

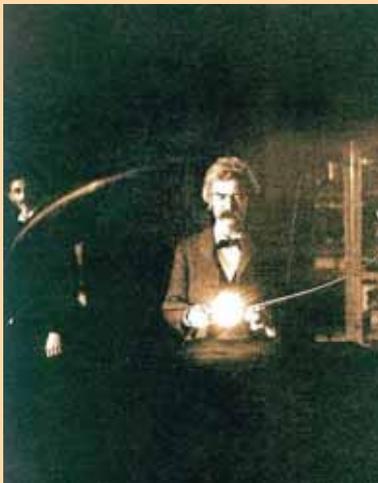
Newfangled

Machines

by Cynthia Levinson



***Life on the Mississippi* is believed to be the first book ever composed on a typewriter.**



Twain loved “hanging out” with inventors. He is shown here in Nikola Tesla’s laboratory in 1894.

Mark Twain was what we might today call an “early adopter.” In 1874, he spent \$125 to buy a brand-new invention, the typewriter, and immediately typed a letter to a friend. “THIS THING REQUIRES GENIUS TO WORK IT JUST RIGHT,” he said. But, he soon wrote his brother Orion, “THE MACHINE HAS SEVERAL VIRTUES... IT PILES AN AWFUL STACK OF WORDS ON ONE PAGE. IT DON’T MUSS THINGS OR SCATTER INK BLOTS AROUND.” Later, he used his typewriter to compose part of *Life on the Mississippi*, probably making him the first major author to use a typewriter.

He knew Orion would be interested in this device because the Clemenses were a family of inventors. Their father had tried to build a perpetual-motion machine. Orion worked on a power saw, a solar helmet, and a paddlewheel boat, which he hoped would cross the Atlantic Ocean in 24 hours.

Although none of these family contraptions worked, Twain wasn’t discouraged. New gadgets excited him so much that he invented them, used them, invested money in them, and wrote about them. He also suffered when they failed.

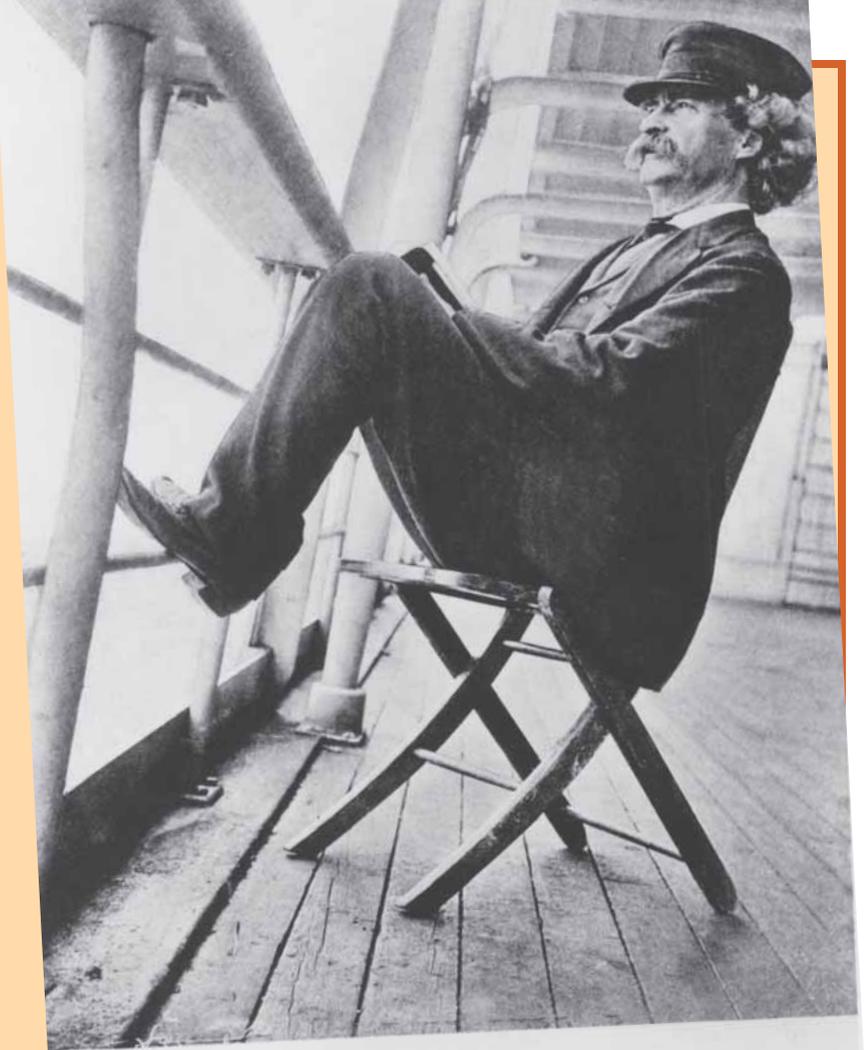


The 19th century has been labeled the Age of Invention. Thomas A. Edison, Samuel F.B. Morse, Alexander Graham Bell — these were Twain’s heroes. He considered them “true poets,” even “the creators of this world — after God.” He enjoyed spending time with inventors in their laboratories. He yearned to invent not only stories and characters but also machines. In fact, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, Twain’s novel about time travel, is considered one of the earliest examples of science fiction.

Sometimes his children inspired his creations. Watching daughters Clara and Susy try to memorize English kings and queens, he concocted a game called *Memory-Builder*. He named a large vase on the front porch “William the Conqueror.” Then, Twain pounded stakes along the driveway to represent the royals’ reigns. Clara recalled, “The game consisted in racing past the stakes and calling out names and dates of the numerous kings.” Twain played, too, his curly hair flapping in the wind. Later, he transferred the game to a cribbage board on which players scored points. Although he received a patent for his game in 1885, it never captured the public’s interest.

Like the self-pasting scrapbook (see page 22), Twain’s self-adjusting elastic strap for vests and corsets was more successful. With buttonholes at each end, it could be lengthened or shortened easily. He also devised a perpetual calendar on a watch charm.

Although only a few of Twain’s inventions worked, he loved using other people’s. In 1879, he installed one of the first residential telephones in Hartford. A private wire connected it to the local newspaper and, later, the telegraph office. A year after he installed his telephone, he published



Be good + you will be lonesome.
Mark Twain

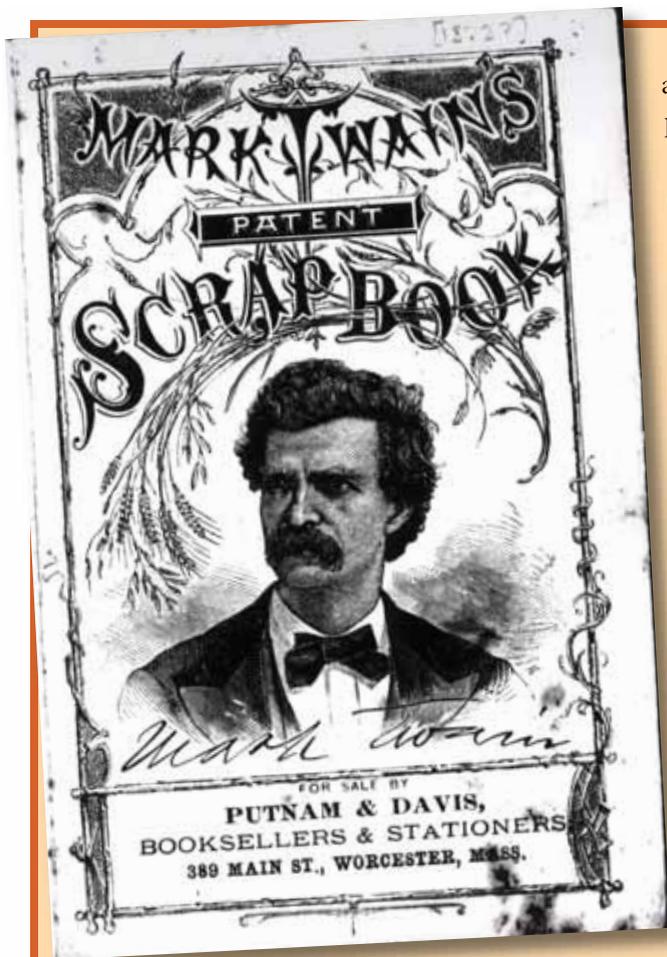
When he was not writing, Twain devoted a lot of time to thinking about inventions — both his own and other people’s.



FAST FACT

TWAIN DEvised A CLAMP TO ATTACH SHEETS AND BLANKETS TO MATTRESSES TO PREVENT BABIES FROM KICKING OFF THEIR BEDDING. THE CLAMP TORE THE SHEETS, HOWEVER, AND HE LOST INTEREST IN THE IDEA.





The self-pasting scrapbook was a successful moneymaker for Twain.

a story in which a couple meet, fall in love, and marry all by phone — like today’s Internet dating.

Twain’s home was also outfitted with flushing toilets; a split chimney flue so that he could place a window over a fireplace; a furnace; and a battery-operated burglar alarm. Recording his voice on Edison’s wax cylinders, he was probably the first author to compose a book (*The American Claimant*, published in 1892) by dictating it to a phonograph. These recordings were later lost in a fire.

Inventors’ ideas for future machines thrilled Twain as much as the real ones in his house. His investments in their startups, however, bankrupted him, forcing his family to live abroad for almost 10 years.

He had great hopes for a typesetting machine that would not only automate letter placement but also produce straight margins. Beginning in 1880, he contributed as much as \$300,000 to develop this Paige Compositor, which he “reckoned the world has got to buy.” He wrote *Orion*, “All the other inventions of the human brain sink pretty nearly into commonplaces contrasted with this awful mechanical miracle.” The Compositor, however, contained 18,000 custom-made movable parts and kept breaking down. Only two machines were built, and they were never used.

Twain also invested in failed processes to engrave book covers and to automate carpet weaving. Plasmon, a “health food” made from dried milk, also sapped his bank account.

THE AMAZING

Mark Twain enjoyed new challenges. In the 1880s, when he was in his 40s, he decided to learn how to ride the newest fad: a high-wheel bicycle. He took lessons from an expert and described them in his essay “Taming the Bicycle.”

“Mine was not a full-grown bicycle, but only a colt...skitish, like any other colt. The Expert...got on its back and rode around a little to show me how easy it was to do. He said that the dismounting was perhaps the hardest thing to learn. But he was in error there.... Although I was wholly inexperienced, I dismounted in the best time on record. He was on that side, showing up the machine; we

Bicycle riding was very popular at the turn of the 20th century. As Twain found out, however, it was not as easy as it looked!



Imagined technologies and techniques appeared in his writing, as well. In some cases, Twain's ideas predicted current ones, including fax machines, DNA cloning, and a "telectrophone" to broadcast moving pictures and sound, like a television.

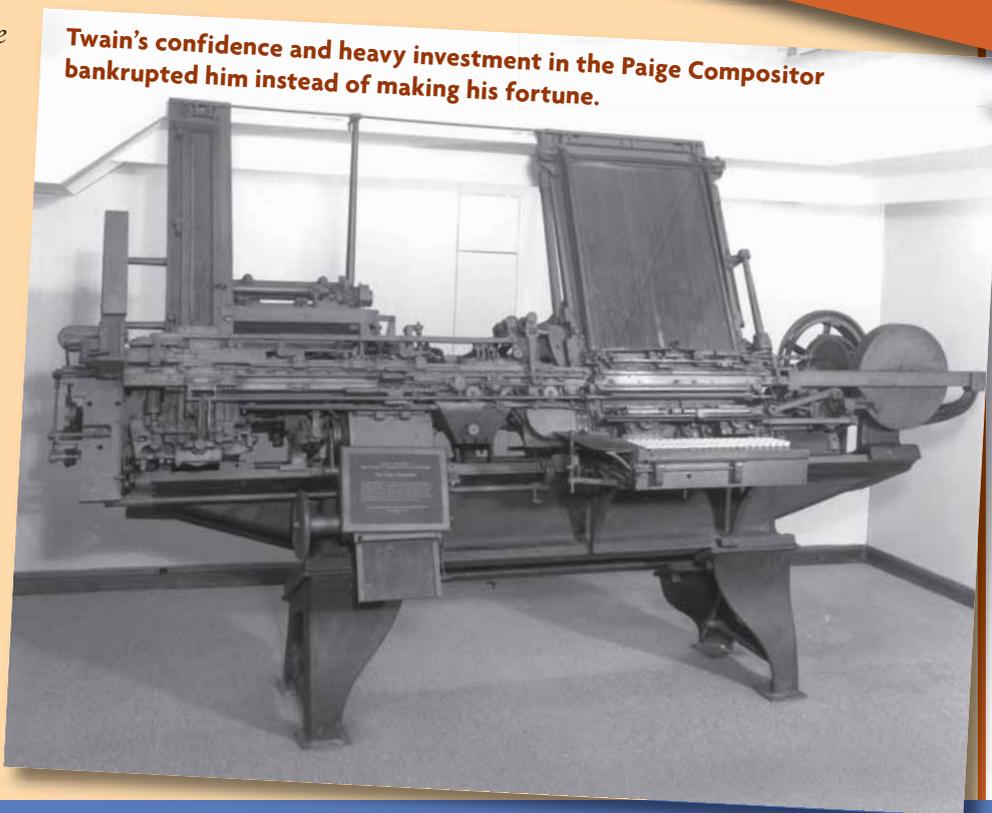
He sometimes despaired about new technology, too. Floating peacefully on his simple raft, Huckleberry Finn is overrun by a steamboat. When Hank Morgan, the main character in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, is transported to sixth-century Camelot, he first improves life there with his 19th-century tools and technology. In the end, though, the people revolt, and he battles their army of knights — unsuccessfully — with modern weapons and dynamite.

Still, Twain admitted, "The trouble with these...novel things is that they interfere so with one's arrangements. Every time I see or hear a new wonder, I have to postpone my death." D

Cynthia Levinson enjoys writing for *COBBLESTONE* and other magazines. She lives in Austin, Texas, and Boston, Massachusetts.

"I have never let my schooling interfere with my education."

Twain's confidence and heavy investment in the Paige Compositor bankrupted him instead of making his fortune.



BICYCLE TAMER

all came down with a crash, he at the bottom, I next, and the machine on top."

Twain tried again, but "the bicycle had what is called the 'wabbles,'" which he could not control with the "tiller," his name for handlebars. After hitting a brick, "I went out over the top of the tiller and landed, head down, on the instructor's back, and saw the machine fluttering in the air between me and the sun. It was well it came down on us, for that broke the fall, and it was not injured." A neighborhood boy suggested Twain "dress up in pillows."

Twain concluded, "Get a bicycle. You will not regret it, if you live." — C.L.

