



"Out West" is certainly a great country ... there is one little town in "them diggins" which ... is "all sorts of a stirring place." In one day, they recently had two street fights, hung a man, rode three men out of town on a rail, got up a quarter race, a turkey shooting, a gander pulling, a match dog fight, had preaching by a circus rider, who afterwards ran a footrace for apple jack all round, and, as if this was not enough, the judge of the court, after losing his year's salary at single-handed poker, and licking a person who said he didn't understand the game, went out and helped to lynch his grandfather for the hog stealing.

-- Spirit of the Times, June 28, 1851.

CHAPTER II LITERARY SOURCES

Native American humor is unique. There have of course been native oral traditions in all civilizations of the world, but characteristically this tradition in America has taken the form of comic exaggeration and the "tall story". Folk tales were told by famous story-tellers from generation to generation. The art of oral narrative flourished particularly in the West and the Southwest: Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas and Missouri.⁶ In these states there existed a special color and flavor to life which furnished excellent stuff for humor. There were different ways of living and various stages of civilization among the inhabitants between settled sections and frontiers.

At first, the telling of yarns was particularly well adapted to travellers by stagecoach or boat. Traveling across country, moving down river, resting at night by campfires, household firesides or by glowing stoves, the rural people passed the time

pleasantly by listening to comic yarns told by many able story-tellers. The yarns ranged all the way from wild fantasy to common accounts of every day happenings. There were thrilling scenes and adventures in unknown regions with mythical or frontier heroes, including super-human deeds and fantastic beasts.⁷

During the time of President Andrew Jackson, there was a great change in American social and economic life, especially in the Southwestern states. Many people became rich overnight through land-speculation. Many immigrants from abroad came flowing into these states and took possession of the land with the prospect of becoming wealthy. At the same time, there was a tendency toward political and economic chaos. The well-to-do upper class who were the earlier settlers began to lose their power and position to the poor, crude, less cultivated newcomers. They began to fear that as democracy spread, they would lose their property too. The lawless life of the new country and the strange ways of its inhabitants, ranging from rascals to statesmen, are presented in a generalized way by Joseph Baldwin in The Flush Times in Alabama and Mississippi, published in 1854.⁸ It was during the "flush times" that tall tales related beside campfires were first put into writing in newspapers owned and written by the upper class.

The first frontier humorists, living in the expanding, unsettled, and turbulent conditions of the Old Southwest, were usually educated, upperclass professional people. They had been either born or educated in the old, established Northern and Southern states or came from families who had migrated from them

not too long before the 1800's. They earned their living as lawyers, doctors, bankers, teachers, politicians and newspapermen. Their work required a lot of travels which brought them into contact with new types of men and with new occupations and adventures. With various social and personal circumstances and literary trainings, these men began to fill in scores of newly founded newspapers with their writings to be enjoyed by the reading public of less cultivated new settlers. These professional funny men -- Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, Johnson J. Hooper, Joseph G. Baldwin, and George W. Harris -- were some of Twain's forerunners who paved the way for Twain to reach the apex of American humor.

There are many characteristics combined in the unique humorous literature of the old Southwest. The sources of laughter lay in the style -- ludicrously assembled sentences with fancy words badly spelled; farcical characters doing foolish deeds; misquotations of the Bible or the classics; exaggeration and understatement for conical effect, vulgarity, audacity, broad irony and irreverence.

Since the first printed yarns were written by the wealthy, conservative established people, they often emphasized their own moral and social distance from distressing events and common people by framing their accounts with opening and closing sections composed in inflated, difficult vocabularies. This began the rise of the literary framework technique to set forth a mock oral tale. The writer keeps himself apart from low characters in the tale by letting an educated narrator introduce the story in fancy, elaborate

language quite above the crude colloquial idiom of common man. This can be clearly seen in Johnson J. Hooper's writing, "The Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs". The author gives us an inflated introductory passage describing Simon's becoming a captain:

By reference to memoranda, contemporaneously taken, of incidents to be recorded in the memoirs of Captain Suggs, we find that we have reached the most important period in the history of our hero -- his assumption of a military command. And we beg the reader to believe, that we approach this portion of our subject with a profound regret at our own incapacity for its proper illumination. Would that thy pen, O! Kendall, were ours! Then would thy hero and ours -- the nation's Jackson and the country's Suggs -- go down to far posterity equal in fame and honors, as in deeds! But so the immortal gods have not decreed! Not to Suggs was Amos given! Aye, jealous of his mighty feats, the thundering Jove denied an historian worthy of his puiscance! Would that, like Caesar, he could write himself! Then, indeed, should Harvard yield him honors, and his country -- justice!

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The author makes fun of Simon Suggs' commonness by using overstatement and a mock heroic style. Such words and phrases as "reference to memoranda," "contemporaneously," "memoirs," "assumption," "posterity," "puiscance" are not commonplace expressions and hardly appropriate to such a low character as Simon. The dialogue between Simon and his neighbors is very different from the introductory section and is evidently meant to stand in comic juxtaposition. The comedy is clearly at the expense of Simon:

"Gentlemen," said Simon, a smile of gratified but subdued pride playing about his mouth; "Gentlemen, my respects -- ladies, the same to you! -- and the Captain bowed -- I'm more 'n proud to serve my country at the head of such an independent and patriotic company! Let who will run, gentlemen, Simon Suggs will allers be found sticking thar, like a tick onder a cow's belly --"

"What do you aim to bury your dead Injuns, Cap'en?" sarcastically inquired the little dirt-eater.

"I'll bury you, you little whifflin fice," said Captain Suggs in a rage,¹² and he dashed at yellow-legs furiously.

Mark Twain was born in 1835, at the precise time when the American comic sense was coming to its first full expression. As a young printer he heard many tales and read such familiar comic narratives printed in the humorous columns of newspapers. As the pilot of a Mississippi River steamer before the Civil War, he was in a position to exchange stories with the masters of the art. It was not until he became a newspaper reporter in the western silver-mining towns of Nevada that he became famous as the teller of tall tales.¹³ However, throughout his writing career, the influences of Twain's forerunners, the frontier humorists, can be closely traced in his works, in humorous materials, devices and traditions.

His first successful sketch, "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," was set down on paper after he had heard it told to a crowd of miners in a California tavern. Twain made it his own by using the framework technique modeled after Hooper. Notice the same ultra-inflated vocabulary:

In compliance with the request of a friend of mine, who wrote me from the East, I called on good-natured, garrulous old Simon Wheeler, and inquired after my friend's friend, Leonidas W. Smiley, as requested to do, and I hereunto append the result. I have a lurking suspicion that Leonidas W. Smiley is a myth; that my friend never knew such a personage; and that he only conjectured that if I asked old Wheeler about him, it would remind him of his infamous Jim Smiley, and he would go to work and bore me to death with some exasperating reminiscence of him as long and as tedious as it should be useless to go. If that was the design, it succeeded.¹⁴

The author calls on Simon Wheeler under his friend's request to hear the story of Jim Smiley. Yet, he keeps himself aloof from Simon Wheeler who is quite obviously less cultivated, a colorfully speaking character taken directly from Southwestern humor. He looks down on Simon and grimly prepares to laugh at his narrative which will really only bore him. Simon is described as a person to be poked fun at: "fat and bald-headed"¹⁵ with "an expression of winning gentleness and simplicity upon his tranquil countenance."¹⁶ When the author tells him the purpose of his visit, Simon "backed him into the corner and blockaded him with his chair."¹⁷ The author impatiently listens to Simon's ridiculous story which Simon considers highly important matter judging by his "voice of impressive earnestness and sincerity."¹⁸ After finishing the account of Jim Smiley's jumping frog, Simon is ready to begin another one:

Well, thisn-yer Smiley had a yaller
 one-eyed cow that didn't have no
 tail, only jest a short stump like
 a bananner, and -- 19

At this point, the long-suffering and politely speaking author is more bored than he is able to bear and gladly takes his leave in the closing paragraph:

However, lacking both time and inclination, I did not wait to hear about the afflicted cow, but took my leave.²⁰

Between 1840 and 1860 the tone of American life became more violent, caused by the national tensions that led to the Civil War, especially in the Southern States. Both the wealthy and the poor took part in the general lowering of the quality of life. A change took place in literary technique as well as in social conditions; in fact one mirrors the other. The framework technique vanished in later writings. The writers stopped looking down on lower, common-place characters. They identified themselves with their characters, and even loved to be called after their characters' names. The remarkable change is to be found in George Washington Harris' "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting" in which the author discarded the use of his framework and let the characters speak for themselves:

"thar's one darn'd nasty muddy job,
 an' I is jis' glad enuf tu take a

ho'n ur two, on the straingth ove
hit."

"What have you been doing, Sut?"

"Helpin tu salt ole Missis Yardley
down."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Fixin her fur rotten cumfurtably,
kiverin her up wid sile, tu keep
the buzzards frum cheatin the wurms."

"That's hit, by golly! Now why the
devil can't I'plain myself like yu?
I ladles out my words at randum, like
a calf kickin at yaller-jackids;
yu jib' rolls em out tu the pint, like
a foller a-layin bricks -- everyone fit 21

Similarly, in his masterpiece The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Twain begins the story without any introductory paragraph. Huck directly introduces himself to the readers at the very beginning of the book:

You don't know about me, without you
have read a book by the name of The
Adventures of Tom Sawyer, but that
ain't no matter. 22

Again, Twain's predecessors' influence upon his writing is clearly seen when he wrote Chapter Twenty of Huck Finn, "The Camp-meeting." The elements of Hooper's camp meeting scene in "The Captain Attends a Camp-meeting" are strikingly similar to Twain's writing. It is demonstrable that not only is this chapter in Twain's greatest work entirely in the vein of Southwestern humor but that Twain borrows quite directly from Hooper's material.

In the Hooper story, Simon Suggs has contrived many means

of making money but has failed. He cannot bear seeing his family suffer. He sets out for a camp-meeting simply to find amusement. When he arrives there he finds the encampment filled with people listening to the sermon:

A half-dozen preachers were dispensing the word; the one in the pulpit,... His voice was weak... however, he contrived to make himself heard occasionally, above the din of the exhorting, the singing, and the shouting which were going on around him. The rest were walking to and fro.... Men and women rolled about on the ground, or lay sobbing or shouting in promiscuous heaps. More than all, the negroes sang and screamed and prayed....

The atmosphere of intense confusion and excitement is identical to the camp-meeting scene in Huck Finn when the king arrives at the shed where the meeting is held:

The preaching was going on under the same kinds of sheds, only they were bigger and held crowds of people ... The preachers had high platforms to stand on, at one end of the sheds... the preacher was lining out a hymn... everybody sung it... in such a rousing way... and towards the end some began to groan, and some began to shout. Then the preacher began to preach;... and shouting his words out with all his might. ... you couldn't make out what the preacher said, any more, on account of the shouting and crying. Folks got

up, everywhere in the crowds... they
 lunged, and shouted, and flung them-
 selves down on the straw, just crazy and
 wild.²⁴

At both meetings there is a group of mourners who occupy the front benches in the crowd. Simon Suggs introduces himself to the meeting as a sinner. He wisely invents a miracle which had purified him and converted him to religion and piety. His story convinces the meeting and receives much applause and admiration. He pretends to mourn for his past iniquities and desires to do a good deed by collecting a sum of money to found a new church. Then he cunningly escapes the meeting and vanishes with the money. This plot is closely followed by Twain when he wrote his camp-meeting episode. Twain's camp-meeting is an improvement only because it enjoys the advantage of Twain's richer imagination. In this scene in Huck Finn the king introduces himself to the meeting as an ancient pirate in the Indian Ocean who had been robbed and had become a changed man. He intended to spend the rest of his life converting his other fellow-pirates sailing on the oceans. He, therefore, would like to ask for a collection. His words impress the meeting so much that everybody bursts into tears and willingly donates his money:

So the king went all through the crowd with his hat, swabbing his eyes, and blessing the people and praising them and thanking them for being so good to the poor pirates away off there... and he was invited to stay a week; and

everybody wanted him to live in
 their houses, and said they'd
 think it was an honour....²⁵

The king makes an excuse that since it is the last day of the camp-meeting, he cannot do any good in delaying. He wants to make haste to do his mission: converting the pirates. Then he takes his leave -- and takes the money with him.

Another characteristic of American folk humor is a hard core of realism or anti-romanticism, a desire to describe things precisely and a tendency to make fun of imaginative excesses. George Washington Harris' Sut Lovingood may have been crude, but he took pride in his very crudity. Behind this crudity is the idea that life is rough and crude and no lilies should be gilded. Twain had a strong sentimental streak, but as a Westerner -- and as a journalist -- he almost necessarily participated in the quest after describing things just as he saw them. As a Western humorist, excess in literature became his natural target. Twain wanted to be true to nature, to accurately and honestly record what he saw. Thus, for example, he attacked Cooper's writings strongly in his article, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses." Twain disagreed with many of Cooper's admirers who praised Cooper's writings to be "pure works of art"²⁶ by showing some of Cooper's defects. In many ways the essay teaches us more about Twain than it does about the earlier writer. In it Twain, the realist, criticizes Cooper, the acknowledged romancer, for being a romancer:

If Cooper had any real knowledge of Nature's ways of doing things he had a most delicate art in concealing the fact... even the eternal laws of Nature have to vacate when Cooper wants to put up a delicate job of woodcraft on the reader.

Cooper's Indians are too romanticized to be true. Twain called Cooper's description of the snow episode in The Deerslayer "a sublime burst of invention." In regard to The Pathfinder, in which Natty Bumppo has to show off his skill in a shooting-match, Twain points out that Pathfinder's quickness and accuracy of sight are incredible.

The difference between a Cooper Indian and the Indian that stands in front of the cigar-shop is not spacious.

In his sketch "Niagara", Twain makes fun of certain romantic conventions popular in his days: excessive glorification of Niagara Falls and marvelous emobled portraits of Indians. Twain joins a travelling group making a trip to see the Niagara Falls with a guide to lead the way. Instead of seeing a beautiful, romantic sight, Twain meets such a frightful one that he longs to return home, but it is too late:

Now a furious wind began to rush out from behind the waterfall, which seemed determined to sweep us from the bridge, and scatter us

on the rocks and among the torrents below... We were almost under the monstrous wall of water thundering down from above, and speech was in the midst of such a pitiless crash of sound... All was darkness. Such a mad storming, roaring, and bellowing of warring wind and water never crazed my ears before.³⁰



Such words as : "monstrous wall of water," "pitiless crash of sound" "deluge," "furious wind," "harrowy tempest of rain" are suggestive enough as to why he wanted to return home. The Falls are sublime but they cannot be romanticized.

Twain says he has read tales, legends and romances about "the noble Red Man" who seemed to be the "sublime relic of bygone grandeur"³¹ with his "inspired sagacity,"³² "his stately metaphorical manner of speech,"³³ and "the picturesque pomp of his dress and accoutrements."³⁴ However, a lady clerk suggested that he call on the real, living Indians who would be friendly and not dangerous to speak with. On the contrary, the Indians were unwilling to talk with him and even threaten his life. Despite his effort to make friends with them many times, at last he is hit, stripped of his clothes, and thrown over the Niagara Falls. In fact, in a masterful touch of burlesque, this "savage tribe"³⁵ of Indians at Niagara Falls are really all Irish immigrants dressed up for the tourist trade.

Another literary comedian who greatly influenced Twain's works was Artemus Ward who wrote "Interview with President Lincoln" by using

the language of the sailor with bad grammar and misspelled words. The work influenced Twain's "An Encounter with an Interviewer," one of his funniest sketches Twain used the language of Ward and other literary comedians on the lecture platform, and many of their comic devices found their way into his fiction. The tall talk of the Southwestern humorists can be found, for example, in the story of the Fat Child of Calamity in Life on the Mississippi. Huck's and Jim's conversation about King Sollerman and their discussion of the French language exemplify Twain's use of Ward and the literary comedians. These marvelously funny passages in the novel are just lengthy jokes, extended gags on a set theme. This sort of humor also has a relation to ^{the} 19th century minstrel shows.

The artistry of the frontier oral story was one of Twain's most important assets. He followed the path paved before him by his predecessors. But Twain refined Southwestern humor and the humor of the literary comedians and refined it for his own purposes. In remodeling these traditions for his own uses, he reached the highest level of ^{the} 19th century American humor. We will have occasion to return to these traditions further in commenting on individual works.