

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist and Dennis Myers, Journalist

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"One of the oddest episodes in a life more than commonly filled with the unusual is the duel Sam Clemens did not fight," wrote Leland Krauth in *Mississippi Quarterly* (Fall 1980). "Clemens' challenges to James L. Laird, one of the owners of the *Virginia City Daily Union*, were never accepted; there was no confrontation on the field of honor."

In a drama that matches the traditional romance of the West, young prospector-reporter Sam Clemens, a.k.a. Mark Twain, supposedly departed Nevada on May 29, 1864 to avoid fighting a duel over some items he had written impugning the honor of a group of Carson City socialites. The truth is probably more prosaic: Nevada Territory, and particularly Virginia City, where Clemens wrote for the *Territorial Enterprise*, was suffering an economic depression. The mines were shutting down, the population of the once-great Comstock silver lode was hemorrhaging, and Clemens likely was just another of the departing pilgrims seeking greener pastures.

He had resigned his commission as a notary public in Virginia City in April. Moreover, Clemens'

popularity on the Comstock was in decline. And finally, he was restless and anxious to move on; "I wanted to see San Francisco," he later wrote in *Roughing It* (1872). "I wanted to go somewhere. I wanted- I did not know what I wanted. I had spring fever and wanted a change, principally, no doubt."

And what about the duel? Samuel Clemens, while in charge of the *Enterprise* in his editor's absence, made trouble for himself in May 1864. Clemens, during a drinking spree, wrote an article facetiously suggesting that money raised by prominent Carson City women for the Sanitary Fund--a Civil War relief organization that helped care for sick and wounded soldiers and their families--went to an eastern miscegenation society and that the rival Virginia City Daily Union was not meeting its pledges to the fund. Fellow reporter William Wright, a.k.a. Dan DeQuille, had convinced Clemens not to publish the injudicious story. However, while Clemens was briefly out of the *Enterprise* office, the foreman found the copy on a table and assumed it was left there to be published.

The Carson City socialites were incensed and wrote a scathing letter to the *Enterprise* demanding to know who wrote the article. Union owner James Laird, serving as editor in the absence of his regular editor, angrily rebutted Clemens' indiscrete claims. In his *Autobiography*, Clemens, late in life, wrote that the feud with Laird became so intense that he challenged Laird to a duel and then, thinking better of it, fled Nevada Territory to avoid arrest for violating the anti-dueling law.

There were some articles written about duels in the Comstock newspapers, but they smack of the kind of journalistic jibes and pranks of which Clemens and his colleagues were fond. ("By the privileges of our order," he once said, "we are independent of facts" -- which explains where some of these pieces of Nevada folklore come from.) The fact that Clemens and his pal Steve Gillis embellished the duel yarn as the years passed lends support to the view that the abortive duel may have hastened Clemens' departure but it was not the sole reason he left for California.

Photo: Credit: *The Making of Mark Twain* by John Lauber (1985)

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