

Marrying Exhibit Material with a Literary History Study: Samuel Clemens and Bret Harte in the West

I have long been fascinated by the relationship between two famous authors (together in Figure 1) whose paths crossed in California following the 1849 gold rush there. Academic study reveals their various jobs, their first impressions of each other, changes in their writing, how they worked together as friends, and finally—the story behind their falling out.



Fig. 1--John Coulthard (1903-1966) designed linoleum-stamp cachets for many California Motherlode towns having unusual names like Twain-Harte. He left them behind for postmasters to use on additional covers.

I am embellishing this little-known but fascinating story with philatelists by mixing in relevant stamps, postcards, first day covers, and topical ephemera. I realize that good exhibiting practices require the collector to start with their material first and then build a story around it, but I reverse that process by starting with a story and then searching for material to go with it. Most of the philatelic items illustrating this story were previously presented in a display class exhibit created in 2018 for the AMERICOVER show, the APS Stamp Show, and a local university.

My narrative bounces back and forth between Clemens and Harte (only a year apart in age) as they struggle to find their true calling while stumbling around in the rough and tumble towns of Nevada and California. Because he moved West first, I start with Bret Harte.

In 1854, Francis Bret Harte (U.S. Scott 2196, Figure 2) and his sister travel by ship from New York via the isthmus of Panama and another ship to San Francisco (U.S. Scott 147, Figure 3) to reunite with his recently remarried mother. They finally reach her after taking a ferry boat to arrive (Postcard, Figure 4) at the dusty East Bay town of Oakland. Opportunities are limited for seventeen-year-old Harte, (Iwamasa FDC, Figure 5) so he takes the first work he can find. His ability to read and write, his knowledge of basic chemistry, and his ability to measure and package medicines for customers make him a good druggist assistant, a job he holds for two years. (U.S. Scott 1473, Figure 6)



Fig. 2--\$5 Bret Harte stamp of the Great American series issued August 25, 1987.



Fig. 3--18-cent Canal Zone issue of 1949 showing a ship "Leaving Panama for San Francisco" during the 1849 California Gold Rush.



Fig. 4-- This Real Photo post card was mailed from Oakland, CA to Norwich, CT, in 1906. Rules of the period required messages to be on the picture side of the card, not the back.

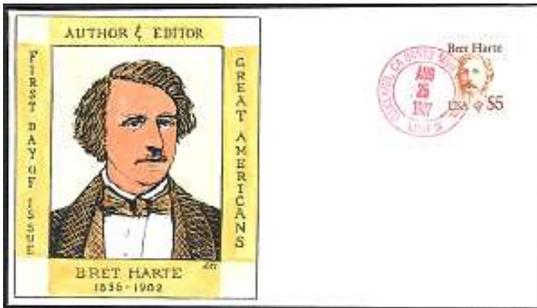


Fig. 5--Unofficial city FDOI cancel on a hand painted cover by Robert T. Iwamasa (RTI), the only cachet maker to note Harte's Oakland connection.



Fig. 6-- The pharmacy stamp (issued Nov. 10, 1972) was so popular with pharmacists that few FDCs bearing it remain for sale.

During that time, he listens to fisherman, stevedores, wagon drivers, farmers, ranchers, and drunkards talk about their ailments, and those of their wives and children. Soon, he can recite their words and peculiar speech mannerisms like a stage actor. Memories of that time become inspiration for some of the popular local color stories he writes years later.

Clemens, like Harte, has worked during his youth at several jobs. He learns type setting, writes for newspapers, and pilots river boats (U.S. Scott 4545, Figure 7) but does not yet have a goal for his life at age 26. He knows it is time to leave Missouri before the Civil War gets dangerously serious.



Fig. 7-- February 13, 1940, 10-cent stamp honoring Samuel Clemens as part of the U.S. Famous American series.



Fig. 8-- Junior cachetmaker Ian Calle's hand drawn Mark Twain has riverboat clipart and a digital color postmark for the 44-cent June 25, 2011, Literary Arts issue.

Clemens moves West seven years after Bret Harte, in 1861. He travels by stagecoach from Missouri to the new territory of Nevada with his brother Orion, who will serve as secretary to the governor. The brothers cross the country on the new Central Overland Route in a mail-carrying coach which Sam later describes in *Roughing It* as “a great swinging and swaying stage, of the most sumptuous description—an imposing cradle on wheels.” (Ridgley postcard, Figure 9) As they crossed the Great Plains, they want to catch a glimpse of a Pony Express rider flashing by, but it happens so quickly (Figure 10, Fogt cachet) that they are not sure it really happened.



Fig. 9-- The W.T. Ridgley Calendar Company printed this postcard in the early 1900s, showing an image by Charles M. Russell. The printing on this card is mis-aligned, placing both front and back content too high.

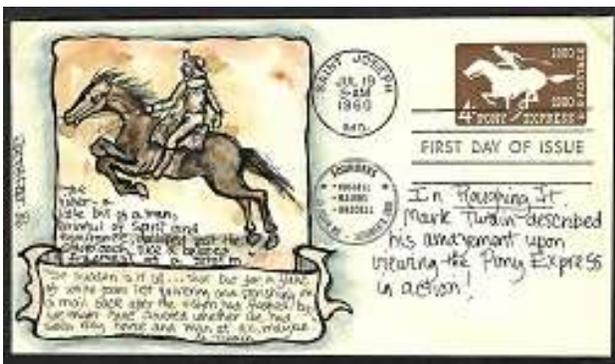


Fig. 10-- In 1986, Judith Fogt added this one-of-a-kind hand-drawn cachet to a 1960 embossed envelope commemorating the Pony Express.

Clemens and his brother arrive at Carson City, the fledgling capital of the Territory of Nevada, in August 1861. This is ten years after the first Nevada settlement a few miles away in Genoa (U.S. Scott 999, Figure 11) and three years before Nevada attains statehood (U.S. Scott 1248, Figure 12).



Fig. 11-- 3-cent Nevada First Settlement Centennial, July 14, 1951, depicting a scene in the Carson River Valley.



Fig. 12-- 5-cent Statehood Centennial July 22, 1964, issued in Carson City, NV

The job helping his brother does not turn out as anticipated. In *Roughing It*, Clemens recalls “I had become an officer of the government, but that was for mere sublimity. The office was a unique sinecure. I had nothing to do and no salary. I was private secretary to His Majesty the Secretary and there was not yet writing enough for two of us.” Clemens does, however, send a few letters to the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*, and is surprised when the editor prints them. Not following up on the publishing of his letters, he experiments with other ways to make money in Nevada.

After his pharmacy job, Harte travels to many towns in California (Artemaster cachet, Figure 13) trying different ways to make a living and gaining valuable experiences to draw upon later. Figure 14 is a clipart map listing and showing a larger view of the towns on the Artemaster cachet. Not finding travel details in my research of those earliest years, I assume young Harte must have hitched rides on wagons or simply walked from town to town.

After a brief tutoring job near Oakland ends, Harte travels to a spot near Sonora and opens a school but a shortage of water and declining gold veins cause families to move away. Harte does not have enough students to maintain the school. He wanders down the road attempting to find gold like everybody else but that fruitless struggle leads to failure and starvation near Tuolumne. Harte is saved by miner Jim Gillis who lets him stay in a cabin on Jackass Hill (Gillis Cabin PC, Figure 15)—the same place Clemens takes refuge seven years later. Harte next works a few months in the spring of 1857 as an agent and messenger for Wells Fargo (U.S. Scott U27, Figure 16).



Fig. 13-- The tiny foreground map on this Artemaster cachet shows many of the places where Bret Harte lived in California.



Fig. 14— The author combined this text, arrow legend, and clipart on an exhibit page to show town names where Harte lived in California.



Fig. 15-- Unused linen post card created by the C.T. Art-Colortone company in 1947 from a black and white photograph. Distributed by Frasher's, Inc., Pomona, California. Caption at bottom: "On the Mark Twain-Bret Harte Trail, California."



Fig. 16-- U.S. Scott U27 Star Die, used by Wells Fargo. It was routed to Sacramento from Jackson, one of many Mother Lode towns in the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Harte then moves from the gold country to San Francisco for a few months where he contributes ten unremarkable poems to the *Golden Era*. He soon leaves San Francisco, writing that he is tired of the “dirty streets, sand hills, bricks and mortar” and seeks a change of climate. He boards a north-bound steamer to Eureka in Humboldt County to be closer to his sister who is living in Uniontown. Harte tutors two sons of rancher Charles Liscomb in reading, spelling, geography, and arithmetic. He stays on the Liscomb ranch from October 1857 through March 1858.

Harte’s next job is in Northern California working as a printer’s assistant for the *Northern Californian* in December 1858. It is a weekly paper in Uniontown, now named Arcata. Typesetting was dirty tedious work but when the editor was absent, Harte contributes articles and

essays. During such editor absences, Harte attempts to defend the retaliatory actions of local Wiyots when accused of outrages: “It is a painful reflection that the provocation is usually the work of the white civilizer.”

The California Militia patrols the area to protect the cattle and property of ranchers. Their Indian War mission to exterminate “savages” becomes evident when, on February 26, 1860, white settlers murder over 60 of the Wiyot tribe on an island in Humboldt Bay. (Not surprisingly, I could find no philatelic material or ephemera to represent this event in my exhibit; early photographers, if any were around, may have been discouraged from recording it.) Harte condemns the killings in a newspaper editorial and then must flee angry and threatening citizens who are not in sympathy with his social justice principles. He boards the *SS Columbia* (Genuine Photo postcard, Figure 17) to sail back to San Francisco, hoping to find more writing and editing work in a place that honors freedom of the press. He returns to the *Golden Era* as a typesetter.



Fig. 17— The *SS Catherine* is like the *SS Columbia* boarded by Harte. Postcard by the Eastern Illustrating & Publishing Co. in Belfast, Maine.

Two years after Harte’s misadventure, Clemens hires on at the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise* and begins three years of flamboyant news writing. His articles for this Nevada daily paper, first as a reporter and later as feature editor, range from humorously ridiculous to outrageously dangerous. He rides a wave of local popularity for a while, but finally goes too far with negative articles and essays that push against popular sentiment and get him into trouble. He heads for San Francisco (like Harte) when he must suddenly escape Virginia City to avoid an illegal duel arising out of a questionable fundraising tactic. [See Sanitary Commission sidebar.] He makes his escape aboard the California Stage, leaving under a cloud of shame on May 29, 1864.



Fig. 18-- The stagecoach is a classic mail transportation mode depicted by the 20th Universal Postal Congress issue, November 19, 1989.

In San Francisco, Clemens hires on as a beat reporter for the *Morning Call*, a job he later calls “soulless drudgery.” This is more bitter medicine, but he learns from it and hones his social satire, developing a cutting moral slant in his humor. He keeps his eyes and ears open for a higher level better-paying writing position on a different paper.

[Sanitary Commission Sidebar

One of Clemens’ last wild-hoax pieces concerns a competitive local charity drive. He is inspired by the actions of a Hannibal, Missouri school mate Reuel Gridley who carries a large sack of flour from town to town in Nevada, auctioning it off repeatedly to raise funds for the U.S. Sanitary Commission.

The U.S. Sanitary Commission was a private relief agency authorized by federal legislation on June 18, 1861, to support sick and wounded soldiers of the Union Army during the American Civil War. Nationwide, it raised nearly \$25 million to support the cause and enlisted thousands of volunteers. Well-known supporters included Clara Barton (U.S. Scott 967, side bar Figure 1), Dorothea Dix (U.S. Scott 1844, side bar Figure 2), Louisa May Alcott (U.S. Scott 862, side bar Figure 3), and Elizabeth Blackwell (U.S. Scott 1399, side bar Figure 4).



SB Fig. 1-- U.S. Scott 967, 3-cent Clara Barton issued September 7, 1948.



SB Fig. 2-- U.S. Scott 1844, 1-cent Dorothea Dix issued September 23, 1983, part of the Great American series.



SB Fig. 3-- U.S. Scott 862, 5-cent Louisa May Alcott issued February 5, 1940, part of the Famous American series, Literature.



SB Fig. 4-- U.S. Scott 1399, 18-cent Elizabeth Blackwell issued January 20, 1974, part of Prominent Americans series.

Clemens stirs up trouble by falsely accusing a rival newspaper, the *Daily Union*, of outbidding the *Territorial Enterprise* at one of these flour auctions and then refusing to pay. The two papers exchange insults and counter accusations. Clemens caps his (often drunken) bullying and baiting with a challenge to the editor of the *Daily Union*, demanding “the satisfaction due to a gentleman.”

Clemens has at least two fearful second thoughts about this foolish challenge. First, dueling is against the law in Nevada, and anyone convicted of issuing a challenge could spend ten years in prison. Second, Clemens has no skill handling a pistol and realizes he has put himself in mortal danger. It is time to get out of town. Some historians also believe that Clemens’ behavior was a symptom of his restlessness; he was jaded by his negative news writing and ready to move on to other things.] –end side bar.

While working for the *Humboldt Times*, the *Northern Californian*, and the *Golden Era*, Harte writes social commentary, a news column, eleven poems, and a mix of sketches, stories,

and serials. His writing attracts the patronage of Jessie Benton Frémont who arranges for him to work in a series of well-paying government jobs.

Because of his own and his wife's spendthrift ways (Carte de viste, Figure 19), he must begin writing again after a 15-month hiatus, to supplement his government salary. He sells dozens of poems and twenty-three stories to the *Golden Era* and to the San Francisco *Evening Bulletin* between July 1862 and May 1864. He attempts to cater to the literary market, including longer stories serialized in many installments. He is learning and experimenting, sometimes ending up with results that disgust him, but the writing community is taking favorable notice of his work.



Fig. 19-- The 1860s dresses Harte's wife liked to buy may have been the style on this "carte de viste." Such photographs had a tax paid with a revenue stamp on the back.

In May of 1864, shortly after Clemens arrives in town, Harte becomes the main contributor and fill-in editor for a new sixteen-page literary weekly called the *Californian*. Clemens admires the writing in this new publication, wishing he too could contribute articles. In a review he writes for the *Morning Call*, he says of Harte: "Some of the most exquisite productions which have appeared in its pages emanated from his pen and are worthy to take rank among even Dickens' best sketches." (2012 G.B. Dickens mini-sheet, Figure 20)



Fig. 20—These four British stamps depict scenes from *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Editing the *Californian* is a part-time job; Harte's better-paying more-secure position is with the San Francisco Mint, located in the building with the offices of the *Morning Call*. Clemens soon gets his wish for a position on the *Californian* when his editor-boss, George Barnes, takes him downstairs to meet Harte.

Harte later remembers his first impression of the "Washoe Giant," a name given to Clemens in Nevada: "His head was striking." He had "curly hair," an "aquiline nose," and "an eye so eagle-like that a second lid would not have surprised me...His eyebrows were very thick

and bushy. His dress was careless, and his general manner one of supreme indifference to surroundings and circumstances.” The Gurney & Son 1860-1865 photograph shown here (Figure 21) is a reproduction printed on a modern picture postcard in 1999 for the Mark Twain Bookstore in Virginia City, Nevada. As Harte remarks, Clemens did not dress like this for his new job; the formal Gurney portrait required a better grooming standard.

The two young men are strikingly different. Clemens recalls the short petite Harte as having a “distinctly pretty” face, despite smallpox scars. Harte is always “more intensely fashionable than the fashionablest [sic] of the rest of the community,” He often wears a brightly colored necktie (Goldberg FDC, Figure 22), “a flash of flame under his chin...[or] indigo blue and as hot and vivid as if one of those splendid and luminous Brazilian butterflies had lighted there.”

Fig. 21—Gurney photo portrait of the young Mark Twain. on a picture postcard.

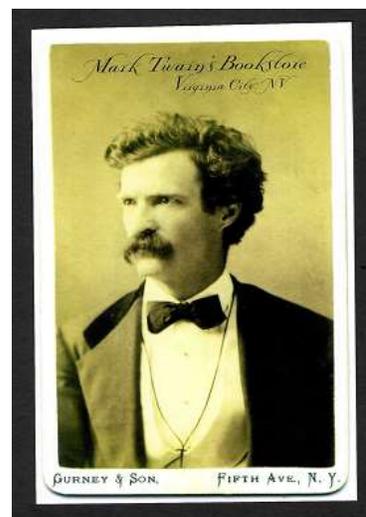


Fig. 22—Bernard Goldberg cachets are known for beautiful calligraphy and bright colors. This one is printed from original hand drawn artwork.

Shortly after their introduction, Harte hires Clemens to begin writing for the *Californian*. Clemens tries hard to produce prose that is significantly more professional than his work for the *Morning Call* or the *Territorial Enterprise*. His humor never disappears, but he uses it more carefully to parody and spoof newspaper advice columnists, theater critics, and local reporters. He writes social-critique fictions, aiming them at what people do versus what they say, what their treasured institutions look like versus how they imagine them. He mixes in some folk philosophy and includes flash backs to his recent adventures in mining camps. His work is showing some moral edginess.

Meanwhile, Harte too is changing his writing focus. While still working at the Mint and editing for the *Californian*, he also contracts to serve as the Western correspondent for publishers in the East by sending a steady stream of letters, prose, and essays describing California (U.S. Scott 3438, Figure 23) civilization as though it is a foreign country. He has had a good run with the *Californian*, publishing almost a hundred pieces of poetry, prose, and condensed novel parodies of works by Dumas, Bulwer-Lytton, Charlotte Bronte, James Fenimore Cooper (U.S.

Scott 860, Figure 24), Charles Dickens, and others, but now he is reaching for new inspiration. Compared to Clemens, Harte writes less flamboyantly, with more subjective humor, and conservatively.



Fig. 23-- U.S. Scott 3438, the 33-cent California Statehood sesquicentennial issue of September 8, 2000.



Fig. 24-- U.S. Scott 860, 2-cent Famous Americans author James Fenimore Cooper on an Adam Bert mini FDC, stamp issued and canceled January 29, 1940.

The editor of the *Republican* in Springfield, Massachusetts praises Harte by saying "...we have few newspaper and magazine writers in the East that have so charming and cultivated a fancy, so delicate and innocent a satire." Harte is gaining popular recognition in the East while Clemens is slowly becoming familiar to readers in San Francisco and other nearby towns.

Just as his writing momentum builds during the first two months on staff for the *Californian*, Clemens must suddenly leave town. His best friend, Steve Gillis, flees to Nevada when released from jail and leaves Clemens with the debt for his bail bond. Clemens temporarily escapes bill collectors by going to the mountains of Tuolumne County, staying in the same rough cabin (owned by Steve's brother Jim) where Harte was rescued seven years before. He attempts to survive on pocket mining. (TUCOPEX cover, Figure 25)



Fig. 25-- This 1984 Tuolumne County philatelic show cover features the Gillis cabin. It is franked with the 1-cent Quill & Ink, 11-cent Early Printing Press, and 8-cent Tom Sawyer.

The pickings are slim, and a long rainy season adds to his misery. But the experience does give him one valuable thing to take back to San Francisco three months later: an exaggerated, hugely funny folktale about two con men wagering on a jumping frog. He hears the story in an Angels Camp tavern first, and then hears it again from his friend Jim who knows how to deliver such humor. He later remembers it as "the one gleam of jollity that shot across our dismal sojourn in the rain and mud."

When Clemens returns from his interlude in Tuolumne three months later, he shares the jumping frog (Angels Camp Frog, Figure 26) tale with Harte. The funny yarn, told in Clemens' slow, back-country drawl, tickles and delights Harte so much that he strongly urges Clemens to write it up and get it published. But Clemens discovers it is extremely difficult to transcribe an oral yarn into words on paper. He cannot give it his full and immediate attention because he is in a state of high anxiety about his ability to write for a living while, paradoxically, scrambling to write dozens of pieces for several other publications to pay his bills. He misses a deadline to get the tale into a collection of humor published by Artemus Ward, but eighteen months later in November 1865 manages to get "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog" printed in the New York *Saturday Press*. It is a smashing success.



Fig. 26—A postcard showing one of many historical markers at Angels Camp, the town where Mark Twain first heard the jumping frog tale. Card distributed by Desert Souvenir Supply, Boulder City, Nevada.



Fig. 27-- An Angels Camp souvenir printed on back as "Photo Post Card" on "Kodak Paper", undated, publisher unknown by the author.

While Clemens is becoming known across the nation, Harte's literary creativity is beginning to slow down. His name is still getting attention, but recently he is more a subject of controversy than a praise-worthy author. He inadvertently starts a culture war between provincials and urbanites by too selectively editing a new anthology of California verse titled *Outcroppings*. The publisher, Anton Roman, wants to showcase the finest writers of the West

and invites poets from all over the state to send their work for consideration. Harte rejects most of the 3,000 contributions because he considers them too pastoral, overly focused on the California landscape (Golden Gate, Figure 28). He favors only nineteen poets, many of whom are friends and fellow members of the Bohemians, a San Francisco literary society. The book is well-received in the East and ridiculed in the West. Warring critical reviews keep it in the spotlight, thus generating strong sales during the Christmas season of 1865.



Fig. 28-- Text on this postcard: "Golden Gate at Sunset, From Oakland, California." Published by Edward H. Mitchell when postage was one cent.

Although Harte and Clemens experience success and gain literary fame, both are still struggling with finances. The need for money influences most of their decisions about what to write, where to send it, and how to promote it. Both want to establish a higher-level reputation in the East; they become tired of California and search for opportunities to move on.

In March 1866; Clemens convinces editors of the *Sacramento Union* to pay him as a travel correspondent while on a four-month visit to Hawaii (U.S. Scott C46, Figure 29, and U.S. Scott C55, Figure 30). He sends twenty-five dispatches to the *Union* that entertain and inform mainland readers about the exotic customs, costumes, food, and tropical life he encounters. One of those dispatches is about the sinking of the USS Hornet, in which he claims to interview eleven survivors. His sensational scoop is the first news of the shipwreck to appear in the American press. He later sells a longer version of the story to *Harper's Monthly*.



Fig. 29-- U.S. Scott C46, 80-cent airmail, issued March 26, 1956, shows profile of Oahu volcanic tuff cone known as Diamond Head.



Fig. 30-- U.S. Scott C55, 7-cent airmail, issued August 21, 1959, to commemorate Hawaii's statehood date.

Upon his return to California, Clemens wants to produce something about his recent experiences in Hawaii, but not necessarily in a publication. Remembering the popularity of stage humorist Artemus Ward from two years earlier, Clemens prints handbills and newspaper ads, and reserves venues all over California and Nevada in preparation for a speaking tour. His first engagement, on October 2, 1866, packs the Academy of Music in San Francisco with the opera crowd, the governor, and Bret Harte's friends. His style is uniquely intimate, casual, and unpretentious; rather than lecturing, he connects with the audience on a personal level. With some envy, Harte comments that Clemens "took his audience by storm," and "I think I recognize a new star rising in this western horizon." (Dragon Card, Figure 31)



Fig. 31-- Lloyd de Vries printed this public domain image from an 1870s humor magazine *Puck* and serviced it with a combo of related Mark Twain stamps. His "Dragon Card" measures 6.75 x 5 inches.

In June of 1867, Clemens gets a traveling correspondent assignment for the *Daily Alta California*. He goes on a tour of Europe (Venice landmark, Figure 32) and the Holy Land (Damascus, Figure 33) in the company of 76 other middle-class tourists. Upon his return to California, he asks Harte for help editing a huge messy pile of notes and drafts about his recent travels. He wants to publish a book titled *The Innocents Abroad*. (He knows from bitter experience that proper preparation is important; an earlier attempt at marketing a book version of his jumping frog story failed miserably because of poor editing and printing.) Harte does an excellent job for Clemens, who later remarks that Harte "trimmed & trained & schooled me patiently until he changed me from an awkward utterer of coarse grotesquenesses [sic] to a writer of paragraphs & chapters that have found a certain favor." Clemens is full of enthusiasm about their friendship and new working relationship.



Fig. 32-- This St. Mark's Basilica postcard was mailed from Venice to New York in April 1900, when postal rules dictated that no messages could be written on the back where the address and stamp belonged.



Fig. 33-- A landscape view of Damascus on an unused divided back postcard, printed in Germany.

It is amazing that Harte is willing to help Clemens with his *Innocents* manuscript at this time. Harte is in the middle of another new publication contract, editing the *Overland Monthly* for Anton Roman. (Van Natta FDC, Figure 34).



Fig. 34-- The only cachet showing Harte reading the *Overland Monthly* depicts it as a newspaper instead of a magazine.

The publisher pushes for fiction pieces about the early California miners, so Harte writes “The Luck of Roaring Camp,” a story with satire and irony about an infant named Tommy Luck who is cared for by a group of crusty miners after his prostitute mother dies in childbirth.

Not everyone gets the nativity irony, but most love the “Luck” story. The piece gets praise first from eastern papers and then the local press. The *Nation* gives a typical positive review, saying “The Luck” is “one of the best magazine articles that we have read in many months,” with “pathos and humor” that “take it out of mere magazine writing and give it a place in literature.” Harte goes on to write more gold camp fiction in “The Luck” style, producing the romantic view of characters and places that his mostly eastern reading public wants. Nearly 100 years later, introducing a 1964 paperback edition of Harte’s stories, John Columbo says “He described imaginative and irresistible characters. He constructed exciting plots, and he sympathized with those people fate singled out to die in snowfalls or floods. Harte is an American Charles Dickens, for he has Dicken’s human weakness for absurd detail, audacious humor, outrageous dialogue and dialect.” (Paperback Cover, Figure 35)

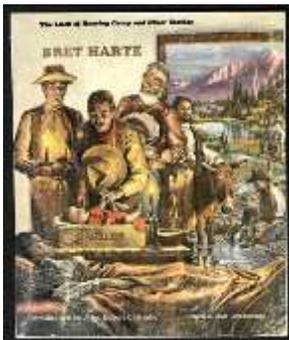
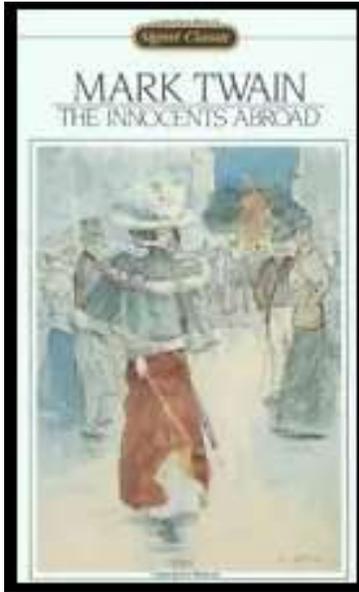


Fig. 35-- The bottom two-thirds of a cover from a 1964 paperback collection of Harte’s local color stories. It pictures an imagined scene from *The Luck of Roaring Camp*.

Meanwhile, Clemens leaves California, heading east to get his Harte-edited manuscript published. He delivers it to publisher Elisha Bliss Jr. on July 3, 1868 and waits. And waits some more. In the meantime, he persistently courts the woman of his dreams, writing 184 letters to persuade her into marriage. She is Olivia Langdon, a graduate of the Elmira Ladies' Seminary who represents well her refined Victorian upbringing in a wealthy family. She has never been



exposed to the rough-hewn frontier culture of the West. Once she accepts his engagement, “Livy” begins helping him with the page proofs of *The Innocents Abroad* by lining through all the rough phrases that might offend his intended reading audience. Those finishing touches have an impact. After the 650-page book is finally published in July 1869, over 82,524 copies sell in its first eighteen months. Mark Twain, the pen name by which Clemens is now very well known, earns the 2014 equivalent of \$217,000. He has a genuine best seller. (*Innocents Abroad*, Figure 36)

Fig. 36-- A 1966 paperback book cover of an *Innocents Abroad* reprint, published by Signet for mass consumption.

Twain promotes sales of his book by traveling to speaking engagements and by writing to newspaper editors for good reviews. His publisher sends two thousand advance copies to those editors to help with press coverage. He expects Bret Harte to receive one of those copies for a review in the *Overland Monthly* (Magazine image, Figure 37), especially since Harte was so instrumental in the pre-publishing process. But then something goes wrong; the western book distributor refuses to provide Harte with a review copy. Harte takes great offense at this snub and sends what Clemens describes as “the most daintily contemptuous & insulting letter you ever read,” even though Clemens claims he is not to blame. The event casts a pall on their friendship; they are not speaking to each other now.

Over the next several years, Clemens and Harte become antagonistic competitors. They are both writing about the western experience they remember, embellishing and fictionalizing it, but their styles are different. Harte rides a wave of popularity greater than Clemens’ because his post-Civil War eastern audience prefers a more romantic refined

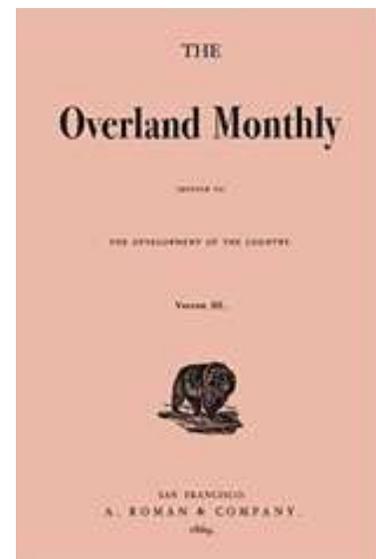


Fig. 37-- Web image of an early *Overland Monthly*. The magazine stayed popular for decades and is still available in reproduction printings and on Kindle.

style with plots and dialog like those in novels by Charles Dickens. Clemens describes Harte “as a literary swindler: showy, meretricious, insincere,” a master of “artificial reproductions,” the originator of “a dialect which no man in heaven or earth had ever used.” Clemens starts to write a memoir-style book, *Roughing It*, in which he attempts to counter that influence and present a more laid-back folksy view of western events and places in his own idiomatic style. But the work is not coming together well, and he is falling behind the Harte popularity train.

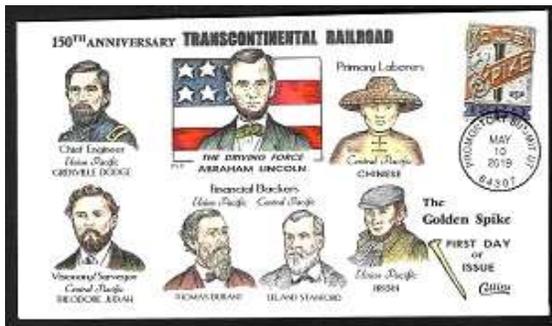
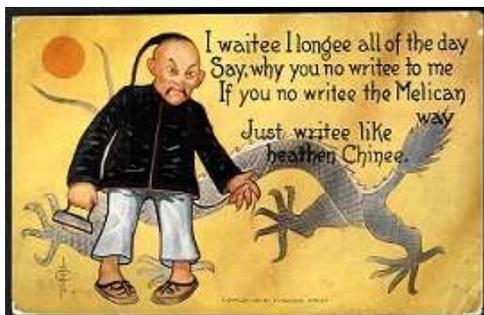


Fig. 38-- A Fred Collins cachet for the 2019 Transcontinental Railroad issue, *The Golden Spike*. I like it for depicting the Chinese and the Irish.

Trains. Completion of the transcontinental railroad (Collins FDC, Figure 38) in 1869 changes everything in San Francisco. The city loses its beneficial economic status as the only entry port for goods from the eastern United States and foreign countries. Eastern market competition causes shrinking local sales, falling wages, and high unemployment in the West. Thousands of Chinese railroad construction workers flood the city looking for new jobs, competing with the Irish working class. Violent racism is rampant. Harte still abhors racism, remembering the treatment of Indians in Humboldt County. In September 1870, he decides to write a scathing satiric poem on the subject called “Plain Language from Truthful James.” After it appears in the *Overland Monthly*, it becomes the most popular piece Harte has written to date.

The story is about a card game in which both the Chinese man Ah Sin and his two white opponents are cheating. Ah Sin cheats more skillfully and wins. His opponents are furious at his trickery, ranting “We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor.” This inverted name calling exposes the hypocrisy of white racists who blame all their troubles on cheap Chinese labor. The poem is so popular that it is republished in newspapers across the country, and it doubles sales of the *Overland Monthly*. Harte’s east coast publisher rushes to print a collection of poetry that includes “Plain Language from Truthful James” in time for Christmas sales. The first six editions sell out in five days. Harte realizes later that the piece is popular because most readers misunderstand the



message; they do not recognize the satire, they take the piece seriously as an endorsement of anti-Chinese racism. (Haffner Postcard, Figure 39)

Fig. 39-- A 1911 postcard published by F.J. Haffner still showing misconceptions about Chinese Americans more than 40 years after Harte’s satire.

While Harte is negotiating from a position of power for more money via speaking engagements and by contracting with publishers, Clemens is pulling himself up from a bout of self-doubt and bad times. In the two years since publishing *The Innocents Abroad*, he and Livy suffer through the premature birth of their first child and Livy battles typhoid fever. They must move from Buffalo, New York, to her childhood home in Elmira so that she may regain her health. A few days a week, Clemens retreats to a nearby idyllic old farmhouse (Quarry Farm, Figure 40), where he is now able to continue work on *Roughing It*. He gets encouragement from Joe Goodman who was editor of the *Territorial Enterprise* when Clemens worked there nine years before. He is beginning to feel more confident again.



Fig. 40-- A 1909 postcard of the Langdon family Elmira farmhouse where Clemens worked on *Roughing It*. Published by C.S. Woolworth & Co.

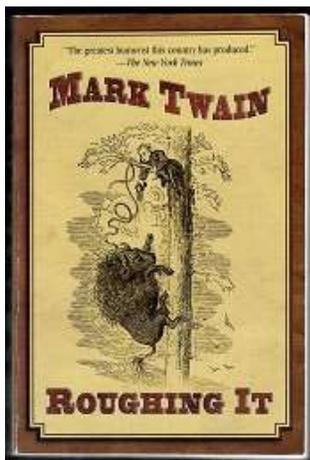


Fig. 41-- This 2014 edition of *Roughing It* includes images from the original and is (as Twain remarks) “Fully Illustrated by Eminent Artists.” Reprint is by Skyhorse Publishing.

The see-saw ups and downs of writing continue for both writers. Clemens successfully publishes *Roughing It* (Book cover, Figure 41) and becomes the darling of readers everywhere, even in Europe. Harte however, after moving back east, is still in trouble with his creditors, fails as a public speaker, and misses writing deadlines. He puts on a good public face and bites back when criticized, but knows he is on shaky ground. The little he writes now is mostly revised or resurrected work from his previous output. He has nothing new; his muse is gone. At an especially low point in 1872 when he cannot pay the rent, he visits Clemens and asks for help. Because of their past friendship, Clemens loans Harte \$500, even while knowing it will not be repaid.

Their final project together happens after Clemens returns to Connecticut from England in 1876. He writes to one of his long-time loyal publishers, William Dean Howells, “Harte came up here the other day & asked me to help him write a play & divide the swag, & I agreed.” The play resurrects the character named Ah Sin from Harte’s “Plain Language from Truthful James,” to extract humor from a racial stereotype of Chinese coolie laborers. They aim only for commercial success by milking remaining national interest in the Far West. The story is set in a California mining camp and has the flavor of a dime novel. It goes against their earlier liberal Bohemian ethics concerning justice for minority races and cultures. Harte especially is uncaring of quality writing and fairness at this point; he has hit rock bottom, is now a drunk, a condition not captured in this 1957 Old Crow Whiskey advertisement from Life Magazine (Figure 41). He will do anything to ease his financial crisis. Clemens suggests they capitalize on the popularity of actor Thomas Parsloe Jr., who is known for his comedic portrayal of a Chinese laundryman in the play “Two Men of Sandy Bar.”



Fig. 42-- The top half of this Life Magazine page (entire is 10" x 14") imagines both authors at Mark Twain's home in Connecticut, an idealized scene.

The former friends pull the play together, but not with pleasure. By now, they have lost respect for one another and maintain internal lists of grievances and irritations. Part-way through the creation process, Clemens sends a critical note to Harte and Harte responds with a long letter of counteraccusations and proposes a more equal footing between them. Clemens erupts in full anger and takes over the entire project. A mean streak and his push for profit flavors his pre-opening publicity. Poor timing, poor taste, and below-standard writing result in a quick closing of the play known as “Ah Sin” in the fall of 1877. Unfortunately, it also marks the end of a ten-year association; Clemens and Harte will never see each other again.

Clemens and Harte experience a similar range of hardships, periods of self-doubt, peer support, and lucky timing between 1854 and 1868 while they are in California. Both write better after surviving an especially difficult downturn in fortune. Both gain inspiration for the plot and setting of a career-boosting story after moving away from trouble in one town and moving to another. The people they meet and places they observe affect their perspectives on Western culture, their choices of genre, their ability to write dialog, and their marketing skills. Each gains popularity by writing about what they experienced. Their future careers are shaped by the West.

Selected Bibliography

Although I consulted eleven sources while doing research for this story, I list the five below that most significantly helped me understand what happened to Bret Harte and Sam Clemens while they were in the West.

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