

“ROUGHING IT” AT THE FULTON - MARK TWAIN COMES TO LANCASTER, JANUARY 19, 1872

by *William R. Luck*

A winter mix of snow and sleet fell on the city of Lancaster as Mark Twain stepped out of his carriage. He had arrived in Lancaster to speak to the largest crowd of the Home Lecture season. The author of *Innocents Abroad*, would talk on his adventures in the American West, which was entitled “Roughing It.” The city anxiously awaited that evening, their anticipation heightened by the January 13, 1872 *Daily Evening Express*’s announcement:

HOME LECTURE: The sixth of the Home Course lectures will be delivered on Friday evening at Fulton Hall by Mark Twain on “Roughing It.” The change of subject from that announced by published cards was rendered necessary by the announcement of the Boston Lyceum Bureau that Mark Twain will not repeat his old lecture this season, but deliver instead a new one, entitled “Roughing It,” which he first gave in Chicago December 19th.

The following from the Chicago Evening Post will give our readers an idea of the character of the lecture: “The entertainment of the season, thus far, was the curious, disjointed, delightful talk of Mark Twain (Clemens is his married name)[sic], last evening, in the Michigan-avenue Baptist Church, below Twenty-second street.

“Every seat in the house, four hundred chairs in the aisles, and standing-room for two or three hundred, were crowded full, when the lank, lantern-jawed, and impudent Californian

bestrode the stage as if it were the deck of a steamboat, and, getting to the middle of the front, rubbed his bony hands, and gazed around. A thin man of five feet ten, thirty-five, or so, eyes that penetrate like a new gimlet, nasal prow projecting and pendulous, carrotty, curly hair, and mustache, arms that are always in the way, expression dreadfully melancholy, he stares inquisitively here and there, and cranes his long neck around the house like a bereaved Vermonter who has just come from the death bed of his mother-in-law, and is looking for a sexton. For something like a minute, he says not a word, but rubs his hands awkwardly, and continues the search. Finally, just as the spectators are about to break into giggles, he opens his capacious mouth, and begins in a slow drawl about three words a minute by the watch.

“Mr. Twain took his auditors on a flying trip to California and the mountain raining-regions; giving alternate glimpses of sense and nonsense, of humor, burlesque, sentiment, and satire, that kept the audience in the most sympathetic mood. He dipped into pathos, rose into eloquence, kept sledding right along in a fascinating nasal snarl, looking and speaking like an embarrassed deacon telling his experience, and punctuating his tardy fun with the most complicated awkwardness of gesture. Now he snapped his fingers; now he rubbed his hands softly, like the catcher of the champion nine; now he caressed his left palm with his dexter fingers, like the end minstrel-man propounding a conundrum; now he put his arms akimbo, like a disgusted auctioneer; and now he churned the air in the vicinity of his imperiled head with his widespread hands, as if he was fighting mosquitoes at Rye Beach. Once he got his arms tangled so badly, that three surgeons were seen to edge their way quietly toward the stage, expecting to be summoned; but he unwound himself during the next anecdote.

“It is plain to see that Twain’s success as a platformer results: first, from his being a genuine humorist with audacity and imagination; secondly, from his slow and solemn speech and his sanctimonious bearing and manner. Then the style of his delivery gives all the effect of spontaneity. The jokes are uttered as if he had just thought of them a minute before, and didn’t perceive the point of them quite as soon as the audience.”

The sale of tickets will commence on Wednesday morning at Mr. Kevinski’s store. Those desiring good seats must secure them early. ¹

Mark Twain began his lecture tour during the month of November 1871. It was a long grueling trip, traveling to cities and towns across the Midwest and East Coast. On November 8, 1871 he was in Hartford, CT; on November 20, 1871, Philadelphia, PA; on November 25, 1871, Reading, PA; on November 29, 1871, Albany, NY; on December 12, 1871, Toledo, OH; December 20, 1871, Logansport, IN; and January 19, 1872, Lancaster, PA. The tour would end in February 1872 and all told he would have seventy-seven speaking engagements in the the course of the six-month journey.



Mark Twain was so widely caricatured that illustrated posters for his lectures often omitted his name, his likeness being all that was needed to draw large crowds.

The topic of Twain's lecture began with "Reminiscences of Some Uncommonplace Characters Whom I Have Chanced to Meet." After growing tired of the subject, Twain decided to change the topic of his talks to "Artemis Ward."² Then before long he again switched topics to "Roughing It." With this, his popularity as a speaker grew. The *Daily Evening Express* of January 16, 1872, wrote about his success:

HOME LECTURE:

Mark Twain's lecture promises to be a grand treat to those who like to laugh.

His lecture on "Roughing It" is

said to be his most successful effort of his life. The Chicago Times says: "It consists chiefly of reminiscences of 'roughing it' in California, with accounts of new discoveries in the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, glowing descriptions of exquisite scenery, droll yarns of life in the bush, which convulsed the audience with laughter during the entire evening." The patrons of the Home Course will bear in mind that the sale of tickets commences to-morrow (Wednesday) morning at Mr. Kevinski's music store. First come first served.³

It would be four years until America would be introduced to "Tom Sawyer," "Huck Finn," or "Becky Thatcher." His most famous novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, would not be published until 1876. However, his

popularity as a speaker is evident with the announcement in the *Daily Evening Express* of January 18, 1872:

*HOME LECTURE: Mark Twain will be complimented on tomorrow evening with one of the finest audiences ever assembled in this city. If any who are not already supplied with tickets desire seats in the hall, they had better secure them at once, as there are very few seats left. Of this lecture on "Roughing It" a New York paper has the following: "It abounded in descriptive passages of rare beauty -really classic in their conception and expression, and delivered with all the effect of finished eloquence, holding the crowded audience in perfect stillness of rapt attention which marks the fine periods of Cutis or Anna Dickinson. Equally well done, to our mind, were the humorous passages. The slightly drawling and apparently seriously-unconscious manor seems to us perfectly adapted to the droll, extravagant humor of Ward and Twain. With the latter it is entirely natural, and not assumed as some suppose. Aside from the fine descriptive passages, and the inimitable stories, his effort abounded in bits of sentiment and flashes of wit that alone redeem many a dull lecture. The audience were 'with' him from the introduction to the close; and the hour and a half seemed robbed of half its clock-ticks."*⁴

No transcript for Twain's lecture has been found but the *Lancaster Intelligencer*, of January 20, 1872 reported that Twain did not enjoy flattering introductions. His favorite introduction was: Ladies and Gentlemen, this is Mark Twain. I only know two things about him. One is that he has never been in the penitentiary, the other is that I don't know why.⁵ Perhaps, he spoke of his silver mining days in Nevada or his travels across the great plains in a stage coach. Or, his days as a newspaper reporter in California. Whatever stories he included, he was a success. The January 20, 1872 *Lancaster Intelligencer* continued on to say:

Mr. Twain's lecture consisted of a humorous description of Nevada, which was portrayed as a desert waste, with only one thing of beauty in it, Lake Tahoe, and one thing of value, the silver mines. From the beginning to end, the speaker held the audience in rapt admiration of his beautiful descriptions of scenery or convulsed them with laughter by his humorous sketches. His manner is admirably suited to his subject and matter, and his strong clear voice enabled all to hear him

*distinctly. Mark Twain is the sensation of our course of lectures.*⁶

The *Daily Evening Express* of January 23, 1872 also gave Twain a rave review:

*MARK TWAIN had the pleasure of addressing one of the finest audiences ever assembled in Lancaster to listen to a platform lecture. It was the only instance in this city in which the tickets for every seat in the Hall were disposed of before the evening of the lecture. Mark, himself, paid Lancaster the compliment of saying that he never appeared before a finer and more appreciative audience, and that if he could always have such audiences he would stick to lecturing as a profession. We understand it his intention to relinquish lecturing at the close of his present engagements.*⁷

Mark Twain, called by some the “Lincoln of our Literature,” would go on to be one of America’s best know authors. His works include; *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches*, *Innocents Abroad*, *Roughing It*, *The Gilded Age*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *A Tramp Abroad*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Mark Twain’s death on April 21, 1910, at his home in Redding, CA was mourned throughout the world.

I wish that I could have been in the Fulton that winter evening to hear Mark Twain speak of the American West. I know I would have left the lecture smiling from his closing remarks: “Ladies and gentleman, after thanking you heartily for the attention you have given me this evening, I desire to wish you a very pleasant good night, and at the same time assure earnestly that I have told nothing but the truth, and I have hardly exaggerated that.”⁸

ENDNOTES

1. *Daily Evening Express*, January 13, 1872, Lancaster, PA.
2. Artemis Ward was the pen name for Charles Farrar Browne, (1834-1867) American humorist, newspaper writer for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and *Vanity Fair* magazine.
3. *Daily Evening Express*, January 16, 1872, Lancaster, PA.
4. *Daily Evening Express*, January 18, 1872, Lancaster, PA.

5. *A History of Professional Entertainment at the Fulton Opera House in Lancaster, Pennsylvania: 1852-1930, A Thesis in Theater Arts*, by Tyler L. Griener, 1977.
6. *Lancaster Intelligencer*, January 20, 1872, Lancaster, PA.
7. *Daily Evening Express*, January 23, 1872, Lancaster, PA.
8. *Mark Twain Speaking*, ed. by Paul Fatout, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City Iowa, 1976. P 62.

William R. Luck has been a research assistant at the Lancaster County Historical Society since 1978. His research on Mark Twain's 1872 visit to the Fulton was conducted in response to an inquiry from the University of California, Berkeley, which is editing Twain's papers and sought verification of his Lancaster appearance.