

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

---



Tourists by the tens of thousands flock to Virginia City every year in search of the Wild West and evidence of Mark Twain's time on the Comstock. Anybody who knows anything about Samuel Clemens in Nevada knows he was a reporter for Virginia City's *Territorial Enterprise* newspaper in the early 1860s and adopted the pen name Mark Twain. Many of the visitors want to see where the aspiring young writer worked and find their way to the Territorial Enterprise building and Mark Twain Museum on South C Street between Union and Taylor. But did Twain work there or ever set foot in the building?

The simple answer is no, much to the dismay of those who would like to believe otherwise. Even respected historians such as Richard Lingenfelter in his co-authored study, *The Newspapers of Nevada* (1984), and R. Kent Rasmussen in his encyclopedic work, *Mark Twain A to Z* (1995), claimed Twain worked in the building. The existing Territorial Enterprise structure was constructed after the disastrous fire of October 26, 1875 that burned much of central and northern Virginia City. The new building, located on the site of the previous office at 24 South C Street, saw the first issue of the newspaper published on February 1, 1876.

The large brick building on North C Street between Sutton and Union where Twain was first employed as a *Territorial Enterprise* reporter in September 1862, according to fellow *Enterprise* reporter Dan DeQuille, was destroyed in the 1875 conflagration. The multi-story, brick Territorial Enterprise building with its steam-powered press at 24 South C Street, where Twain worked beginning in the summer of 1863, suffered the same fate. While the desks, presses, and varied equipment in the current Territorial Enterprise building on South C Street are certainly vintage and fascinating, they would not likely be anything that Twain ever sat on, leaned against, wrote on, or had anything to do with in the earlier newspaper offices located on North C Street and South C Street.

At the same time, Mark Twain never set foot in the existing Territorial Enterprise building. In May 1864, in the midst of the region's first mining depression and amid talk of a duel with an angry Virginia City newspaper editor, the Comstock's bad-boy journalist left hurriedly for San Francisco where the *Golden Era* magazine welcomed him as "the Sagebrush Humorist from Silver-Land."



Twain returned twice to his old haunts. Once in 1866 on a lucrative lecture tour the "Wild Humorist of the Pacific Slope" spoke about his recent excursion to the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands. His Hawaiian adventures and the Nevada tour are chronicled in *Roughing It* (1872).

During his second lecture tour in 1868, Twain talked about his trip to Europe and the Middle East, the subject of his next book *Innocents Abroad* (1869). On his first day back in Virginia City, April 24, he witnessed the execution by hanging of John Millian, the alleged murderer of prostitute Julia Bulette.

On May 3, 1868, Mark Twain left Nevada never to return. Twain stayed in contact with his

Comstock cronies over the years. However, much of the Virginia City he knew was laid to waste with the great fire of 1875.

While Mark Twain is inextricably linked to the history of the “Queen City of the Comstock,” you won’t find his Virginia City days associated with the current Territorial Enterprise building on South C Street.

Photos courtesy of the Mark Twain Bookstore, Virginia City, NV. Top: Territorial Enterprise building of today. Bottom: Territorial Enterprise building in the 1940s.

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, December 2005)