

‘On the road with Mark and George.’

In November, 1884, Mark Twain and George W. Cable, billed as the “Twins of Genius,” set out on a four month cross-country speaking tour by private rail car from Washington, D.C. to Toronto and points between terminating in Minnesota. They were considered an odd pair—Twain, age fifty, sociable, profane, active; Cable, paid the unheard of \$450 per week, slight, proper, pious given to hours of Bible reading speaking in a thin, metallic voice scarcely called agreeable. Twain joked in a letter to his wife Livy, “I was the greatest triumph WE have ever made.” Entree to Twain’s inner circle was reputed to be based on a love of good literature, cigars, conversation and bourbon. In a related interview Twain grumbled, “I have had a hard time of it. I’ve been railroading for two weeks, and taking some mixed drinks. You stick to one thing at a time—straight. Coffee or whiskey if you drink it all the time.” Cable, age forty-one, noted New Orleans writer on Creole life and other southern topics, had met Twain in New Orleans in 1882; later moving to Hartford, Conn. near the Clemens family and the literary community known as ‘The Hartford Monday Club.’ Cable’s penetrating, sympathetic treatment of the Creoles and views on slavery had not endeared him with southern readers.

Joining forces on the national tour, Twain and Cable recited from memory or read their works. Twain appeared like a comedy act punctuated with serious moments employing careful planning and rehearsal making all sound casual and off the cuff with just the right pause before the punch line. He called it hard work “...worse than writing” terming such public appearances as, “The trouble begins at 8:00 o’clock.” Admission to the lectures was one dollar in the dress circle, fifty cents in the galleries. The CINCINNATI ENQUIRER reviewed the two in a January 3rd article titled ‘A Splendid House Meets Them On Their First Appearance.’ The piece, critical of Cable at first, gave him applause at the end of his dramatic reading sending chills over the audience. Twain as, “Tall, awkward, gestureless, with a shock of gray hair and deeply furrowed, tired face. To describe his voice is next to impossible...words distinct and rich in their delicious drollery. Concluding his remarks, he ambles off stage with a funny little trot, as if he was wild to get out of sight...to have a roar all by himself...either man is infatuated with his own work and takes this means of bolstering its sale.”

Between 1882 and 1885, Twain, armed with his “pen warmed in hell...typographical ammunition” had ground out *Huckleberry Finn*, *Life on the Mississippi*, *Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur’s Court* in addition to the editing and printing of President Ulysses Grant’s monumental memoirs during the last days of Grant’s life suffering from cancer. Advanced sales of 250,000 copies had been the largest to that date earning Grant’s widow huge royalties. By 1890, Twain tired of his perception as a mere humorist as his darker side appeared in books, articles, speeches focusing on political, racial, social issues of the day with both major political parties and malefactors of great wealth during the Gilded Age taking it on the chin. Example: “In statesmanship get the formalities right, never mind about the moralities.” Another, “It could probably be shown by facts and figures there is no distinctly native American criminal class—except Congress.”

As a historical note, Twain had not been in Cincinnati since the years 1856/1857 at the age of twenty-one employed as a printer’s assistant to the firm of Wrightson & Company, 106 Walnut Street, printers of railroad schedule books. In time he penned an article in the CINCINNATI POST under the humorous name of ‘Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass’ detailing his trip here by steamboat and the characters he encountered. In 1857, Twain left Cincinnati aboard

the steamboat PAUL JONES with the intent to satisfy his fascination with Brazil and the Amazon River. Aboard he met pilot Horace Bixby who agreed to take him on as a cub pilot for a term of two years upon the payment of five hundred dollars in installments after they reached New Orleans. In two years Twain commanded on the river the equivalent of \$70,000 a year in today's currency becoming something of a dandy enjoying good living aboard his boat making careful note of people and events later appearing in *Life On The Mississippi* embroidering characters and plots. He was no wall flower when it came to fist fights with deserving boat officers and crew. All the rest is history.

The bitterly cold evening of Saturday, January 3, 1885, Twain, Cable, Congressman William Springer and Dr. Lawrence C. Carr were brought as guests to the Literary Club by host Alexander Hill and John Follett before a group of some thirty-three members to hear a paper read by noted artist Henry F. Farny on his trips to the West titled 'On Indians I have met.' The American frontier in Farny's paper would not officially be considered ended until 1890. Minutes of the day carefully recoded the names of members attending along with guests and their hosts. In former days Club programs would be announced weekly in Cincinnati's newspapers with the COMMERCIAL GAZETTE often printing entire papers of interest read at Club for Cincinnatians to digest. For some years heated debates raged at our Club over the qualities of Cincinnati papers with the ENQUIRER not held in very high esteem appearing in various Secretary minutes at the time. Among the members was William Howard Taft, later President of the United States.

Dr. Lawrence Carr, elected a member in 1885, had the singular distinction of being the young medical officer aboard the Str. JOHN PORTER on her tragic trip up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers stricken with dreaded Yellow Fever in 1878. Louisville news writer and humorist Will S. Hayes wrote of the event, "Anybody who even looked at the JOHN PORTER was run out of town." This account beautifully covered in Club Historian John Diehl's commemorative book on the life and times of Lawrence Carr. One must remember that for years in our Club history weekly attendance averaged between twenty-six and thirty-six at most with anniversary celebrations of sixty. Those attending each week were carefully noted by the secretary with the tally inked along with the notation of each meeting in chronological order extending back to the natal year 1849. Those not present for extended periods of time were reminded by note saying, "If not, then why not?" For a time individual monthly program cards were mailed with a place to mark each week if one would be attending or not. Budget night often heard the reading of from five to seven papers of varying length.

The Literary Club's minutes recorded the visit by Twain and Cable with little to no hint on what either had said that evening tantalizing later researchers, club librarians and historians. Fellow Literary Club members Dale Flick and Rick Kesterman long discussed the question and possibility of discovering just what Mark Twain said, if anything. Former member Yeatman Anderson III mused that for years he had fruitlessly searched in vain for any accounts of that night. Then, in the winter of 2008, Rick discovered, during his serendipitous diggings relating to his archival duties with the Cincinnati Historical Society, a brief news clipping possibly attributed to the GAZETTE what was said that bitterly cold evening 126 years ago. All in good humor on Twain's part to the assembly in his quick retort.

DISTINGUISHED GUESTS

“The evening at the Literary Club last night was unusually pleasant. H.F Farny made a highly interesting address on ‘Indians I Have Met,’ detailing graphically some of his experiences in the Wild West. When ‘Mark Twain’ was presented somebody called out, “Speech!” whereupon the humorist, with an injured look, remarked, “The gentleman who said “speech” is certainly not a public speaker, or he wouldn’t expect a man who has already preached twice in one day to convert the people of this great city—and I am convinced I have converted thousands—to preach again.”

“Mr. Cable made a few pleasant remarks and intimated that his confrere’s gray hair was possibly due to too frequent speaking, after bed-time.”

“Something was the matter with the gas-meter at the club rooms, and it was found necessary to find other illumination towards the tail-end of the evening. This was furnished by frequent flashes of wit, and candles stuck into the necks of empty bottles.”

From St. Louis Twain penned a letter to his beloved Livy regarding George Cable, “He would make me abandon the Sabbath.” For years both Twain and Cable denied reports of conflict and disagreements during the long tour with both remaining close friends. Though never actually converting Cable to his ways of bourbon, cigars and ribald stories, Cable did soften his own prim stance. But there’s more.

A recently discovered short Budget Paper, more in the form of a letter, written by Lawrence Carr surfaced during my Club research titled ‘REMINICING’ dated October 30, 1920—thirty-five years after that memorable winter evening in 1885. Carr recalled it in vivid detail. “I remember, for instance, the visit of Mark Twain and George Cable. They were seemingly at their best that night, and the Club took much pleasure in entertaining them. I can see Twain standing up to make a speech. In this speech, he accused Cable of drinking all the liquid refreshment he had provided for their joint lectures. Which remark he gave as an apology for the amount of liquid refreshment he consumed at the Club. How Cable, white with wrath, got to his feet, denied the impeachment and stated that he had never touched that kind of refreshment. It took some time to get him in an equitable humor so that he could understand a joke was intended.” Was it an act for Club consumption or Cable’s own true sentiments? We will never know.

The famed quote attributed to Twain, “When the end of the world comes, I want to be in Cincinnati—because it’s always twenty years behind the times” has, to date, never been attributed to him in spite of archival and literary research. Rather it has been laid at the feet of humorist Will Rogers. Think of the undying fame such a quote about our fair city would have earned this noble Club if, indeed, Mark Twain had uttered it from our hallowed walls later appearing in gold letters beneath ‘Here Comes One With A paper.’

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