

**MARK TWAIN (TOM SAWYER)**

**VISITS PETOSKEY**

**JULY 20, 1895**

## TOM SAWYER VISITS PETOSKEY

Sunday, July 20th, 1895, was a red-letter day for the people of Petoskey. Most everyone had been awaiting eagerly the appearance in person of Mark Twain, author of *Tom Sawyer*, and perhaps the most popular writer and humorist of the day.

Persons who have heard of his visit here so long ago usually assume that Twain appeared in Bay View, which is not surprising since Bay View had long been recognized as the cultural seat of the north country, the place where all summer long there were presented a succession of famous people speaking on many subjects.

However, Mark Twain's appearance was not in that famous enclave. It had been scheduled into Petoskey's Grand Opera House at 416 Bay Street, across the way from today's Perry Hotel, by Major Pond, Twain's tour manager. The visit here was sandwiched between two others at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island, July 19th and 21st. The three sessions were part of twenty-six "one-night stands" across this country and Canada, with an around-the-world-tour to follow. The author stayed overnight at the Arlington Hotel after his Petoskey performance.

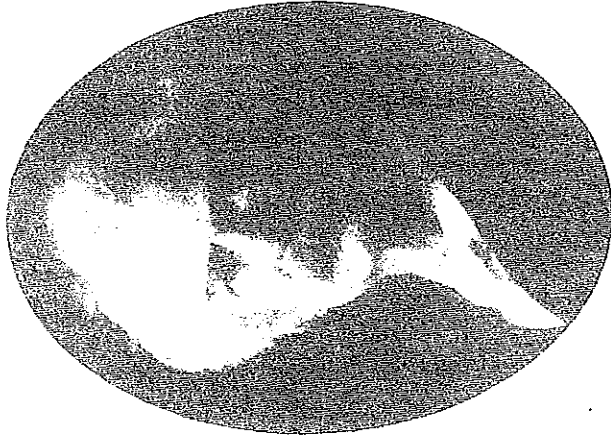
Twain delighted a sellout crowd that attended his engagement here. *The Petoskey Daily Reporter* commented next day:

*An audience which packed the Grand Opera House from the orchestra railing to the top of the rear gallery greeted Mark Twain when the curtain rose last night. Every seat was sold and over a hundred folding chairs were set up in the aisles to accommodate those who wished to see America's greatest humorist, and even then many were turned away. It was the largest, most cultured and best audience ever seen in Petoskey, the receipts being \$524.*

(Since the box seat price was \$1.00 and gallery seats, \$ .50, there must have been at least seven hundred people on hand).

The size of the audience at a special lecture in Bay View that same evening is not a matter of record, but the program competing with Twain was a stereopticon lecture on "Babylonian Religion and Ideas: Their bearing on those of the Hebrews", delivered by one Dr. Frank K. Sanders.

In spite of being quite ill while on stage, Mark Twain had his Petoskey audience stomping for more, as he always did at the end of his down-to-earth platform appearances.



Mark Twain  
Around the time of his  
visit to Petoskey

Twain was a natural performer. He spiced his lectures with nonsense, preposterous stories and wild exaggeration, and audiences loved it. One would never have guessed that the motivation for this whole tour was Twain's desperate need for money.

Behind his light-hearted utterances on the stage, this funniest of men was newly stone-broke, doing what he had to do to pay off the debts that had driven him to bankruptcy.

Perhaps he believed too much in people. Or maybe success came to him too easily. Doubtless a little more formal education would have helped. And a little discipline when he was growing up.

By any measurement, Mark Twain had led a carefree life as a youngster.

Born in the village of Hannibal, Missouri, as Samuel Clemens, Twain early developed a love affair with the Mississippi River, and a wanderlust that was never satisfied.

His father died when he was twelve, and despite the valiant efforts of his mother and "Aunt Polly", he lived an unrestrained childhood which is mirrored in his books.

He served as apprentice in the newspaper office of his brother Orion who published the Hannibal weekly newspaper. Sam learned to hand-set type and his natural curiosity led to wide reading. At eighteen, Twain became an itinerant reporter, working for newspapers in St. Louis, New York, Philadelphia and then in Keokuk, Iowa, where Orion had become publisher of the local paper.

At twenty-one he departed for South America, but got only as far as Cincinnati where he took a job reporting for a daily paper for a year. He quit to take a river trip to New Orleans. En route he apprenticed as a river pilot, qualified for pilot's license; then spent two and a half years piloting big river boats.

In 1861 Orion was hired as secretary to the territorial governor of Nevada, and Mark signed on as Orion's secretary. The two brothers on one occasion traveled to Nevada from St. Louis by boat and overland stage (from whence came Twain's later book *Roughing It*).

Soon tiring of inside work, Mark Twain gave in to wanderlust once more, became a silver prospector in Nevada, then a newspaper writer in wild and woolly Virginia City, Nevada. Here he started to write in earnest, assuming the nickname *Mark Twain*. This phrase he had often heard bellowed from the bow of riverboats by deckhands assigned to continually plumb the depth in fathoms of the river, using a weighted line. "*By the mark twain, Cap'n...by the MARK TWAIN!*" (Meaning: a safe depth as gauged by the second knot on the line, from the river bottom - a depth of 12 feet).

He left Virginia City for San Francisco, where he wrote his classic *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*, and met author Bret Harte. Soon he went on a freelance writing assignment to Hawaii; then left on another trip, this time around the world.

Much more travel and frequent changes in work plans followed... until Twain met Olivia Langdon, whom he married in 1870.

Olivia (his beloved "Livy") domesticated her author-husband, and the next twenty-four years were the most productive in his career. During this period he published *Tom Sawyer*, *The Prince And The Pauper*, *A Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur's Court* and *Huckleberry Finn*.

Unfortunately, Mark Twain was far less capable as a businessman than he was as a writer. He met an inventor named Paige who had conceived but not yet perfected a type-setting machine. As a long-time newspaperman, thoroughly familiar with the slow and tedious job of hand-setting type, Twain swallowed the implied promise of Paige's revolutionary invention, hook, line and sinker.

In spite of the fact that the Paige machine was in the inventor's model state - for years - Twain invested every cent he could muster. Soon all his savings and future royalties and all of Livy's inheritance - plus money he borrowed from Orion and his friends were sunk in the effort to bring the Paige invention into production, but the contraption was too complicated to succeed.

At the same time a Twain publishing venture also failed. Both projects, aided no doubt by the depression of 1893, flopped completely. At age 59 Mark Twain found himself \$100,000 in debt, a very large sum in those times.

While he escaped creditors legally by declaring bankruptcy, Twain felt deeply obligated toward those who had trusted his judgement and entrusted money to his hands.

Accordingly, he arranged through a friend, Major Pond, to set up the lecture tour that took him, Livy and his daughter to Mackinac and Petoskey and a couple of dozen other centers. With the help of his share of the \$524 realized in Petoskey, it is good to know that by 1898 Mark Twain was entirely free of debt.

If the thought of a *Grand Opera House* in pioneer Petoskey strikes you as slightly "hifalutin", consider what the frontier was like in the days before Television, Radio and the Movies. Pretty drab after dark! So, like every little town around, including Charlevoix, Mancelona, East Jordan, Boyne, Traverse City and all the others, Petoskey built an *opera house* because of public demand for professional entertainment - and - like most of the other towns, called it the *Grand!*

A strange hodge-podge of amusement was provided by agents, usually in New York, who booked whole seasons of entertainment into little towns. "Acts", included such fare as comedians, musicians, melodramas, trained animals and occasional lecturers, like Mark Twain.

New offerings were available on a once or twice a month schedule. In between these imported programs, local managers like Mr. Harwood of the Petoskey Grand Opera House would rent their halls for local group meetings, political rallies, etc., and sometimes stage boxing and wrestling tournaments.

On one occasion Mr. Howard, manager of the Petoskey House, and the manager of the Cheboygan Opera House rented out their respective facilities for a home-and-home contest to determine once and for all which town's highly touted blacksmith was, in fact, the most adept at replacing all four shoes on patient and amiable nags tethered on stage. Speed of course counted.

The contest drew packed houses in both cities on their scheduled dates, and there was spirited betting. Impartial judges were on hand to decide the outcomes, but prudently awarded victory to each of the contenders in his own home town, so the contest ended in a draw.

On another occasion Brigham Young's wife #7 was booked for a lecture in Petoskey's Opera House but did not appear on the scheduled date. No reason given.

Early Petoskey residents were proud and thankful that H.O. Rose, early town leader and benefactor had underwritten an Opera House for their enjoyment. Presumably Mark Twain was, too.

**MARK TWAIN {author of Tom Sawyer}**

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**Sunday, July 20, 1895**

**Extracted:  
People, Places, Happenings  
In Northern Michigan**

**By  
William H. Ohle**