



Mark Twain Circular

Newsletter of the Mark Twain Circle of America

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President's Column

Laura Skandera-Trombley
Coe College
President, MTCA

Dear Friends of the Mark Twain Circle,

Jim Leonard has just emailed me and informed me that my first *Mark Twain Circular* deadline comes next week. As luck would have it this deadline coincides with our annual family vacation in Mexico. So I'm writing you rather hastily the day before we leave sunny Iowa for even sunnier Baja California.

This year the American Literature Conference was held in a new location, namely Long Beach, California. I'd say for the most part attendees accepted the change of venue, although I heard "it's just not the Bahia" numerous times. There was a truly impressive gathering of people involved in Mark Twain, and all of the panels were very well attended. The video by Sandy Bradley featuring such august scholars as Hamlin Hill, Lou Budd, Vic Doyno, James Cox, and David Sloane, sharing what working on Mark Twain means to them was a wonderful, emotional, thoughtful way to begin the conference. At our business meeting on Thursday, we recognized Shelley Fisher Fishkin's excellent leadership over the past two years, and the torch was passed to yours truly. I am also pleased to report that Tom Quirk was voted in unanimously as our new vice president. We had an excellent turnout for the Mark Twain dinner, held on Friday night, with approximately 35 people in attendance with all the milling around I never

Mark Twain Circle Officers for 2000-01

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- Laura Skandera-Trombley (Coe College)

Vice President:

- Tom Quirk (Univ. of Missouri)

Executive Committee:

- Shelley Fisher Fishkin (Univ. of Texas)
- Jeffrey Steinbrink (Franklin and Marshall C)
- Jocelyn Chadwick (Harvard Univ.)
- James Zwick (Syracuse Univ.)

did get an exact count. Next year, ALA will again be in a new locale, namely Cambridge, MA, and I hope to see many of you there.

April 21, 2000 marked the 90th anniversary of Samuel Clemens' death, and interest in him only continues to increase. The highlights for the coming year include the Elmira conference, and soon Ken Burns' documentary on Twain will be released. Sam Clemens would have been most pleased to know that such a fuss is still being made over him.

That is all I have to report at this time. I'm very pleased and honored to serve as the association's president and look forward to all of the upcoming events.

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Twain, Huck and the Ministerial Alliance

Jocelyn Chadwick
Harvard University

Enid, Oklahoma, the Ministerial Alliance, the teacher's association, state curriculum coordinators, a concerned school board and even more concerned and baffled students and parents—add all together with Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and you have a pretty good idea of what I encountered when I disembarked from the plane on April 5th. The school district's administration contacted me after having seen PBS's *Born to Trouble* and asked whether I would come to Enid and assist them, their teachers and their parents with *Huck Finn*. After agreeing to go to Enid, I asked the Assistant Superintendent, Dr. Ruth Ann Erdner, to send me copies of all newspaper articles and transcripts of any meetings that had dealt specifically with the Twain challenge issue. I asked the chair of the English Department, Kay Dragoun, to acquaint me with the teachers who were teaching the novel so that I could get a sense of how they were teaching it. I came to know each of the major perspectives through those newspaper articles, discussions, e-mails and transcripts, as well as through the department chair.

The Enid ministers saw themselves as the voice of the African-American community—all of it. The teachers saw themselves as adrift after being accused of insensitivity, unprofessionalism, and lack of adequate knowledge of multicultural literature. Enid ISD school officials saw themselves as divided along the lines of supporting their teachers and their curriculum, thus supporting the novel, versus supporting the adversaries of the novel and the approved curriculum. The parents and the students were in the middle of an escalating situation that was fraught with emotion and earnest sentiment.

I arrived to assist in finding an answer to a seemingly impossible situation. I must confess that I was taken aback by meeting the Rev. Alfred Baldwin and his wife at the airport, after being told that I was to be met by the English Department chair. Rev. Baldwin is

the president of the Alliance. Dinner and a long car ride from Oklahoma City to Enid proved to be more than a bit interesting. Thinking that dinner conversation would revolve around the novel, I was surprised to find that it did not. Rev. Baldwin, however, waited for a more private moment when we were alone during the evening to inform me of current and past racial problems in Enid as well as other parts of Oklahoma. He apprised me of the lack of substantial numbers of African-American school administrators, the lack of upper-level administrators, one suspicious lynching and one disappearance over the past twenty years in the city itself. Of the numerous cities and schools where I have visited, I have found that controversy swirling around this novel invariably invites a myriad of concomitant issues, issues that really have nothing to do with the teaching of this work.

I had to tell Rev. Baldwin, as I often tell protesters, my presence there was to address how to best utilize a novel that I believe is essential to the experience of any student in an American literary survey. I could not address inequities in personnel. I tried to assure him that this work is indeed one that encourages conversation about a topic that all too often we give short shrift when really confronted with discussing how we feel in this country.

The following two days would be filled with class lecture/discussions, with my taking over the junior classes and teaching the novel. Gathered in a small amphitheatre, one hundred students per period engaged me in focused and energetic conversation about Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and racism. We talked about censorship, them, their reading and viewing habits and their opinions about race. I asked them questions, and they asked me questions. Parents, teachers and school administrators were allowed to attend but were not to participate actively in the class.

I found, as usual, the students to be engaging, astute and really savvy about society—its pros as well as its cons. All, with the exception of one, had read or were reading the novel. I found the students to be quite forthcoming about the novel, and again, as usual, I found that if the novel is discussed and explicated in a Socratic way, they not only understand the satire but also grasp the seriousness of Twain's more subtle issues as well. The students of color

found the atmosphere conducive to expressing their concerns and thoughts about the text, and once more I found them to be extremely secure in their understanding of Twain's characters, dialect and situations. By the second day of teaching, the one student who had refrained from reading the novel decided to attend one of the sessions and to begin reading. She proved an eager asset to the lively class discussion.

The first day was punctuated by a working lunch with the school board, administrative staff, the Ministerial Alliance, state representatives and media. Interestingly, the "discussion" was more of a debate between the alliance and me. I found them to be well prepared with the opposing views on the novel's history of challenges, but their information of the outcomes of the challenges was not quite as accurate as they had led everyone to believe. I was able to correct the results of several of the challenges and found this development to be more than helpful in supporting my argument that the novel should remain in the curriculum in the manner it always had, rather than being designated for one group of students alone. Rev. Baldwin finally asked me whether I would mind conversing with another scholar who espoused an opposing perspective. Of course, I responded "no," but to my surprise, no one appeared. Dr. Ruth Ann Erdner reminded Rev. Baldwin that, although the board and the administrative staff had invited him to ask another scholar from the opposite side, Rev. Baldwin had subsequently told her that no one accepted his invitation.

With the working lunch concluded, I was back to teaching, looking forward to a working dinner and a community forum for the evening. It was the community forum that I found most intriguing. Parents, concerned citizens, students and teachers were encouraged to address the audience with their concerns and to ask me questions. I fielded questions for the evening and explained why Twain wrote the novel, who his audience had been, who his audience is now, how the novel was traditionally taught, how it is taught now, and the etymology of the word "nigger"—its use then, its use now. One African-American parent asked me how I felt the

students had responded to the novel during my first day with them. A very significant question, I felt. I told her and the audience that I was more than a little satisfied with the students and their level of discussion, and I proceeded to provide examples of the day. I did, however, caution parents about why we teach this novel and the important role it plays in the American literary scene. Simply substituting another novel by someone else is a great danger that should and must be avoided.

The evening was progressing well, I thought. Tensely, but well. The teachers were directly attacked by one of the ministers, Rev. Smith, as insensitive and unprofessional. This same minister then questioned me as to whether I was "a little bit of light brown sugar to ease the bitter pill of Mark Twain in Enid." Since I have been "on the road," so to speak, with the high schools, I have been called a number of names, but to be addressed in this way was more than a bit shocking. Rev. Smith even inquired whether I was being paid to be there, and, again, Dr. Erdner spoke up to inform the audience that my services for the forum and the teaching, as well as the working lunch, were pro bono. I would receive a consulting fee for the teacher in-service training that I would do the following day after I once again taught classes.

One thing I have learned from so many methods of attack on this novel, is that, when the direct attacks on the novel and Twain fail, Huck's opponents will attack the speaker. I am always prepared for the inevitable. I did address the remark before the audience, since Rev. Smith made it before the audience. I maintained focus on the novel and the issue that had brought me to Oklahoma and to Enid in the first place: should students be allowed to read literature unfettered by the pasts of their parents, by the pasts of their friends, and by the ghosts of wrongs done long before any of them were even born? Should these same students be allowed, even encouraged, to peel back the layers of a wound that is still fresh for all Americans, a wound that started with slavery? Should teachers be allowed to teach and select this controversial work, and should these same teachers be trusted in the classroom? These and these alone were the issues that brought me to Oklahoma and to Enid. I concluded my presentation to the community by saying that running from what Twain is trying to engage us

with will do little good in the long run. If we cannot even confront that slavery ever existed here, how will we ever address, much less resolve, the racial issues that are rife in this country? The African-American parents thanked and hugged me at the conclusion of the evening—that is, with the exception of Rev. Smith.

I taught the next day and conducted a teacher in-service training session. In spite of everything that had occurred, the teachers were absolutely fantastic! The board vote would come within the following week. I received calls, e-mails and newspaper accounts of the board results. The board voted to maintain the novel in its original form: all students in American literary surveys will read *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The state representatives are using the tapes made from all of the sessions for all of their school districts to maintain *Huck Finn*. The students will be the better for the debate. And so, too, will the parents, I think.

Remembering Herb Wisbey

The following is excerpted from a Mark Twain Forum posting by the Elmira College Center for Mark Twain Studies:

It is with great sadness that we report the death of the first Director of the Elmira College Center for Mark Twain Studies, Dr. Herbert A. Wisbey, Jr., on Friday March 17, 2000. Dr. Wisbey is survived by his wife of 54 years, Mrs. Adelia Wagner Wisbey; sons and daughters, Thomas B. and Karen Wisbey of Eliot, ME, Jane C. Wisbey of Horseheads, NY, Susan M. and Charles VanAlst of New Paltz, NY and Peter A. and Sarah Wisbey of Rochester NY, and grandchildren.

Dr. Wisbey received his BS from the University of Rhode Island, his MA from the University of Arizona and the Ph.D. from Columbia University in NY in 1951. He was a Professor of American History at Elmira College from 1965-1986, becoming Professor Emeritus upon his retirement in 1986. In 1983, he was appointed the first Director of the Elmira College Center for Mark Twain Studies. Dr. Wisbey was a charter member of the Mark Twain Society and co-author with Robert D. Jerome of *Mark Twain in Elmira*. He was also the author of numerous articles on Mark Twain and his associations with Elmira, many published in the *Mark Twain Society Bulletin*. His other books include, *Publick and Universal Friend*, and *Soldiers without Swords*. Dr. Wisbey was active on the Board of the Chemung County Historical Society, the Elmira College Archivist and in 1975

Dates to Circle

- **November 10-12, 2000.** South Atlantic Modern Language Association Annual Convention (including Mark Twain Circle session). Birmingham, AL.
- **December 14-17, 2000.** American Literature Association “Rereading Realism and Naturalism” Symposium. Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. See conference information and call for papers on p. 5.
- **December 27-30, 2000.** Modern Language Association Annual Conference. Washington, DC.
- **May 24-27, 2001.** American Literature Association Annual Conference. Cambridge, MA. See conference information and call for papers on p. 6.
- **August 16-18, 2001.** “Elmira 2001: The 4th International Conference on The State of Mark Twain Studies.” See “Call for Papers” in the January-March 2000 *Mark Twain Circular*.

American Literature Association Symposium

Rereading Realism and Naturalism

Presidente Intercontinental Hotel

Puerto Vallarta, Mexico

December 14-17, 2000

Conference Director: Alfred Bendixen

English Department

California State University, Los Angeles

Los Angeles, CA 90032-8110

abendix@calstatela.edu

Conference Fee: \$50

Hotel Rates: The Presidente Inter-Continental Hotel is offering a special all-inclusive hotel rate of \$150 per single or \$180 per double, plus applicable Mexican taxes (currently 16%). The hotel rate includes a deluxe room and all food and beverages.

ALA symposia provide an opportunity for scholars to meet in an intimate setting, present papers, and share ideas and resources. The conference director welcomes proposals for papers or sessions focusing on new approaches to realism and naturalism. Program space is very limited. Deadline for Proposals and Papers: September 15, 2000

Call for Papers

American Literature Association Annual Conference

Dates: May 24-27, 2001

**Location: Hyatt Regency Cambridge
575 Memorial Drive
Cambridge MA 02139**

**Conference Director: Maria Karafilis
California State University, Los Angeles**

Conference Fee (including two lunches): \$100 (\$50 for Graduate Students, Independent Scholars, and Retired Faculty)

Deadline for Proposals: January 30, 2001

Address for Papers and Proposals:

**Professor Maria Karafilis
English Department
California State University Los Angeles, CA 90032-8110
Fax: (323) 343-6470
Email: mkarafi@calstatela.edu**

The primary source for information on the ALA and its activities is our website:

www.americanliterature.org