by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

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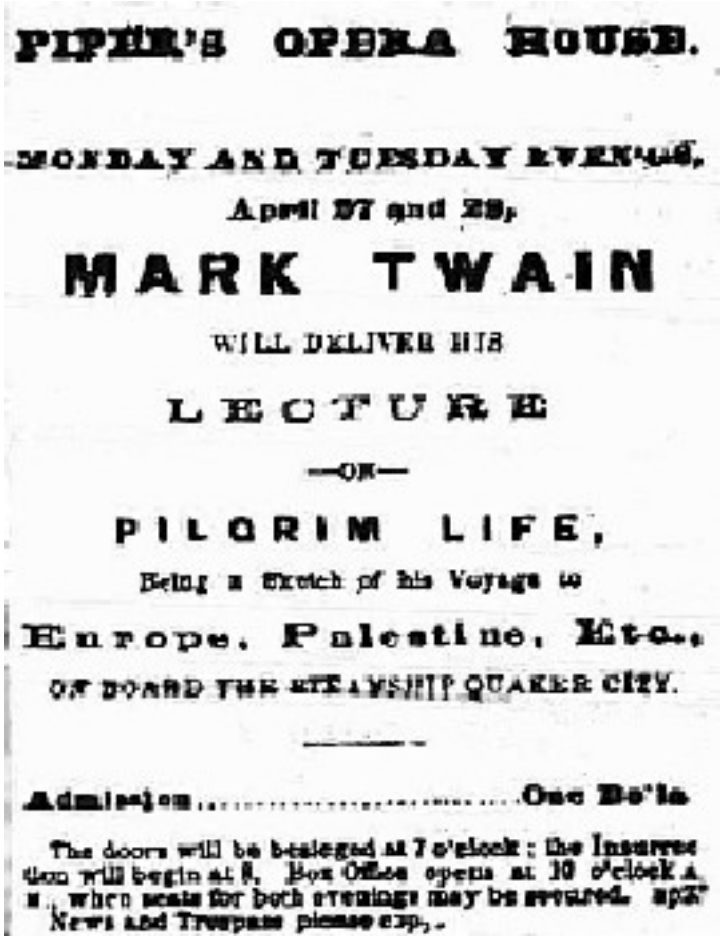
Piper's Opera House in Virginia City was Nevada's premier entertainment venue in the late 19th-century. Practically all entertainers on tour in the far west found their way to Piper's, including the great American author Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens). The myth in this story is that many people believe that Twain lectured in the current Piper's Opera House, the third building with that name. Its location at the northwest intersection of B and Union Streets dates to 1885, having replaced the second Piper's which operated from January 29, 1878 until it burned in 1883.



PIPER'S OPERA HOUSE.

MONDAY AND TUESDAY EVENINGS,

April 27 and 28,

MARK TWAIN

WILL DELIVER HIS

LECTURE

—ON—

PILGRIM LIFE,

Being a Sketch of his Voyage to

Europe, Palestine, Etc.,

ON BOARD THE STEAMSHIP QUAKER CITY.

Admission.....One Dollar

The doors will be besieged at 7 o'clock; the Insurrection will begin at 8. Box Office opens at 10 o'clock A. M., when seats for both evenings may be secured. apl7

News and Troupers please copy.

Actually, Mark Twain's last visit to Virginia City found him entertaining audiences in the first Piper's Opera House on D Street between Union and Taylor. That structure, the former Maguire's Opera House, built in 1863, burned down in the great fire of October 26, 1875.

When Twain visited Nevada during his West Coast lecture tour of April/May1868, he brought with him a reputation as a writer and humorist, and his arrival drew applause in the Virginia City newspapers. The *Territorial Enterprise*, where Twain made his mark as a reporter and adopted his now-famous penname a few years earlier, announced, "The celebrated humorist, after having visited the Holy Land and all the principal cities of the world, will again once more press his foot upon his native sagebrush this morning."

Strangely enough, Mark Twain's visit in 1868 is virtually forgotten today, long overshadowed by his first two Nevada sojourns in 1861-64 and 1866. Twain booked Piper's Opera House in Virginia City and the Carson Theater in Carson City. Upon his arrival on April 24, he witnessed a remarkable event, the hanging of John Millian, who had been convicted of the murder of Virginia City prostitute, Julia Bulette. In addition, when Twain took leave of Nevada ten days later--unlike his two previous departures in 1864 and 1866--he did not have to high tail it to California with a cloud over his head.

The crowds attending Twain's lectures on April 27 and April 28, 1868 at Piper's Opera House were much smaller than the horde, some 4,000 onlookers, that witnessed John Millian's execution. The Odd Fellows balls siphoned off many would-be-attendees on Monday night. Before his Tuesday night lecture, Twain drank champagne with journalists Alf Doten, Phil Lynch, and Joe Goodman at the Gold Hill News office. In his diary Doten described Twain's unusual opening at Piper's: "at 8-1/2 oclock a piano was heard in behind the curtain--as it went up, Mark was discovered playing rudely on it, & singing 'There was an old 'hoss & his name was Jerusalem' etc--He came forward & apologized for so introducing things on the ground that if any of them had been waiting behind the curtain as long as he had, they would appreciate some relief of the kind." Doten, who attended both presentations, noted the one-hour talks were "humorous," "pleasing & instructive," and "Much applauded."

On the other hand, Doten observed on the first night, "Not very full house," and on the second, "about the same audience as last." Twain, ever obsessed with his financial condition, did not forget the perceived slight. In 1871, recalling his experience at Piper's--the building drafty and cold--Twain advised James Redpath of the Boston Lyceum Bureau to schedule temperance lecturer John Bartholomew Gough for only "1 night (or possibly 2,) in Virginia City, Nevada (provided you can get a church--for they won't go to that nasty theatre.)" He also referred to the disappointing receipts in a letter to Joe Goodman. As paraphrased in the Territorial Enterprise of March 26, 1869, Twain wrote, "I shall lecture in San Francisco in April or May. Come down boys. I can't go to Virginia, having killed myself twice already in the lecture business." However, Twain's plans fell through, and he never returned to Nevada or California after 1868.

Boarding the stage on May 3, 1868, Twain bid his friends good-bye. For most of his Comstock associates, it was the last time they ever saw Twain. A farewell send-off published in the Enterprise entitled "Going to Leave Us," probably written by lifelong friend Joe Goodman, captured the sentiments of many who knew Twain in his Nevada days:

"Mark Twain leaves this morning for San Francisco. Sorry to see you go, Mark, old boy--but we cannot expect to have you always with us. Go then, where duty calls you, and when the highest pinnacle of fame affords you a resting place remember that in the land of silver and sagebrush there are a host of old friends that rejoice in your success."

(For further reading see: Guy Louis Rocha, "Mark Twain's Forgotten Tour," *Nevada Magazine*, Sept./Oct. 1999)

Photo credits:

Advertisement for Twain's appearance at Piper's Opera House from the *Territorial Enterprise*, April 26, 1868. Courtesy of Nevada State Library and Archives.

Carte-de-visite photograph of Alf Doten in his volunteer fireman's uniform courtesy of the Alfred Doten Collection, Special Collections Department, University of Nevada, Reno.

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