

# Mark Twain Circular

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# PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Harry Wonham, University of Oregon



Dear Twainiacs,

I want to make sure everyone is aware that the geographic center of Mark Twain studies is migrating to the West Coast next month, where several distinguished members of this organization will present papers at the Modern Language Association annual conference (yes, the dreaded MLA, redeemable only by virtue of Mark Twain's enduring presence as a focus of discussion and conviviality). A session vacuously entitled "Mark Twain and Our Times," hosted by yours truly, will take place on Friday, January 6, at 12:00 PM-1:15 PM, in downtown San Francisco's Moscone West hotel. I hope those of you who are in San Francisco that day will come hear Gregg Camfield explain that "Disease Made Mark Twain," after which Shelley Fisher Fishkin will discuss "How Hal Holbrook Made Mark Twain a Social Critic for Our Time," followed by Ben Griffin's paper, "Authority, Corruption, and a Black Box: Editing the California *Pudd'nhead Wilson*." If anyone would like to join this crew for lunch after the session, please just let me know.

From San Francisco, the geographic center migrates east in May, where the Mark Twain Circle of America will host two sessions at the American Literature Association conference in Boston from May 25-28, 2023. The line-up for ALA is wide open, so please consider sending me a proposal, and encourage colleagues and promising graduate students to do the same. I've decided to take vacuity to a new level in the call for papers, so absolutely anything goes, including (from the CFP [posted on our website](#)): "innovative proposals on all topics that engage with Mark Twain and Mark Twain studies. We are especially interested in the work of emerging scholars and in perspectives that challenge existing paradigms and assumptions about Mark Twain's life, his work, and his legacy. Please send a short vita and a 1-2 page proposal to Harry Wonham ([wonham@uoregon.edu](mailto:wonham@uoregon.edu)) no later than January 10." (The deadline is somewhat flexible for Circle members who may be just receiving this notice.)

Reviewing what I've just written, I realize that two themes emerge in the paragraphs

# PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

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above: the notion of a shifting geographic center that is fairly easy to trace, and a reluctance on my part to name the actual location and direction of Mark Twain studies, which are not so easy to trace. Where *are* we as a scholarly community, one might ask, whether we are in San Francisco, Boston, Elmira, Hartford, Hannibal, or somewhere else? One answer is that we are everywhere: Mark Twain touches everything, and the phrase I used in the ALA call for papers, “anything goes,” is an apt name for any conference session or lecture series that intends to capture the current state of Mark Twain studies. But this is a dodge and a half-truth. There *is* a coherent, if endlessly complex and diverse, “state” of Mark Twain studies today, and for my money we need look no further than our iPhone or Android device to enter into that state.

What I am obliquely referring to is Matt Seybold’s *American Vandal* podcast, which strikes me as the boldest, most provocative, and most compelling articulation of Mark Twain’s enduring relevance that exists in the media and scholarly landscape of this moment. The first two seasons of the podcast aired in late 2020 and early 2021, featuring prominent Twain scholars, such as Judith Yaross Lee, Brook Thomas, and Kerry Driscoll, talking about issues that animate their research on Mark Twain and his era. I was hooked at this point, but those episodes did not prepare me for the wild ride of “Series” 3 through 7, which explore such topics as: the state of literary studies, viewed through the lens of the Netflix series, *The Chair*; the nature of work and the prospect of a postwork world, featuring economic historian James Livingston; a discussion among native-American literary scholars of Kerry Driscoll’s *Mark Twain among the Indians & Other Indigenous Peoples*, guest-hosted by Mika Turim-Nygren; and a deep dive into HBO’s corporate culture, highlighting the impact of commerce on narrative and representation. What does any of this have to do with Mark Twain and Mark Twain studies? Well, as the *American Vandal* increasingly foregrounds issues of urgent contemporary concern, from reckless monetization in the financial industry to the recent implosion of Twitter and other social media platforms, Mark Twain’s intellectual relevance becomes ever more apparent and ever more inescapable. The changing nature of work under industrial and post-industrial conditions; the uncertain status of “Literature,” with a capital L; the rise of new media and the corporatization of communication industries; the treatment of indigenous people and cultures under settler colonialism; the financialization of everything that money can touch and most of what it cannot: these *were* Mark Twain’s issues, for better or worse, long before they became the defining challenges of our own time. I can’t predict what Mark Twain studies will look like when the Center or Mark Twain Studies hosts its next quadrennial conference four years from now, but every episode of Matt Seybold’s podcast strikes me as a provocation to reexamine the pre-history of our own media-saturated, too-late capitalist moment by way of the writer and thinker who first articulated its complexity. If emerging scholars respond to that provocation, I think the papers delivered in Elmira in 2026 will collectively represent what former president Susan K. Harris, in an inspired CFP from a year ago, called, “Not Your Granddaddy’s Mark Twain.” I think that is where we are and where we are headed, and I look forward to the journey. I hope to see as many of you as possible in San Francisco, Boston, and beyond.

Cheers, Harry



Season's  
Greetings

from the Mark Twain Circle



# ELMIRA CONFERENCE

## Graduate Student Workshop

The inaugural workshop, “From Seminar Paper to Publishable Article: A Workshop for Graduate Students and Recent PhDs” was held at Elmira College and Quarry Farm, August 8-12, 2022. Jointly sponsored by the Mark Twain Circle of America and The Center for Mark Twain Studies at Elmira College, the workshop had five talented participants. They received a stipend, travel funds, and housing and meals at Elmira College.

I was honored to be chosen as the research consultant and mentor for the inaugural workshop, a memorable and productive weeklong experience. The graduate students and recent PhDs were Rosie Click, Thomas H. Howard, Maggie E. Morris Davis, Mira Turim-Nygren, and Elizabeth Cantalamessa, with interdisciplinary topics such as Mark Twain and Cuba, Mark Twain and philosophy, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and brain science, illustrations of childhood poverty, and Mark Twain's use of dialect.



We met for the first two days at the Mark Twain Archives in Gannett-Tripp Library on the Elmira College campus, where the students took full advantage of the holdings to conduct deep and wide-ranging research. On the remaining three days, we met at Quarry Farm, where the students continued to read and began to write and revise. I was very impressed with their diligence and hard work; they all took full advantage of this excellent opportunity. As we know, Mark Twain did much of his best writing at Quarry

# ELMIRA CONFERENCE

## *Graduate Student Workshop*

Farm in the summers spent there, and although they did not have access to a secluded octagonal study, they all found their own special places for work and contemplation.

By the end of the week, they all made impressive progress in converting their shorter papers to longer, article-length manuscripts. It was a pleasure to suggest additional research, read their drafts, and watch as their work expanded in scope, fullness, and depth, and after being retired for five years from teaching, it was good for me to be back in the “classroom” again. The fruits of their good labor will come with eventual publication in academic journals and edited books—watch for these upcoming younger scholars!



The week was also a time of fellowship, bonding, and growing friendships. Many thanks to the Mark Twain Circle and The Center for Mark Twain Studies for providing this inaugural experience, which proved to be a most valuable and productive time for all involved.

John Bird  
Winthrop University



# TWAIN TALK:

Harry Wonham





# TWAIN TALK

an interview with Harry Wonham

**Not to drift too far toward “The Turning Point of My Life,” but do you recall any early experiences with Mark Twain that contributed to your later scholarly interests?**

*I feel as if it would be appropriate to invent a stupendous lie in answer to this question, but the truth is that Mark Twain did not become a significant interest of mine until graduate school at the University of Virginia. It was in Charlottesville, sometime in the late 1980s, that I stumbled into the Clifton Waller Barrett Library, probably in search of a quiet place to read something completely unrelated to Mark Twain. What I discovered in the Barrett Library was an archive containing, according to its own promotional literature, “all known fiction, poetry, drama, and essays published by an American in book form up to and including the year 1875,” including the work of writers “whose achievements were not of first rank but who, nevertheless, occupy a place in the literary history of the Republic.” Needless to say, the archive contained first editions of all the classic texts of ante-bellum America, as well as a treasure trove of obscure, ephemeral, goofy Americana. I quickly put my assigned homework aside (Kafka? Proust? I don’t remember which) and began exploring for fun. The writers “whose achievements were not of the first rank” were the ones I enjoyed most, especially the forgotten and forgettable humorists. I came to Mark Twain’s incomparable achievement by way of this folksy tradition of literary humor in ante-bellum America, to which, I later learned, he owed more than most readers realize.*

**What was your dissertation topic, and who directed your dissertation?**

*My dissertation came directly out of those visits to the Barrett Library. A number of distinguished scholars had undertaken to explain and document Mark Twain’s debts to early American humor. David E. E. Sloane had done (and continues to do) pathbreaking work on Twain’s connections to Northeastern humor and literary comedy; Kenneth Lynn had published his epic *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor* in 1960; and many others, including James M. Cox, Louis J. Budd, and James E. Caron, were exploring the rich terrain of early American humor as a way of refining our appreciation of Mark Twain’s art. I decided to focus my own research on a distinctive form of humorous storytelling, the tall tale, which I had found to be ubiquitous in the Barrett archive’s early American collections from every region in the country. My own dissertation, which became a book in 1993, was called *Mark Twain and the Art of the Tall Tale*. Harold Kolb, who taught the only course on Mark Twain I ever took as a student, was my dissertation director, and I will never forget the care and encouragement with which he commented on every page.*

# TWAIN TALK

an interview with Harry Wonham

**As some of us know, your work on American Literature frequently involves the study of “ethnic caricature.” What drew you to this area of inquiry, and who are some other authors you have studied?**

*It has always puzzled me that Mark Twain wrote so approvingly of E. W. Kemble’s illustrations of Jim in Huckleberry Finn. If Huck’s gradual recognition of Jim’s full humanity is as important to the novel as readers have found it to be for nearly 140 years, why would Twain have been so pleased with illustrations that clearly dehumanize Jim by depicting him according to the period’s well-established conventions of “coon comedy”? Why would Twain—a writer outspokenly committed to racial justice throughout most of his life—have written so lovingly in 1906 about “the genuine nigger show, the extravagant nigger show, the show which to me had no peer and whose peer has not yet arrived, in my experience”? My second book, *Playing the Races: Ethnic Caricature and American Literary Realism*, raised these questions about Mark Twain as a way of understanding why ethnic caricatures of African Americans, Asians, Italians, Jews, Native Americans, the Irish, and members of other ethnic groups permeate not only Twain’s works, but the novels and stories of his ostensibly “realist” contemporaries. Ultimately, I tried to argue that while ethnic caricature might seem anathema to the aesthetic values of literary realism, in practice it was an essential technique in the fiction of William Dean Howells, Henry James, Charles Chesnutt, Edith Wharton, Abraham Cahan, and many other American writers who aligned their work with the Howellsian imperative that fiction should “cease to lie about life.”*

**Have your impressions of Twain and his work changed at all over the years? Has your perception of his contribution to the broader conversation of 19th-century American Literature changed?**

*I think my own impressions of Mark Twain have changed over time in response to two things: one is Twain scholarship, which is continually refining our understanding of his art and his persona; the other is students, who bring their own sensibilities to bear on the conversation and thus inevitably send it in new directions with every passing year. Having just completed an undergraduate course exclusively on Twain here at the University of Oregon, I think I would conclude that his humor has less purchase on this generation of students than his cynicism. That’s a gross generalization, but the students in my class—and, I suspect, in post-pandemic classrooms across the country—were not often in a laughing mood, and I think Twain appealed to them less for his antics than for the power and sincerity of his misanthropy. This required an adjustment for a teacher (i.e., me!) who was originally drawn to the “Wild Humorist of the Western Slope” side of his persona, but I’ve learned a lot from this group of students, and my own perceptions of Twain have been affected by their impatience with the hijinks of “the sagebrush bohemian.”*

**What common misconceptions about Twain do you strive to correct?**

*To me, what makes Mark Twain worth thinking about is his literally endless complexity. Whether the topic is race, or politics, or sexuality, or gender, or baseball, or chivalry, or technology, or money, Twain simply cannot be pinned down, and his handling of these and myriad other issues is complicated, multi-dimensional, and—in an always-problematic way—brilliant. I think the only misconception one can have about Twain is*

# TWAIN TALK

an interview with Harry Wonham

*to imagine that he settled somewhere, and that we, as readers, can name the place.*

**What, if anything, have you grown to dislike about the man?**

*Twain scholars are always reshaping our understanding of Sam Clemens and his literary alter ego, often in ways that make one's skin crawl. As a fan of *Roughing It*, I had always found ways to dismiss Twain's representations of Native Americans in that book and elsewhere as minor lapses in his comic sensibility. It didn't particularly trouble me that he sought to earn a laugh at James Fenimore Cooper's expense by mocking idea of "the noble savage," even if the joke required a demeaning image of the "Goshoot Indians." But Kerry Driscoll's recent book, *Mark Twain among the Indians and Other Indigenous Peoples*, exploded my complacency. Twain's representation of indigenous peoples and cultures is much more than a lapse, as I am embarrassed not to have understood before reading this fine example of Twain scholarship. I'd have to say now that I "dislike" this aspect of Mark Twain.*

**What do you consider your most important contribution to Twain studies?**

*I don't know if more than a handful of people have read it, but I would love to believe that the book Larry Howe and I co-edited in 2017, *Mark Twain and Money: Language, Capital, and Culture*, will have an impact on the way readers think about Mark Twain's economic ideas. Twain scholarship has generally treated him as a pudd'nhead in the realm of finance, and with some justification, but I think his creativity as a writer was inseparably linked to his thinking about money and economics. I hope the essays in that volume encourage other scholars to explore this connection.*

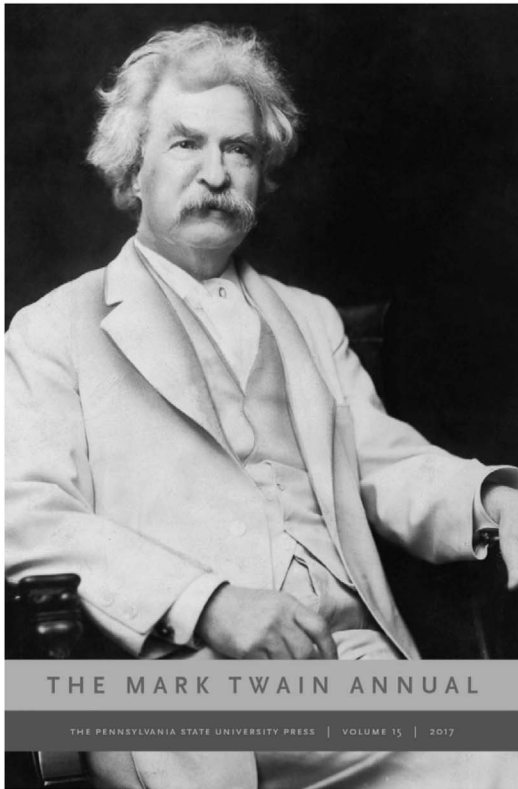
**As our current president, what are your main hopes for the Mark Twain Circle's evolution, and what can our members do to get more people involved in Twain Studies?**

*The Mark Twain Circle is a vibrant and diverse community of scholars, teachers, and enthusiasts who share a fascination with the author's life and career. I can think of no larger goal than to expand and strengthen that community, especially among young and emerging scholars who will chart the future for Twain studies. Current members can help by spreading the word about our organization and its activities, including conference presentations, fellowships, and prizes sponsored by the Circle.*

**Finally, what is your best advice for someone just starting in the field?**

*My advice to someone entering the field of Mark Twain studies would be, don't forget to laugh. I think no explanation is needed.*

# THE MARK TWAIN ANNUAL



**BEN CLICK, EDITOR**

*The Mark Twain Annual* is the official publication of the Mark Twain Circle of America. The journal offers essays related to Mark Twain and those who surrounded him and serves as an outlet for new scholarship as well as new pedagogical approaches.

The Mark Twain Circle of America encourages interest in Mark Twain and fosters the formal presentation of ideas about the author and his work, as well as the informal exchange of information among Circle members.

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# CALL FOR PAPERS

**2023 Quarry Farm Symposium on “Mark Twain: Invention, Technology, and Science Fiction”**  
**October 6-8, 2023**  
**Elmira, NY**

The Center for Mark Twain Studies at Elmira College is hosting its annual Quarry Farm Symposium during the **Fall 2023 semester**, from Friday, October 6, to Sunday, October 8, 2023, organized around the theme of **Mark Twain: Invention, Technology, and Science Fiction**. The year’s Keynote Address will be presented by **Sheila Williams**, editor of *Asimov’s Science Fiction* magazine and multiple Hugo Award winner. The annual symposium gathers scholars from various fields around a theme related to Mark Twain studies or the nineteenth-century more broadly and is held at the historic Quarry Farm site, where Twain wrote his most famous works during summer stays with his wife’s family in Elmira, New York.

In his landmark 2010 essay, “On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History,” John Rieder wrestles with the slippery definition of “science fiction.” He notes that clear genre distinctions are frequently demanded by “two institutional locations, commercial publishing and the academy, and this pair of institutions bears no accidental resemblance to the oppositions between high and low culture....” (204). Building from Bourdieu and Habermas, Rieder argues that because of these “contradictory drives for economic profit and cultural prestige in commercial publishing, the history of sf is well positioned to contribute importantly to broader cultural history...” (206).

SF is uniquely positioned in this way, and Twain is a particularly useful lens for such genre examination. Scholars have acknowledged that much of Twain’s work could be labeled “science fiction” if it were published today, an understanding that goes back at least as far as David Ketterer’s 1984 collection, *The Science Fiction of Mark Twain*. Twain’s writing appeared in the nineteenth-century literary marketplace side-by-side with dime novels about boy explorers in submarines or airships, hero-worshipping biographies of famous inventors, and the translated works of contemporaries like Jules Verne. Moreover, Twain’s career—then and now—straddles contradictions of popular success and cultural prestige that Rieder mentions. Locating when and how Twain’s work fits the “science fiction” label can help us see the limits and utility of genre.

Of course, Twain is more than just a literary figure; he was part of a culture immersed in science and technology. Alan Gribben, in *Mark Twain’s Literary Resources, Vol. 1* (2019), specifically notes science was one area Twain read voraciously, including “an entire set of Charles Darwin’s works” and “at least a dozen titles” on astronomy (44). Once he had money, Twain constantly sought new inventions to fund; his investments in new printing technology partly caused his bankruptcy. Gary Scharnhorst’s recent biography *The Life of Mark Twain: The Final Years* (2022) reminds us that Twain spent his later years scrutinizing osteopathy, Christian science, and other nascent medical movements, partly to help his ailing wife and daughters. Twain constantly interacted with all these developing fields and more, frequently in very public, mercurial ways.

With all this in mind, this symposium will work to understand the “broader cultural history” Rieder mentions

# CALL FOR PAPERS

by placing Twain and his contemporaries within the cultural transformations of science and technology, and within the broad literary boundaries of science fiction. We welcome a range of papers on this theme, including any of the following topics and more:

- Portrayals of science and technology in fiction by Mark Twain and/or his contemporaries
- Scientific and pseudo-scientific ideas that influenced literature during Twain's lifetime (1835-1910)
- Critical interrogations of nineteenth-century scientific rhetoric, knowledge-making, and science-related art and letters
- Critical examinations of the writing surrounding nineteenth-century invention and science, including patents, copyrights, planning documents, promotional materials, and more
- Research on inventors in Twain's circle of acquaintances, including James Paige, Nikola Tesla, Jan Szczepanik, or larger concerns such as Hartford's Colt Arms Factory, and their portrayals by Twain or by other writers in "heroic" biographies, magazine features, etc.
- Science fiction in nineteenth-century humor, including frontier narratives, tall tales, scientific romances, and satires
- Twain's place in the evolving definition of science fiction, including perceptions of him among writers of the Gernsback era, the "Golden Age," the New Wave, Afrofuturists, and other movements
- Modern technologies and their role in reproducing Twain in online editions, in memes, in repurposed quotations on Facebook, et al.
- Studies of appropriations of Twain's image or work in science fiction, including steampunk, space opera, or other sub-genres

Please send **300-word abstracts** and **either a CV or biographical statement**, preferably in **PDF** format, to Nathaniel Williams ([ntlwilliams@ucdavis.edu](mailto:ntlwilliams@ucdavis.edu)) by February 10, 2023.

# RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP IN THE MARK TWAIN CIRCLE OF AMERICA



**\$30 Individual**  
**\$15 Graduate Students and K-12 Educators**  
**\$75 Three-year Individual**

Membership helps support the educational and social activities of the Circle, including scholarly panels at academic conferences such as MLA and ALA. It also includes our newsletter, the *Mark Twain Circular*, which will keep you connected to all things Twain, and *The Mark Twain Annual*, published by Pennsylvania State UP. Previous issues are available to members through The Scholarly Publishing Collective.

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**Or, send your check—payable to the Mark Twain Circle of America—to:**

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Drea Fournier is the *Circular's* Design Editor.

## SERIAL LIBRARIANS

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## James Wharton Leonard, Editor

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