



MARK TWAIN'S RIBBETING TALE

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Mark Twain had spent years as a printer and as a newspaper reporter. But his first real success as a writer — the story that brought him national attention — was the tale of a champion jumping frog that, for some reason, wouldn't jump when money was at stake.

The story known then as “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog” was published on Nov. 18, 1865 — 160 years ago — in the New York Saturday Press and soon spread to other magazines and newspapers.

SAMUEL CLEMENS' EARLY YEARS

NOV. 30, 1835

Samuel Clemens is born in Florida, Missouri, two weeks after Halley's comet makes its closest approach to the sun. He's born two months premature and would be sickly and frail until age 7.

1839

The Clemens family and their seven children — including Samuel — move to Hannibal, Missouri.

1847

Samuel's father dies of pneumonia. Samuel, age 12, quits school and becomes a printer's apprentice.



Clemens in 1850

JUNE 1853

Samuel leaves Hannibal as a journeyman printer. Over the next few years, Clemens works briefly in St. Louis, Philadelphia, New York and Washington, D.C. He occasionally writes satirical articles for publication.

APRIL 1857

Clemens begins training as a Mississippi River steamboat pilot. He earns his river pilot's license two years later.



A typical river steamboat

1861

The start of the Civil War ends Clemens' steamboat career. He joins a Confederate militia, which breaks up two weeks later when word comes that Ulysses S. Grant and his army is approaching. Clemens travels via stagecoach to Nevada with his brother, Orion, to try prospecting.

MARK TWAIN AND HIS NEWSPAPER CAREER

FEB. 1863

Finding no luck at prospecting, Clemens finds work as a reporter for the Virginia City, Nevada, Territorial Enterprise. He begins using the pen name “Mark Twain,” which is river pilot talk for water two fathoms or 12 feet deep — enough to safely navigate.

1864

Twain challenges another reporter to a duel, has second thoughts and abruptly leaves Virginia City. He moves to San Francisco and begins working for the Morning Call newspaper.

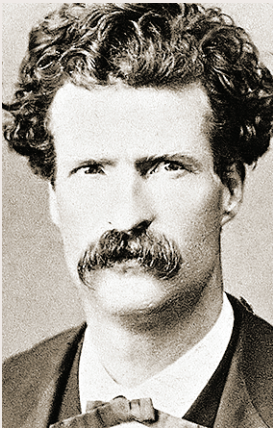
1865

A bartender at the Angels Hotel in Angels Camp, California, tells Twain about a legend about a gambler who loses a \$40 bet — that would be \$800 in today's dollars — that his champion jumping frog can jump further than another man's frog.

Twain promises the story, “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog,” to a friend for inclusion in a book but works so long writing and rewriting the story that he misses the



The Angels Hotel in Angels Camp, California



Twain in 1870

errors of grammar and deadly inconsistencies of spelling in the Frog sketch because I did not read the proofs.”

“I never had but two powerful ambitions in my life,” Twain later wrote to his brother. “One was to be a (riverboat) pilot, and the other a preacher of the gospel. I accomplished the one and failed in the other, because I could not supply myself with the necessary stock in trade — i.e. religion.

“But I have had a ‘call’ to literature, of a low order — i.e. humorous,” he continued. “It is nothing to be proud of, but it is my strongest suit.”

Twain would go on to write such classics as “Roughing it” in 1872, “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” in 1876, “The Prince and the Pauper” in 1881, “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” in 1884, “A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court” in 1889, and “Pudd'nhead Wilson” in 1894.

Twain died in 1910 at age 74, the way he had predicted he would: during a close approach from Halley's Comet.

deadline. His friend instead sends it to the New York Saturday Press, where the story causes a sensation.

Twain updates the story for the San Francisco Californian newspaper, changing Smiley's name to Greeley and changing the title to “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” The Californian publishes it on Dec. 16, 1865.

1866

The Sacramento Union newspaper sends Twain to the Sandwich

Islands in the Pacific. When he returns, he begins speaking on the lecture circuit.

1867

Twain travels to Europe and the Middle East to report for the San Francisco Alta California newspaper.

That May, his first collection of short stories — “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches” — is published. Twain later complains the book was “full of damnable

YOU (AND YOUR FROG) CAN ACTUALLY COMPETE

Thanks to Twain's short story, frog jumping contests have become a thing in a number of locations around the country — but especially in Angels Camp, California, about halfway between San Francisco and Lake Tahoe, Nevada.

The Jumping Frog Jubilee has been held

annually since 1926 and is part of the Calaveras County Fair. Frog owners enter their hoppy little friends over four days of competition in hopes of winning a \$750 prize.

If their frog breaks the record job — 21 feet, 5.75 inches, set by Rosie the Ribiter in 1986 — they get \$5,000.



A contestant in the Calaveras County Jumping Frog Jubilee

“Did you know you can't train a frog?,” asks the event organizers' web site. “That's right! It's up to contestant frog jockeys to learn what the frog needs to be able to go the distance.

“Each contestant will place their frog on the starting lily pad and sing, leap, dance, whistle, stomp, yell, or

blow to get their frog to begin jumping — but whatever you do, remember that in order to qualify, once your frog is on the starting lily pad, you cannot touch the frog.”

The frog jumping contest draws between 30,000 and 50,000 visitors from around the world, organizers say.