

Elyse: We traveled an hour north for our next investigation in Portland.

Wes: Vagabond, river man, prospector, writer, master of political satire and social commentary, and ultimately a member of the eastern elite, Mark Twain was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens on November 30, 1835, not far from the Mississippi River, in Florida, Missouri. Twain has been called the Lincoln of American literature, and his writing, an autopsy of the American dream. In "Roughing It," the novel he wrote about prospecting in the Wild West, Twain buried the rags to riches myth of the United States' last frontier. But from one man's rags comes another man's riches, and in the river city of portland, thousands of miles from Missouri, one Oregonian thinks this timeless piece links him to Mark Twain. Hi, I'm Wes Cowan. I've come to portland, Oregon, to investigate a mystery of the freewheeling old northwest. Jack Mills is the great-grandson of captain John Commingers Ainsworth, founder of the greatest steamboat operation in the old Pacific Northwest.

Jack: Well, the watch reminds me of Captain Ainsworth primarily because it's a really classy watch, and he was a classy guy. He started from nothing and built a big business, and did a lot of civic work, and was a big deal around these parts here in the northwest, Oregon, Washington, and California.

Wes: So how does captain John Ainsworth figure into our story?

Jack: Well, he received a watch, our family believes, from Samuel Clemens, Mark Twain.

Wes: Wow! Well, you know, that's a great story. But I've got to ask you, how in the world would your great-grandfather ever have come into contact with Mark Twain?

Jack: Well, my great-grandfather was a riverboat captain, steamboat on the Mississippi, and we all know that Mark Twain was a pilot on the Mississippi. And possibly they could have met there. We would like you to answer, is this watch a watch that Mark Twain could have had, might have had? And is it the right period for him to have had it? And did he, when and where, if possible, give this to Captain Ainsworth?

Wes: Good questions. Tough to answer. My first stop is San Francisco, to find out if the watch is from the right period, the early 19th century. Don Levison is a watch historian and appraiser. So what I need to find out from you is, first, who made this watch? How old is it? Is it the kind of watch that Twain would likely have been carrying?

Don: Okay. Well, let's take a look at each aspect of the watch and try to determine if it fits with the time frame that you're looking at. Now, I don't see any hallmarks in here, except the case is Marked W.W. & co. W.W. & co. Could have been an American company. At that time we had the capability of making cases in this country, but there were very few watches actually manufactured here. To get into the watch here, we need to open up the bezel first. And then the movement swings out. We remove the dust cover and what we have revealed here is a very typical English, Liverpool watch from the first half of the 19th century. This makes it pretty easy to identify the maker. Very clearly, "Joseph Johnson," with a serial number. "20177." Why don't I take a look in my book and come up with a time frame when he was working.

Wes: Okay.

Don: Liverpool, 1814 to 1851.

Wes: So then with the serial number, we should be able to, within that range, pinpoint the date when that watch was made?

Don: Certainly. This is a serial number that you had given me previously, so I was able to do a little homework. And I went to my own database of watches by this maker that I've handled over the years. I was able to extrapolate that this watch would have been made around 1833 to 1835. Mark Twain wasn't born until 1835 so he could not possibly have purchased that watch new. No, this watch, if he was born in 1835, let's say he bought it when he was 20. This was still a fairly advanced watch. If I cleaned and lubricated that watch today, you could probably wear this in your pocket and you could catch the plane by it.

Wes: Gotcha. That's great news. The watch is period. But for Jack's family legend to be right, Twain and Ainsworth must have met. Could it have been on the Mississippi? I asked Macavoy Lane, Mark Twain expert and impressionist, to date the Mississippi river years.

Macavoy: In 1857, I took an apprenticeship on a riverboat and was told I didn't know enough to pilot a cow down a lane, but I did receive my license to navigate the mighty Mississippi. And in 1862, the war between the states closed commerce on the river. So I seceded from the secession and was missing in action before a shot was fired. Norma Paulus is the interim head of the Oregon Historical Society, where Ainsworth's watch is currently curated. I asked Norma what she knew about John Ainsworth's early years and his life on the Mississippi.

Norma: He was born in Ohio. We know that. And we know that he was orphaned when he was 13. He stayed in Ohio for a couple of years after that, but then he thought he'd seek his fortune on the Mississippi. And within a very short period of time, he had his own steamboat and he was captain of it.

Wes: So what happened to him after his Mississippi days?

Norma: Well, he, like a lot of other young men I guess at that time, heard the call of the gold rush and he ended up in San Francisco, and then up around the Comstock mine.

Wes: So this was in 1849, he must have sold his steamboat business on the Mississippi and gold fever struck him.

Norma: Yes, yes, it did.

Wes: 1849, that's disappointing. Ainsworth was long gone from the Mississippi river by 1857 when Twain's apprenticeship on a riverboat began. It's unlikely Twain and Ainsworth would have met on the Mississippi. Did Ainsworth continue mining? What did he do next?

Norma: Now, I'm assuming that was not a profitable thing for him, because he comes up to Oregon and he starts operating this steamboat up and down the Columbia river, and sometimes down to Oregon city. And before long, he with three other men created the Oregon steamship company. The Columbia river was one of the most treacherous stretches of water in the United States. Its fierce currents and Sandbanks wrecked many steamboats. Ainsworth made his name as a pilot by successfully navigating these waters. He was an innovator, too. Ainsworth introduced the first stern-wheeled steamboat to the Columbia. He believed they would be more effective in the difficult conditions than a traditional side-wheeler.

Wes: So when Ainsworth first arrived in Portland, what was this town like?

Norma: Well, in 1850, there were only about 600 people here. It had a couple muddy streets. It had a wharf. It had warehouses down there. So it was a small place that he came to in 1850. By 1863, Portland

was home to nearly 4,000 people, and John Ainsworth's steamboat line was prospering. Within a few years, Ainsworth and his partners had cornered the transportation Market and established the first monopoly in the Pacific Northwest. One of the earliest entrepreneurs, Ainsworth's holdings soon included real estate, railroads, mines and banks. Today, he is considered one of Portland's founding fathers.

Wes: He sounds like he was the classic story of young boy goes west, makes good. I asked Norma if she knew of any physical documentation to prove that Ainsworth received the watch from Twain.

Norma: If there is, we do not have it at the Oregon Historical Society. But we do know that they had mutual friends, and they were all connected with this mining effort.

Wes: That sounds like an interesting lead. Twain and Ainsworth could have had common interests that led to common friends. I asked Macavoy, our Twain impressionist, where did Twain go after he left the Mississippi?

Macavoy: I went west in 1862, with my brother Orion, who had been appointed secretary to territorial governor Nye out in the silver land, Nevada. So I fancied myself to be secretary to the secretary. But as it turned out, I took another apprenticeship at the "Territorial Enterprise" on the Comstock Lode, Virginia city, the wealthiest place on earth. I learned a good lie can travel twice around the globe before the truth gets its boots on. In 1864, I went away to San Francisco to be unemployed. The coldest winter I ever spent in my life was a summer in San Francisco.

Wes: That settles it. Common ground: San Francisco. Both Twain and Ainsworth went there to seek fortunes in the west. Could they have met there? I want to do more digging. The university of Oregon's Knight Library houses 27 boxes and 32 volumes of Ainsworth materials.

I'm looking through the index and there's no mention of Samuel Clemens, Mark Twain, or the pocket watch. But what about those mutual friends in San Francisco that Norma was talking about? You know, looking through this file of correspondence, it's all from the 1860s, and I keep coming up with these letters from this guy, W.C. Ralston. I've heard of this guy. I think he was a big mover and shaker in San Francisco.

This is Ainsworth's diary from 1865. You know, there was a period in here for about a month when Ainsworth was visiting people in San Francisco. And then you look at this, here's another one.

"Monday, May 1, went down to Ralston's country home and stayed all night."

August 25, he's back in San Francisco. "Dined at Ralston's with the Colfax party."

That's really interesting because this puts Ralston, Twain, and Ainsworth all in San Francisco at the same time. Could Ralston be the connection that Norma mentioned? Around 1849, William Ralston arrived in San Francisco. There he hit the jackpot as a banker and financier, underwriting at least one of Ainsworth's Oregon deals. Ralston would later be known as the man who built San Francisco. And he hosted lavish salons at his Belmont estate for artists, inventors, and entrepreneurs. Surely Twain would have known of Ralston. U.C. Berkeley's Bancroft library is the repository for most of Mark Twain's papers. I visited there to see if Mark Twain knew Ralston, too. Hey, Bob, Wes Cowan. Bob Hurst is the general editor. I hope you can help me out.

Bob: I hope I can, too.

Wes: All right. Let's see what bob brought me. He's got some stuff Marked here. Let's see. Oh, here's a letter written by Mark Twain, Samuel Clemens, to one of his friends. And it's written -- this is great.

"Do not let Ralston have the pamphlet unless he allows you to add it to the book."

So it's very clear from this letter that Twain certainly knew who Ralston was.

Bob: This is a biography about Ralston. This is what we've been looking for. Listen to this. He's referring to Ralston and what an entertainer he was. And he's saying, "And entertained everyone from a young, comparatively unknown lecturer named Mark Twain to the visiting Chinese embassy at Belmont." that was his country estate. Well, there you have it. Twain was at Belmont. Ainsworth was at Belmont. But there's still no indication that Twain and Ainsworth were at Belmont at the same time.

Wes: Well, we may have found the place where Twain and Ainsworth could have met, but we didn't find any evidence to back up Jack's story. Is this watch of the period of Mark Twain?

Bob: Well, we can tell you that it was probably made between 1833 and 1835. So it was made before Mark Twain was born. And I think you can see the implications that Mark Twain may never have carried this pocket watch. On the other hand, there is a possible connection between Twain and Ainsworth. And that connection is a gentleman named William Ralston. Ralston hosted regular salons at his estate in San Francisco, and we can guess almost certainly that at one or more of these salons, Ainsworth was present, and we know that Twain also was at one of these literary salons.

So it's possible, during 1865 that they could have met. It boils down to simply this: your family tradition says that this watch was given by Mark Twain to captain Ainsworth. We can't prove that.

Jack: I'm satisfied with what you've done. What I appreciate the most is the fact that there is a place where they could have met, and this is what I couldn't put together myself. For the rest of it, I'll go with my family's history. I don't care if anybody else believes it or not.

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