

Mark Twain Lectures in Indiana

*Paul Fatout**

When Mark Twain took to the lecture circuit to recoup losses incurred in the sale of the *Buffalo Express* in 1871, he appeared in Indianapolis on the night of January 1, 1872. During his tour he had abandoned the subject of Artemus Ward in favor of "Passages From *Roughing It*," which, the Indianapolis *Sentinel* remarked, had been "highly spoken of as a happy blending of humor, sentiment, and instruction."¹ Advance publicity in the local *Evening News* described the lecturer as "the noted humorist and author,"² and in *The People* as "this renowned gentleman."³

Under the auspices of the Y.M.C.A., he spoke at Association Hall, formerly the Exchange Theater on north Illinois Street, between Washington and Market. The theater, according to one contemporary, W. R. Holloway, was a lively emporium of earthy entertainment, which "did pretty well with 'minstrels' and dances of doubtful decency."⁴ One notice in the *Sentinel* advertised: "First night of the great Burles[q]ue Opera of 'Oh Hush,' with all the original music. The cheapest place of amusement in the city."⁵ Then the Christian Association bought the building in 1870, and promptly "emptied the theatre, ballet girls, 'can-can' and 'oil room' into the street."⁶

When the beefy burlesque queens were thrown out, the smell of grease paint was replaced by the odor of sanctity. Still, though owned by a religious organization, the place was not precisely a church; Mark Twain said that he disliked to lecture in a church because people were afraid to laugh there. In the 1870's piety was plentiful and exceedingly solemn.

He had acquired some reputation by reason of his "Jumping Frog" story, the earlier California lectures, and especially by the popularity of *Innocents Abroad* (1869), but he was not

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¹ Indianapolis, Indiana, *Sentinel*, January 1, 1872.

² Indianapolis, Indiana, *Evening News*, January 1, 1872.

³ Indianapolis, Indiana, *The People*, December 31, 1871.

⁴ W. R. Holloway, *Indianapolis. A Historical and Statistical Sketch of the Railroad City* (Indianapolis, 1870), 152.

⁵ Indianapolis, Indiana, *Sentinel*, September 17, 1868.

⁶ Holloway, *Indianapolis*, 152. What the "oil room" was I cannot discover. Was it perhaps a sort of bar where performers and stage door Johnnies got oiled?

yet the famous character that the twentieth century would regard as an international institution. Equally well known, if not more so, on the busy lecture circuit of the seventies were numerous divines, humorists, and miscellaneous authorities on phrenology and life. The passion for improvement was so fervid that mental and spiritual enlightenment were just around the corner, where, on almost any evening, the world famous Dr. Soandso was sure to have hired a hall.

Emerson was an industrious lecturer, who spoke in Indianapolis twice, in 1863 and 1866. Josh Billings, Bill Nye, and Petroleum V. Nasby made good newspaper copy, the late Artemus Ward was useful for a reminiscent column, and the name of Olive Logan, a roving talker who flitted from coast to coast, frequently appeared in newspapers—including those of Indianapolis—from New York to San Francisco.⁷ Many years later Mark Twain was still sufficiently annoyed by her popularity to give her some two pages of derogatory comment in his *Autobiography*. He concluded that "She was merely a name and some rich and costly clothes . . ."⁸

Nevertheless she and others were such warm competition that in 1872 he was far from being the unchallenged front page celebrity he became thirty years afterward. His arrival in Indianapolis caused no furor, and no stampede of reporters eager to broadcast his views on anything in the world, or out of it. As news he was a negligible item compared to the extensive list of New Year's Day calls and at-homes noted at great length in the city press.

Only one Indianapolis paper, the *Journal*, covered the lecture, giving about a third of a column on page four to "The matchless, indescribable, whimsical, and intrepid humorist yclept Mark Twain," who "spoke his piece in the presence of a large, refined, and very appreciative audience, with the single exception of one young lady, who looked on mournfully

⁷ Typical of the lavish praise showered upon her is the full column in the Indianapolis, Indiana, *Journal*, December 25, 1868, reprinted from the New York *Tribune*: "An intellectual, brilliant, handsome woman . . . she dresses wisdom in the robes of wit; quickens all that is fine in the minds and temperaments of her hearers; imparts to life that warm glow of enjoyment which burns up and destroys the chaff of the commonplace . . . Miss Olive Logan, who spoke last night at Steinway Hall on 'Paris—City of Luxury' . . . showed herself to be a diamond worthy of the richest setting."

⁸ *Mark Twain's Autobiography* (2 vols., New York, 1924), I, 158-160.

while her neighbors were convulsed with laughter.”⁹ Since the reporter, with that irritating vagueness common to old-fashioned journalism, does not identify the lugubrious young lady, the reader wishes for a modern newsman, who would surely have got her name and address, not to speak of her opinions on a variety of matters, from politics to eternity.

“Mr. Twain,” the *Journal* goes on, “introduced himself, as is his usual custom, with a touching encomium upon his high moral, intellectual and social qualities, being anxious, as he said, ‘to get in all the facts,’ which a stranger might not be able to do, however good his intentions might be.” The reporter was amused by the story of the Mexican plug, and he thought the description of Lake Tahoe so fine that it “would have been applauded to the echo if the audience could have suppressed its apprehension that the story would end humorously.” Mark Twain had met audiences that mistook his seriousness for humor, but here was one prepared to accept the serious note, yet was fearful of being taken in. As he discovered himself, a humorist has difficulty convincing his listeners that he is in dead earnest.

How he passed his time in town and how he weathered the reception of the local committee are unknown, since journalists of those days were indifferent to human interest and to minor facts. The size of the audience is not stated, nor are there any interviews, names of committeemen, or any details of how the distinguished guest was entertained before and after the performance. His was merely another talk by one of a continual parade of talkers. Still, the affair apparently went off well, even though *The People* did enter a mild demurrer in its remark: “It is the decided opinion of all we have heard speak of Mark Twain’s lecture that it read better than it was spoken.”¹⁰ Mark Twain had no doubts about its being a howling success. To James Redpath, manager of the lecture bureau, he wrote on January 2: “Had a splendid time with a splendid audience in Indianapolis last night—a perfectly jammed house, just as I have had all the time out here.”¹¹

On the night of January 2 he gave the same lecture in Logansport at the Opera House, again under the auspices of

⁹ Indianapolis, Indiana, *Journal*, January 2, 1872.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, January 7, 1872.

¹¹ Albert Bigelow Paine (ed.), *Mark Twain's Letters* (2 vols., New York, 1917), I, 193.

the Christian Associations. *The Democratic Pharos*, promising "Fun for the million. . . Don't miss it,"¹² reprinted an article from the *Chicago Tribune* which described him as "a youngish looking man of perhaps thirty-five, not handsome, but having a bright intelligent look, and an eye with a humorous twinkle that puts him at once *en rapport* with an audience. There is nothing finical about his style of dress. He is clean-shaven, and his manner of wearing his hair, which is abundant, shows that he is his own tonsorial artist."¹³

Another jammed house greeted him warmly, but the approval of Logansport was not unanimous. The *Pharos* printed a short, perfunctory paragraph about "a large and appreciative audience," which "frequently applauded" a "lecture . . . well worth the time and money expended by our citizens,"¹⁴ but *The Sun* was not amused.¹⁵ In a caloric half column it roasted the lecturer to a rich and crispy brown, beginning with "his appearance upon the stage, walking with a loose, shambling gait, and an inconceivably awkward manner. In personal appearance he is not very impressive, but looks thin and weazened [*sic*], as if he had grown up amid the sand and alkali of Nevada."

Sourly it observed that "no man not insane enough to be a fit candidate for a lunatic as(s)ylum, or who meant to be sarcastic, would dignify the performance by calling it a lecture." Manner and style were "those of a very poor clown," the words "magnificent" and "commonplace" were overworked, and though the audience laughed heartily at first, "in a few moments the laughing was confined to the boys." The habit of pausing after a supposedly witty remark was "very thoughtful . . . for, if it had not been for that, more than half the time they [the audience] would have failed in discovering the place where the laugh came in. His anecdotes and witiicisms [*sic*] were mostly old and stale."

The *Sun's* critic must have been a dour fellow, for he had not a single good word to say beyond tepid praise for the lecturer's extravagance, but even there "he falls far below J. Proctor Knott, who excels him in extravagant and absurd descriptive powers as far as an ocean steamer does a tea-pot

¹² Logansport, Indiana, *The Democratic Pharos*, December 27, 1871.

¹³ *Ibid.*, January 3, 1872.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Logansport, Indiana, *The Sun*, January 4, 1872.

in motive power [*sic*] . . . as a lecturer, Mark Twain is a 'magnificent' fizzle, or a first-class humbug."

There was stern reproof for "wit . . . of a low order, both as to quality and matter," and the Washoe reminiscing was dismissed as "neither moral, elevating or instructive." It was absolutely worthless "to improve and elevate the moral and intellectual tone of society . . . Does his picturing of Jack Harris, with his coarse allusions, and his buffoonry [*sic*] benefit the people? If not, then, in the name of society, let us have no more such performances under the auspices of the Christian Associations."

Evidently that reporter would have felt more at home under a blistering barrage of hell-fire-and-damnation, or being edified by the do-gooder who made a profitable thing out of platform sanctimony and uplift. Apropos of Jack Harris, the only Harris in *Roughing It* (Chapter XXI) voices no allusions that seem coarse nowadays; either Mark Twain embroidered upon the character, or coarseness was very easily conjured out of thin air in Victorian America, particularly by so self-righteous a critic as this one.

Mark Twain was never to escape the disapproval of the long-faced gentry, who carped at him all his life, not only because of frivolity and allegedly low moral tone, but also because of heretical views of the human race and of Christianity. A narrowness that condemned *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* as unfit for children was unsparing of heterodoxy and of anything that, measured by the smug requirements of the day, was considered insufficiently "elevating." By 1900 perhaps a reporter might have hesitated to write so damning a review as the *Sun's*, but in 1872 Mark Twain could and did receive cavalier treatment, for he was still on probation, both in Boston and the hinterland.