

SEM Today

A publication for alumnae
and friends of Buffalo Seminary

MAY 2014

INSIDE:

At SEM, STEM is STEAM

SEM Firsts: Sailing and Chess

Changing Course:
The New History Curriculum

NAIS: SEM is the Future

Mark Twain at SEM

Reviewing his 1870 "Report to the Buffalo Female Academy"



ILLUSTRATION BY CAITLIN CASS
SEM FACULTY



Finding Mark Twain at SEM

Yes, that Mark Twain

By Douglas Hopkins, history teacher and an architect of the new history curriculum

“It was one of those dreamy, hazy days in mid-summer, when the atmosphere had grown denser and more suffocating until dark clouds gathering in the sky told of a coming storm.”

So began Lillie Powell’s whimsical story, “The Golden Treasure at the End of the Bow,” which Mark Twain judged as one of two winners of the Buffalo Female Academy’s annual essay contest in 1870. Miss Powell’s story won top honors for the graduating class and Lillie Kelsey’s “Little Fish” won the prize for the “Collegiate Department.”

SEM’s archives closet had yielded these treasures: the original, winning, exquisitely hand-written essays in pencil, contained in a bound volume of 1870 essays by Buffalo Female Academy students. (We became Buffalo Seminary in 1889.)

I found these original documents on a hunch after learning of Twain and the writing contest from former SEM teacher

Harry Schooley’s lecture notes, “A Short History of Buffalo Seminary.” It was a thrill to discover possibly the very pieces of paper that Mark Twain held and read in 1870.

Yes, Mark Twain! SEM lore has it that headmaster Albert Chester invited rival celebrity Buffalo journalists and friends, Twain of the *Buffalo Express*, and David Gray of the *Daily Courier*, to judge the 1870 writing contest. Twain wrote a

It was a thrill to discover possibly the very pieces of paper that Mark Twain had held and read in May or June of 1870.

“Report to the Buffalo Female Academy,” tactfully critiquing and praising the pool of entries and explaining the choices of winners. Gray read the report aloud, as well as the winning essays, at the school’s June 23 graduation ceremony, and the *Buffalo Express* published the report in full on June 24, 1870.

Twain seemed to be looking for simplicity of expression and lack of pretension. He praised Lillie Powell’s story for “the very rare merit of *stopping when it is finished*,” and for its “freedom from adjectives and superlatives which is attractive, not to say seductive.”

Twain described Lillie Kelsey's story as "nothing in the world but just a bright and fresh bit of fancy, told with a breezy dash, and with nothing grand or overpowering about it." It tells the story of a small fish discovered by the author in a pitcher of drinking water. The narrator finds that the fish exists in a complex world, a sort of fish kingdom. Suddenly, the narrator hears someone in the "real" world call her. Returning momentarily to the room she finds the pitcher empty, the fish gone. She concludes, "...if I had spent less time in thinking of him and more in helping him, it would have been better for the fish and just as well for me." Twain praised the abrupt ending to this essay, including the moral-to-the-story, "inevitable," but effectively conveyed because "it is compressed into a single sentence, and it is delivered with a snap that is exhilarating and an unexpectedness that is captivating."

In his recently published book, *Scribblin' for a Livin': Mark Twain's Pivotal Period in Buffalo*, Thomas Reigstad writes of the Buffalo Female Academy's essay contest. Reigstad finishes with a summary of Twain's rant, "against the traditional, formulas-driven method of teaching writing in American schools" and his praise for the Buffalo Female Academy and its forward thinking.

"To the high credit of the principal and teachers of this Academy (now SEM), it can be said that they are faithfully doing what they can to destroy it and its influence and occupy their place with something new and better.

SEM Grad Was the First Female Journalist in Buffalo

Twain wrote an editorial criticizing the ineptitude of the Buffalo Streets Commissioner for failing, Twain anticipated, to prevent Memorial Day traffic dust clouds from inundating his front porch. A resourceful and civic-minded neighbor, 16-year-old Buffalo Female Academy student Jane Meade Welch, who had read the editorial which Twain had signed only "472 Delaware," organized a bucket brigade of neighborhood kids. They kept the street watered in front of Twain's home during the busy holiday, and Twain visited her home that evening to express his thanks. Four years later, Jane joined *The Buffalo Express*, launching an extraordinary career and becoming the first woman in Buffalo to make a profession of journalism. Coincidence? You decide.

"But when we of the committee [meaning himself and Gray] take into consideration that much of the atmosphere of old custom and tradition necessarily lingers around this unquestionably excellent Female Academy, we feel that we are more than complimentary when we say that the compositions we have been examining average well indeed."

Twain was right to attack the formulaic model of composition, and he was insistent that fiction include dialect and other non-standard discourse. Whitman did it for poetry, and we owe Twain a great debt for including regional expression in literature. SEM has a long tradition of appreciating Twain, and our students can proudly draw a line from the early, pre-"Huck Finn" Twain who judged our writing contest to the Twain about whom contemporary audiences squabble. He would no doubt delight in this!

By Ben Joplin Ph.D., English teacher

