



The American Frontier

The longest river in the United States is the Mississippi river which flows from the north, near the Canadian border, to the south, into the Gulf of Mexico. It crosses the middle of the country and practically divides it in half.

The United States had been settled as far as the Mississippi River by the middle of the 19th century. Still, after the Civil War, the region beyond the Mississippi River was yet to be settled. Thus, the Far West was in fact the last frontier to be explored.

The Indians who were originally from the east had been pushed into the region west of the Mississippi while their lands to the east of the Mississippi were occupied or purchased by the American government for small prices. The first white men to enter the extensive plains of the far West were farmers, ranchers and prospectors looking for precious metals such as gold and silver.

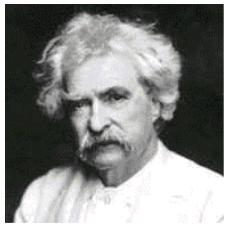
Settlers grazed and fattened their cattle on extensive portions of land of the fertile plains and the cattle was tended and led across the plains by cowboys. The territory across which the cattle were led to feed was the last land in America in which the Indians could live. But they did not accept the incursion peacefully. The Indians charged the cowboys and their herds in conflicts which came to be known as the epic conflicts of the American West.

The land to the West was coarse and rugged. The towns were rudimentary and many times lawless. Cowboys came into the towns wearing guns, joined by truculent miners with dreams of striking it rich, astute gamblers, and prostitutes.

But the towns also attracted lawyers, doctors and small businessmen, as well as the families of ranchers and farmers who contributed for the towns to grow and turn into cities, fully integrated into the country. Nevertheless, the American frontier preserved the tradition of violence which has always been a trait of American frontiers and which still characterizes the American way of life even today.

Humor was one of the few things which relieved the crudity and brutality of the Western frontier. Frontiersmen enjoyed the exaggerated and extravagant type of humor. They appreciated stories about cunning scoundrels who would persuade the dwellers of a small western town to believe in some outrageous tale, or a story in which a humble cowhand would deceive a wealthy doctor from the East. The writers of these stories became extremely popular. Among the most successful of these authors was Samuel Langhorne Clemens whose penname was Mark Twain.

Mark Twain (1835 ~ 1910)



Samuel Langhorne Clemens
Culver Pictures

Born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in Florida, Missouri, he moved with his family to Hannibal, Missouri, a port on the Mississippi River, when he was four years old. There he received a public school education. After the death of his father in 1847, Clemens was apprenticed to two Hannibal printers, and in 1851 he began setting type for and contributing sketches to his brother Orion's Hannibal Journal. Later Clemens became a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River until the American Civil War brought an end to travel on the river. In 1861 Clemens served briefly as a volunteer soldier in the Confederate cavalry. Later that year he accompanied his brother to the newly created Nevada Territory, where he tried his hand at silver mining. In 1862 he became a reporter on the Territorial Enterprise in Virginia City, Nevada, and in 1863 he began signing his articles with the pseudonym Mark Twain, a Mississippi River phrase meaning "two fathoms deep." After moving to San Francisco, California, in 1865 Twain reworked a tale he had heard in the California gold fields, and within months the author and the story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," had become national sensations. His success enabled him to dedicate to writing fiction, resulting in the production of one of the greatest American novels, *Huckleberry Finn*.

The setting for the story is just before the Civil War and tells of a young boy, Huckleberry Finn, who lives in a small town of the slave region, on the Mississippi. Huck has no mother and his father has abandoned him. The boy is raised, therefore, by a gentle widow. But Huck is simple in his approach to life, unaccustomed to the regulations and customs of a house and family, particularly the widow's strict manners.

Huck runs away freeing himself from the "civilizing" of the widow. He gets a boat and floats away down the Mississippi. Soon he comes across a slave, Jim, who is also fleeing from his master to become a free man by entering the North. Huck decides to help Jim escape, so together they pursue their goals of freedom, sailing down the Mississippi.

Many comical adventures take place while they float down the river. Huck must occasionally stop and go into towns for supplies or information. These interludes with humanity are always amusing but disappointing, as

he witnesses corruption, deceit, stupidity, and ignorance. When he returns, though, to Jim and the boat they continue down the river, where there is always peace and consolation in the greatness of the river and in the innocent beauty of nature.

The peace is broken though when they are forced to give a lift to two scoundrels who are escaping the angry citizens of a town in which the two men have just cheated. Identifying themselves as a king and a duke in exile, they persuade Huck and Jim to help them. Huck is able to see through their lies but he helps them in order to protect Jim, whom they could turn in as a fugitive slave.

The two men lead Huck into more adventures, but finally he frees himself. He parts too in the end from Jim, who obtains his freedom. The widow discovers where Huck is and wants him to return to her home. However, remembering the discipline and the "civilizing," he decides to go to the wild and unpopulated West.

The selection below consists of three parts. The first one is Huck's description of his life on the river. The next one is an amusing conversation between Huck and Jim in which Huck tries to explain to Jim that in other parts of the world people speak other languages. Note that the conversation is written in the local dialect of the speakers. "Th" is often pronounced "d," so that "the," "then," and "that" become "de," "dat," and "den." The last part of the selection describes the arrival on Huck and Jim's boat of the two scoundrels who later in the novel reveal themselves to be a "king" and a "duke."

Huckleberry Finn

"Two or three days and nights went by; I reckon I might say they swam by, they slid along so quiet and smooth and lovely. Here is the way me and Jim put in the time. It was a monstrous big river - sometimes a mile and a half wide; we ran at night, and laid up and hid during the day; soon as night was gone, we stopped navigating and tied up - nearly always in dead¹ water; and then cut young trees and hid the boat with them. Then we set out the fishing lines. Next we slid into the river and had a swim, so as to freshen up and cool off; then we set down on the sandy bottom where the water was about knee deep, and watched the daylight come. Not a sound anywhere perfectly still - just like the whole world was asleep, only sometimes the frogs sounding. The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line - that was the woods on the other side - you couldn't distinguish nothing else; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness, spreading around; then the river softened up, way off, and wasn't black any more, but gray; you could see little dark spots drifting along, ever so far away - trading boats. Then you see the mist curt up off of the water, and the east reddens up, and the river, and you make out² a log cabin in the edge of the woods, away on the bank on the other side of the river; then the nice breeze springs up, and comes fanning you, so cool and fresh, and sweet to smell, on account of the woods and the flowers; and next you've got the full day, and everything smiling in the sun, and the birds just singing away!"

...

"Why, Huck, don't de French people talk de same way we do?"

"No, Jim; you couldn't understand a word they said - not a word."

"Well, now, I'll be! How do dat come?"³

"I don't know; but it's so. I got some of their talk out of a book."

"Suppose a man was to come to you and say Polly-voo-franzy⁴, what would you think?"

"I wouldn't think nothing; I'd bust him over de head. Dat is, if he wasn't white. I wouldn't allow no nigger⁵ to call me dat."

"Well, it ain't⁶ calling you anything. It's only saying do you know how to talk French."

"Well, den, why couldn't he say it?"

"Why, he is saying it. That's a Frenchman's way of saying it."

"Well, it's a ridiculous way and I don't want to hear no more about it. There ain't no sense in it."

...

"One of these fellows was about seventy or upwards and had a bald head and very gray whiskers. He had an old battered-up slouch⁷ hat on and a greasy blue woolen shirt, and ragged old blue jeans stuffed into his boot tops. He had an old long-tailed blue jeans coat with slick brass buttons, flung over his arm, and both of them had big fat ratty-looking⁸ carpetbags⁹."

The other fellow was about thirty and dressed about as bad. After breakfast we talked for a while.

"What got you into trouble?" says the baldhead to the other chap.

"Well, I'd been selling an article to take the tar-tar¹⁰ off the teeth -and it does take it off, too, and generally the enamel along with it - but I stayed about one night longer than I should have, and was just in the act of slipping out when I ran across you on the trail this side of town, and you told me they were coming, and begged me to help you to get off. So I told you I was expecting trouble myself and would run out with you. That's the whole story - what's yours?"

"Well, I'd been running a little temperance revival¹¹ there, about a week, and was the pet¹² of all the women, big and little, for I was making it mighty warm¹³ for the drunkards, I tell you, and taking as much as five or six dollars a night and business growing all the time; when somehow or another a little report got around, last night, that I had a way of putting in¹⁴ my time secretly with my own little bottle. A nigger woke me up this morning and told me the people was gathering on the quiet, with their dogs and horses, and they'd be along pretty soon and give me about half an hour's start, and then run me down¹⁵, if they could. I didn't wait for no breakfast. I wasn't hungry."

Listed below are some of Mark Twain's most famous quotations:

- By trying we can easily learn to endure adversity. Another man's, I mean.
- The man who is a pessimist before 48 knows too much; if he is an optimist after it, he knows too little.
- The fact that man knows right from wrong proves his *intellectual* superiority to the other creatures; but the fact that he can *do* wrong proves his *moral* inferiority to any creatures that *cannot*.
- There was never yet an uninteresting life. Such a thing is an impossibility. Inside of the dullest exterior there is a drama, a comedy, and a tragedy.
- A classic—something that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read.
- Put all your eggs in the one basket and—WATCH THAT BASKET.
- There is nothing you can say in answer to a compliment. I have been complimented myself a great many times, and they always embarrass me—I always feel that they have not said enough.
- War talk by men who have been in a war is always interesting; whereas moon talk by a poet who has not been in the moon is likely to be dull.
- Often, the less there is to justify a traditional custom, the harder it is to get rid of it.
- If you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a man.
- Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.
- Man will do many things to get himself loved, he will do all things to get himself envied.
- Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.
- We should be careful to get out of an experience only the wisdom that is in it — and stop there; lest we be like the cat that sits down on a hot stove-lid. She will never sit down on a hot stove-lid again — and that is well; but also she will never sit down on a cold one anymore.
- Wrinkles should merely indicate where smiles have been.
- Humor must not professedly teach and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever.
- Don't part with your illusions. When they are gone you may still exist, but you have ceased to live.

DISCUSSION

1. What brought on the conflicts between white and Indians in the far West?
2. What is the importance of the cowboy in American history?
3. What image of the Mississippi does Huck portray in his description of the river?
4. Why does Jim find it hard to understand Huck's conversation with him about languages?
5. What did the two scoundrels do which forced them to flee from the town they had been in?

¹ calm

² distinguish

³ why's that?

⁴ Huck is here speaking with his dialect the French expression, *parlez-vous français*, meaning "do you speak French?"

⁵ black person

⁶ isn't

⁷ drooping

⁸ worn

⁹ bags made of carpet

¹⁰ stain

¹¹ emotional religious meeting where sermons are delivered condemning drunkenness

¹² favorite

¹³ difficult

¹⁴ spending

¹⁵ hunt me