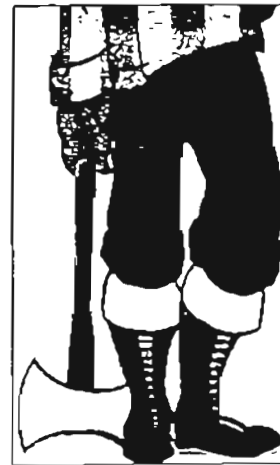


Paul Bunyan Tall Tales Award

Lessons from a ghost



Having a family history that consists primarily of mid-Western farmers of European descent, I was delighted to learn of the family relationship to Mark Twain. After all, as a journalist, it seemed quite appropriate to have had a famous writer in the family—perhaps his genes had cloned themselves in me. But a steady trail of information has led me to believe that such genes are not to be found in my familial closet, only ghosts with a few lessons to teach.

The bait was set by my grandmother, Florence Chapman Brower, whose grandmother, Harriet, bears the Clemens' name that Mark Twain was born with. She sketched a simple drawing for me that showed Samuel Langhorne Clemens—Mark Twain's real name—as our first cousin, several generations removed. Having found a published and documented account of Mark Twain's family tree,¹ I would only need to search a generation or two back from Harriet Clemens.

My grandmother did not know her grandmother well. However, Harriet is mentioned in the *Pioneer History of Pocahontas County, Iowa*, as the first teacher in Williams township of that county.² According to this turn-of-the-century book, she moved there to join her mother, Sarah J. Clemens and her four children. Sarah had bought the homestead rights of another settler. Thus, I started with the federal census to see where Sarah could be found.

Harriet appears with her husband in 1880 Des Moines County, Iowa³—a long way from Pocahontas County. Sarah didn't appear at all in the head of household index. I would learn later that she was listed under her son.

So I sent a letter to the Pocahontas County recorder, who politely responded that Williams township didn't exist, except in nearby Calhoun County. Although I had a WPA cemetery book that said Harriet and her husband were buried in a cemetery in Calhoun

County,⁴ I showed how green I was with this genealogy stuff. I wrote back insisting that it must exist, I had a book that said so! My first lesson in this puzzle: *never* completely trust a secondary source. Fortunately, the Pocahontas County recorder, Mike Bollard, was a helpful man, and found Sarah's homestead record by contacting the Calhoun County recorder. He also came up with some bonus material: a power of attorney filed after Sarah Clemens' death, listing all of her children and their spouses' names.⁵

While the Pocahontas County recorder ran around doing my legwork, I wrote to the *Calhoun County Genies*, that county's local genealogical society. It passed my letter to Illean Fliehman, who should be listed in a genealogical listing of incredibly helpful people. Illean sent me a Calhoun County history, *with the exact same words* as appeared in the Pocahontas County history.⁶ So much for journalistic integrity! However, Calhoun County had a Williams township, so now the search was on full steam.

Now that I knew to search in Calhoun County, I directed my efforts toward finding Sarah's husband. Lesson number two was learned from Illean: if you can't get to the county courthouse, find someone who can. While Illean is one of those rare people who just likes digging through old records for fun, most people are not going to be that lucky. Hiring a researcher is a worthwhile ex-

Have you ever debunked a long-held family tradition, picked at the weave of a family story only to watch it unravel entirely, or disproved a relationship to your famous former ancestor? That was what contestants in the MGS Silver Anniversary "Paul Bunyan Tall Tales Writing Contest" were asked to do.

Through the application of rigorous genealogical research, they were to convincingly disprove a long-held family story or tradition. Entries were judged on the basis of writing quality, genealogical soundness, choice of topic, originality, documentation, clarity of presentation, and form.

The prize winning entries are presented here.

penditure if you really need to dig deep. Let me explain why.

Illean spent time searching through land, death and probate records, marriage applications, and censuses—simply looking for people with the same last names as those I was searching for. She also searched through the local genealogical society materials. Digging for roots this way is time-consuming. Fortunately, when Illean was done, I had more than I had ever hoped for. I knew where Sarah was buried,⁷ where Sarah was in 1870⁸ and 1880,⁹ had evidence of a brother and sister of Sarah's living on the same section of land,¹⁰ and the key to the next puzzle piece: Sarah's son's marriage record, listing his birthplace and his parents' full names.¹¹

Charles Clemens, Sarah's second son, married Alta D. Moon 30 March 1886. When he died, his parents were listed as James Clemens and Sarah F. Flint, and his birthplace as Carbondale, Jackson County, Illinois. Now my search focused on Illinois.

I had long known that Harriet Clemens was born in Illinois from the 1880 census. In fact, I had even ordered one of those surname searches of Illinois for 1850¹² (since I knew Harriet was born in 1847), advertised in the *Genealogical Helper*, but there were too many James Clemenses and I didn't know which county to search. I wasn't ready to spend that much time and money on a long shot. Now I checked that surname search for Jackson County and came up empty for James Clemens. In fact, there wasn't a single Clemens in Jackson County in 1850. Since I knew that Charles was born about 1859 and it was possible that his sister and he were born in different counties, I sent off for the Jackson County census for 1850 and 1860, the former just in case the index had missed my Clemens.

The Clemens clan turns up in 1860 Jackson County¹³ just as I hoped, but no sign of them in 1850. A probate

records search in Jackson County for James Clemens was not successful.

Lesson three arrived at this stage: at some point in your research, you may have to take that leap into the great unknown and follow your hunches. Harriet's husband, Baxter Sherwood Chapman, had also been born in Illinois. I had found his parents, Joseph and Eliza Ann Sherwood Chapman married in Fulton County and later living in Peoria County. I had never found where Harriet and Baxter were married. So I had no idea how they had met. I reasoned, what if they knew each other as children? The surname index list did not have any Clemens in Peoria County, but three counties nearby did have them. Picking those three (two of which were on the same microfilm reel), I ordered the two microfilm reels and hoped for the best. At the same time, I wrote to the Illinois State Archives for land purchase records of James Clemens, since his occupation was listed in 1860 as a farmer.

Luck is the family historian's best research aid. The first county I checked, Marshall County, produced a James and Jane Clemens with two daughters, three-year-old Harriet, and seven-year-old Caroline.¹⁴ The ages matched, as did the birthplaces.

A short time later, the Illinois State Archives sent a copy of an index page of the James Clemens land purchases. Two of the purchases were by a James Clemens in Marshall County in 1837.¹⁵ A check of the 1840 census showed a 20-30 year-old James Clemens with three other males, one 5-10, another 20-30 and the third 60-70, and one female, 50-60 years old.¹⁶ Did he move with his parents and brothers? Without names, this could be difficult to track. But two Clemens, in the same age group as James, show up in Marshall County in 1850.

I finally broke my letter-writing habit and hit the road for the Illinois State

Archives and State Historical Library. Lesson four: there is nothing compared to hands-on research. I have rarely been at a location where I could look for original records. At the state archives I searched the state census, and discovered a marriage index that the archives and the Illinois State Historical Society are compiling of all Illinois marriages. Not all counties have been indexed, but for me, the critical information had.¹⁷ I found two James Clemens married in Fulton County, one to a Harriet P. Sherwood (1842), and another to a Sarah Jane Work (1846). Sarah Jane Flint was previously married in Fulton County to Orville Works (1843).

At the Illinois State Historical Library, I found two county histories of Marshall County that had a James Clemens as one of the first teachers in that county!¹⁸ This destroyed a previously held myth of mine: that historical libraries and state archives couldn't possibly have any information that I could use for my family history. Lesson five was certainly an eye-opener.

When it's all compiled, here's what I have:

James Clemens, born about 1811/12 in Pennsylvania, married first, Harriet P. Sherwood, 21 December 1842 in Fulton County, Illinois, and second, Mrs. Sarah Jane Flint Work(s), 12 March 1846, also in Fulton County. James apparently moved to Putnam County, later Marshall County, Illinois, about 1836, purchasing federal lands in 1837. Prior to 1860, the Clemens family moved to Jackson County, Illinois, where James disappears. Sarah Jane moved to Sac County, Iowa, by 26 June 1876. Sarah died 28 December 1886.

James and Harriet had one child, Caroline, born about 1843.

James and Sarah had: Harnet A., February 1847; James C., about 1849; Carrie A., about 1854; Catherine J., about 1856; and Charles S., about 1859.

I had now compiled enough information to compare with Mark Twain's genealogy. To be a first cousin, James Clemens had to be a descendant of Twain's uncle. John Marshall Clemens (Twain's father) only had two brothers.

Pleasant Clemens died in 1811, 11 years old. The other brother, Hannibal, born in 1803, had two sons, and one was named James! This James, however, was born in 1833, and died 10 years later. The other son was born in 1835. Both too young to be my ancestor.

The end of my story was not as I expected. Certainly, James is no first cousin to Samuel Langhorne, although, I haven't eliminated the possibility that the relationship is more distant. But was this a sad ending? Not at all. From all I've learned through my research, I'm not *too* disappointed that Mark Twain's legacy is not mine. Because I have a ghost in my tree, once a teacher, who's still teaching a few lessons—two centuries after his birth!

END NOTES

¹Raymond Martin Bell, *The Ancestry of Samuel Clemens, Grandfather of Mark Twain* (Washington, Penn.: n. pub., revised 1984).

²Robert E. Flickinger, *Pioneer History of Pocahontas County, Iowa* (n.p.: The Tives Print, 1904), p. 253.

³U.S. Census. 1880 Des Moines County, Iowa; p. 40, family 408, dwelling 400; microfilm at Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

⁴Work Projects Administration Graves Records. *Burial Records, Calhoun County, Iowa* (n.p.: n. pub., 2-1942), p. 32.

⁵Personal letter from Mike Bollard, Pocahontas County, Iowa, recorder, with copies of a power of attorney, "H.A. Chapman et al to Charles S. Clemens," indenture, "J.C.C. et al to

Chas. S. Clemens;" affidavit (recording fee 504), "J.C. Warner to Sarah J. Clemens;" deed record, "Charles S. Clemens to P.A. Morey;" and homestead record, "U.S. to Sarah J. Clemens" (Book G, p. 532, Recorder's Office, Calhoun County, Iowa); February 1994.

⁶Personal letter from Illean Fliehman, Rockwell City, Iowa. Excerpt from "Brown Genie Book" and *Past and Present of Calhoun County*, p. 127; February 1994.

⁷Personal letter from Illean Fliehman. From WPA Graves Records book, Union Cemetery, Pomeroy: "Sarah J. Clemens, 1819–1885 – north end– west side, about 5 graves from Chapman, Baxter;" February 1994.

⁸U.S. Census. 1870 Sherman township, Calhoun County, Iowa; p. 11, family 107, dwelling 100; microfilm viewed at O'Fallon Family History Center, Church of Latter-day Saints.

⁹Personal letter from Illean Fliehman with excerpt from U.S. Census. 1880 Williams township, Calhoun County, Iowa; n. page, family 138, dwelling 136; February 1994.

¹⁰U.S. Census. 1870 Sherman township, Calhoun County, Iowa. Inferred this by knowing Sarah J. Clemens' maiden name (Flint), and from affidavit of her nephew, James C. Warner (see footnote 6); Silas Flint, p. 11, family 105, dwelling 98; and Ira and Harriet Warner with son James C., p. 14, family 123, dwelling 116.

¹¹"Clerk's Certificate as to Marriage Record," Calhoun County, Iowa, Shirley Redenius, Clerk of District

Court. An official certificate obtained from Marriage Records, Book 2, p. 81.

¹²"Census Index Search," Paul Douglas Schweikle, professional genealogist; list includes variations of CL E/I M(M)..N(S)/TS in 1850 Illinois, 10 February 1994.

¹³U.S. Census. 1850 Jackson County, Illinois; p. 467, family and dwelling 1088, line 31; microfilm viewed at O'Fallon Family History Center, Church of Latter-day Saints.

¹⁴U.S. Census. 1850 Marshall County, Illinois; p. 176, family and dwelling 3, line 15; microfilm viewed at O'Fallon Family History Center, Church of Latter-day Saints.

¹⁵"Public Domain Land Sale Index;" personal letter from Illinois State Archives Director John Daly, with photocopy of index page 5011; 16 May 1994.

¹⁶U.S. Census. 1840 Marshall County, Illinois; p. 195, line 5; microfilm viewed at Illinois State Archives, Springfield, Illinois, 24 May 1994.

¹⁷"Marriage Index," viewed on microfiche at Illinois State Archives, Springfield, Illinois, 24 May 1994.

¹⁸John Spencer Burt and W. E. Hawthorne, *Past and Present of Marshall and Putnam Counties, Illinois*, (n.p.: n. pub., 1907), p. 52. And Spencer Ellsworth, *Records of the Olden Times; or Fifty Years on the Prairie* (n.p.: n. pub., 1880), p. 423.