

# Samuel Clemens

1835–1910



**WHY HE MADE HISTORY** Mark Twain was the pen name of Samuel Clemens, a famous American writer known for his many stories and essays.



*As you read the biography below, think about how Samuel Clemens's life experiences might have influenced his writing.*

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born and raised in Missouri, along the banks of the Mississippi River. Clemens adopted the name *Mark Twain* on February 3, 1863. Clemens's **pseudonym** came from Mississippi River boatmen. The phrase means “two fathoms deep”—water just deep enough for **navigating** the Mississippi River.

Riverboats along the Mississippi brought colorful people to Hannibal, the town where Clemens lived as a child. He came into contact with comedians, travelers, singers, gamblers, boat captains, and those who were just rafting down the river. The Mississippi and these characters played major roles in Mark Twain's writings.

When Clemens was 11, his father died. Samuel had to work and held a number of odd jobs. When he was 13, he was apprenticed to a printer. He then worked on newspapers in St. Louis, New York, and Philadelphia. He also began to write, but his travels pulled him in another direction. He worked as an apprentice piloting a steamboat on the Mississippi. By 1859 Clemens was a licensed riverboat pilot. Two years later, the Civil War ended his career on the river.

Clemens traveled west and began to write short stories, including *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of*



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## VOCABULARY

**pseudonym** a fictitious name, or pen name

**navigate** to steer; plot a course

**humorist** a person who writes funny stories or books

*Calaveras County*. Published in *Saturday Press*, this story brought Samuel Clemens national attention and fame. He continued to travel and write. He published some of his travel letters from Europe and the Holy Land in *The Innocents Abroad*. With this book his fame as a **humorist** and writer was firmly established. Twain was also a popular public lecturer, and he amused audiences with his comic tales and wit.

In his “Advice to Youth Speech” he said, “Always obey your parents. When they are present. This is the best policy in the long run. Because if you don’t, they will make you.”

In 1870 Clemens married Olivia Langdon. The couple moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where Clemens continued to write. In 1876 *Tom Sawyer* was published. Then in 1884 he published *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Most critics agree that *Huckleberry Finn* is his best book. It is a great classic of American literature.

Samuel Clemens died in 1910, but he left behind an amazing collection of American short stories and novels. He is considered to be one of America’s major authors and great humorists.

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. How was Samuel Clemens’s pseudonym chosen?

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2. **Analyze** How do you think Samuel Clemens’s experiences helped him as a writer?

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