

On the trip to Hawaii, Twain was served a meal he didn't like: "There's only one dish meaner than stewed chicken and that's grasshopper pie," he wrote. His comment on an amorous fellow traveler: "Her breath was so sweet, it rotted her teeth." On the French: "An isolated and helpless girl is perfectly safe from a Frenchman, if he is dead."

Twain became an admirer of Hawaiian lifestyles

and commented on the royal funeral of one Princess Victoria Kamama Lu, whom he described as "a buxom royal princess, whose 36 splendidly-built male attendants boasted that she kept all of them busy and that, several times, more than one would have to charge for overtime."

Regarding Hawaiian Villages: "All small villages are gossipy. They only accused me of murder, arson, highway robbery and some other little eccentricities."

Twain, who never refused a drink "under any circumstances," commented to his publisher about genius: "It consists of a peculiar mental organization which enables a man to dash off weird, wild, incomprehensible poems with astonishing facility and then prompts him to go and get howling, booming drunk and sleep in the gutter. It is probably on account of this, that people who have genius do not pay their rent - as a general thing."

The above was not a self-analysis. Twain was very careful about finances and, generally, careful about his public persona. But, he was well acquainted with genius through his incredibly wide circle of friends. Regarding his own frustrated moments, Twain wrote: "Nobody knows better than I, that there are times when swearing cannot fully meet the emergency." Twain always returned to his beloved California and his old cronies. One of his pals was an Episcopalian priest. About him,

Twain penned: "Preachers are always pleasant company, when they're off-duty."

He also sent to the N.Y. papers: "There are more bald men in California than anywhere else, young or old."

Mark Twain had many great friends of high office and reputation. He also treasured his friends in the arts. He was "an affable, likable gentleman rogue," one columnist wrote. Twain wrote to his good friend, Bret Flute, in 1867, "the frog sketch was published in N.Y. When I return, I'll give you an autograph copy to pisen the children with."

In Italy: "No right Christian can smoke an Italian cigar. Only the wrappers are grown. The insides are stubs collected on the pavement."

Regarding Tintoretto's masterpiece oil painting "Paradise": "This is a 3-acre picture of Saturday night in Heaven. Now, this is MY idea of Heaven - everybody at work. There is not a reposeful figure in the entire 10,000."

We can only hope that the masterpiece named Mark Twain, who went on to write great classic American novels that still provide great joy, has found his "idea of Heaven." We need more Twains, Will Rogers', Doonesburys and Johnny Carsons to lighten up this regularly dreary life. Chill out and smile a bit! It can't hurt much. A good belly laugh can cure a lot of ills. (For that matter, a good belly can cure a lot of ills).

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