

Mark Twain's Boyhood Home

On the west bank of the Mississippi there is a quaint house with a white picket fence, preserved as a museum dedicated to its former owner--a famous writer. It is said that many of the characters and stories from his novels are based on real-life experiences that he had there as a boy. This house was the childhood home of Samuel Langhorne Clemens, although most of you may know him by his *penname*: Mark Twain.

Sam Clemens was born in November 1835, as the infamous Halley's Comet shot through the skies. His family moved to this house in Hannibal, Missouri when he was 8 years old. The family was so *impoverished* that they had to move out of the house for a while, living above a local drug-store in exchange for his mother's services as a cook. They couldn't afford to move back until after his father died, in 1847.

Ten years later, at age 22, Sam Clemens started to work on a riverboat. Also a journalist, he adopted the penname "*Mark Twain*" after a river term that means two fathoms (12 feet) in depth, meaning "safe water" for riverboats to pass through. Under this new name, he published many famous books including *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, an anti-racist story that is often misinterpreted and criticized for using racial terms and stereotypes.

Vocabulary

penname: a fake name an author uses to publish his writing.

impoverished: poor, lacking money and goods

stereotypes: a common belief about a specific social group or type of individual

Mark Twain: twelve fathoms; "mark" = measure "twain" = two

Essay Questions

Why do you think Mark Twain wanted to use a penname rather than his real name? Come up with a penname for yourself. Explain what it means to you and why you chose it.

Imagine growing up with very little money, just like Mark Twain. How would you handle the situation? Write a short story about the experiences you might have and the people you might meet along the way.

