

Mark Twain's Celebrated Missouri Hometown is Jumping Again May 6, 2010

It's a fine day to be on the Mississippi River. The water is calm. The weather is mild. And David and Ellen Grewe of St. Peters, Mo., are taking it all in from the top deck of the Mark Twain Riverboat. What brought them here?

"Twain nut," David says, jerking a thumb toward his wife.

Indeed. Ellen, who lives two hours away and has no other reason to visit, save for the love of Mark Twain, has been to Hannibal 30-odd times.

"She never gets tired of it," David says. "We've got Twain's picture hanging up at home. It's like he's part of the family."

Grewe has nothing on Cindy Lovell, a self-described "Twainiac," who quit her tenured professor position in Florida and moved to Hannibal three years ago to immerse herself in the real-life settings that figured in some of the author's most popular tales. Or Richard Garey, a 30-year Twain impersonator, who at the moment is leaning on the white picket fence outside the author's boyhood home, his ice cream suit impeccable, his bushy white hair stiff with hairspray. Or Jim Waddell, who channels Twain at the Mark Twain Cave just south of town. Or the visitor from India who broke down and cried, saying he hadn't expected scenes from Twain's stories to appear before his eyes. Or even less emotional fans who still regard a visit to the childhood home of Mark Twain (born Samuel Clemens) as a pilgrimage. A century after his death, Twain's humor and pathos still resonate.

"People think we're a little odd to be so impassioned. But what he wrote is timeless," says Lovell, who after her move here became executive director of the Mark Twain Boyhood Home & Museum. "I see people in the streets speaking different languages and I ask why they're here, and they didn't come to go to Disney World, they came for Hannibal. As a Twainiac, I get that."

A landmark year for Twain fans. This is a big year for Twainics and casual fans alike. With 2010 marking the centennial of Twain's death and the 175th anniversary of his birth, a number of locales that figured in his life, from Lake Tahoe, Nev., to Hartford, Conn., are staging tributes. But the Twain 2010 epicenter is arguably Hannibal, the inspiration for the idyllic river town of St. Petersburg in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Real-life places incorporated into the stories include Tom Sawyer's house (the Clemens family home); the homes of childhood friends who inspired the Huck Finn and Becky Thatcher characters; the cave that has come to be known as Mark Twain Cave; Glascock's Island (called Jackson's Island in *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn*) and Cardiff Hill.



IF YOU GO

Getting there: Hannibal, Mo., is 117 miles north of St. Louis.

Where to stay: Numerous mid-level chain lodgings are located outside the historic downtown area. For a close-in spot, try the newly renovated Best Western on the River. Rooms have refrigerators and microwaves and there's an indoor pool. Rates: about \$89, double, with breakfast. 800-937-8376; bestwestern.com.

Where to eat: The Mark Twain Dinette is known for its pork tenderloin, onion rings and homemade root beer; (lunch specials, \$5.99). For pizza and pasta, try the Brick Oven (entrees: \$7-\$16). Lula Belle's, housed in a riverside 1917 bordello, has a wide selection of dinner entrees (\$15-\$23).

Don't miss: Many visitors check out the exteriors of Twain-related buildings, pose for photos and move on. But it's well worth the \$9 (\$5, ages 6-12) admission to the eight buildings that constitute the Mark Twain Boyhood Home & Museum. They include the original Clemens family home (a fundraising project allows visitors and online contributors to sign the fence there - a sort of symbolic whitewashing - for \$10 each); a visitor center; Huckleberry Finn's (or the character he was modeled on) re-constructed cabin; and an excellent museum that re-creates three-dimensional scenarios from some of his most popular works. (For a live view of the boyhood home: earthcam.com/marktwain.) 573-221-9010; marktwainmuseum.org.

The Mark Twain Riverboat gets you out on the Mississippi River for a narrated one-hour tour (\$14 adults; \$11, ages 5-12). Dinner cruises with live entertainment are \$36.95 for adults; \$21.95 for children. 573-221-3222; marktwainriverboat.com.

Hannibal's historic downtown is compact and walkable but it's fun to climb aboard Glen Yoder's horse-drawn Mark Twain Clopper (usually parked near the boyhood home) for a guided tour. \$5 adults; \$2.50 children. 573-248-4514

"It's a wonder (Hannibal) didn't change its name to St. Petersburg," Lovell says. "People who love Twain and come here don't see the cars and the power lines. They see St. Petersburg. It's a town that can't tell fact from fiction, and we like it that way."

Hannibal has seen its fortunes rise and fall. In the 1860s it was Missouri's third-leading commercial center. Lumber mills, shoemaking and the railroad were thriving. Its historic downtown is full of wonderfully ornate buildings that testify to that earlier affluence. But some notable floods and the arrival of Wal-Mart in 1994 drove businesses elsewhere. Today, shops selling secondhand goods, and collectibles make up a good portion of retail offerings. But in recent years, new residents and business owners have trickled in, rehabbing old buildings into restaurants, galleries and loft apartments. Thanks to Twain's legacy, Hannibal was destined never to become just another down-on-its-luck river town.

Tourists began arriving shortly after the publication of Tom Sawyer in 1876. Guided tours of the cave commenced in 1886. The Hotel Mark Twain opened in 1905. Empty for years, it's now senior housing. His boyhood home became a museum in 1912. Eight buildings, most of them clustered along a pedestrian-only street a block from the river, make up the Mark Twain Boyhood Home & Museum complex. An excellent two-story museum nearby on Main Street re-creates scenes from Twain's most popular works. Twain immortalized Hannibal, and Hannibal is happy to reciprocate.

"You can't swing a dead cat in Hannibal without hitting something to do with Mark Twain," Lovell is telling an audience gathered outside his home on April 21, 100 years after his death.

The author's image is hard to escape. That might be an understatement. There's the Huck Finn Shopping Center, the Mark Twain Motor Inn and the Mark Twain Dinette, the Injun Joe Campground and Sawyer's Fun Park, to name a few. The author's larger-than-life mug adorns Coke and Pepsi machines. Five sets of fishing-pole-toting Toms and bonnet-wearing Beckys greet downtown visitors. (Though the point is lost on some. "I went up to this man to start a conversation and he gave me a quarter and told me to leave him alone," recounts Lijah Harrison, 15.) And Twain's spirit is evoked on trolley, horse-drawn wagon and riverboat tours.

Steven Terry, captain of the Mark Twain Riverboat, maneuvers his vessel past Glascock's Island and invites passengers to "believe Huck and Tom are out there somewhere."

But even Terry isn't certain what Twain would make of all the fuss: "I think there are times he'd be really excited, and other times I think he'd shake his head."

Lovell believes Twain would revel in the attention.

"Some people come and say, 'What a tourist trap.' But this is a heavenly place. And I think Mark Twain would have been thrilled to see his image on a Pepsi machine."

UCLA professor emeritus Tom Wortham is inclined to agree. Twain was commercially astute, trademarking his name in 1905, and in 1908, posed for an Oldsmobile ad, notes Wortham, who is writing a book about the effects of commercialization on the reading of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. But like others, Wortham has been critical of the town's Disneyfied portrayal of Twain and its failure to present more serious issues, such as race. Recently, though, there's been an effort to broaden the portrayal. A 2006 exhibit in the Huck Finn house explores slavery, and an exhibit opening in June will tell the story of slaves in the Clemens home.

"Mark Twain wrote great literature, but he also pleased audiences enough to make himself rich. So I don't think he would disapprove that Hannibal is making money off him," says Wortham. "He just might be a bit upset that he isn't getting any of it."