

ALBERT BIGELOW PAINE'S VISIT TO KEOKUK IN 1910

Shortly after Mark Twain's death on April 21, 1910, Albert Bigelow Paine, having nearly completed his three-volume work, *Mark Twain: A Biography*, decided to visit Iowa in order to deal more effectively with the Keokuk episode in Mark Twain's career. While Mark Twain's early residence in Keokuk had been of brief duration, not more than two years, it was a critical period, fruitful of beginnings. Furthermore, both his mother and his brother Orion had lived there for many years and had died there, and a number of relatives and friends were still living in the city. By visiting scenes associated with Mark Twain in Keokuk and by collecting stories locally current about him, Paine hoped to enrich his story with local color.

Paine arrived in Keokuk on July 18, 1910, and during his stay of three or four days was entertained as a guest at the home of G. Walter Barr, a locally prominent author and physician and friend of the Keokuk Clemenses. According to Mr. Barr, Paine had come to Keokuk with his attitude toward the Keokuk episode in Mark Twain's life and toward Orion Clemens already determined. It soon became evident, he wrote, "that Paine was making a biography to order and was in Keokuk merely to get local color for the story, the plot and most of the structure of which were already completed. When confronted with proof . . . that some of his paragraphs were untrue, and when I insisted upon presenting . . . that proof . . . it made the foundation of what you sense, that he had not altogether a happy time of it down at Keokuk; and there stood Paine really facing a battle line ready to fight against the

slanders that Mark initiated and Paine intended to continue."¹

The purpose of this paper is, first, to sketch the controversies that immediately arose in Keokuk between Mr. Paine and the friends and relatives of Orion Clemens; and second, to point out the probable effect of these controversies upon Paine's treatment of certain portions of his material, particularly that relating to Orion Clemens.

Notices of Paine's visit appeared in the *Keokuk Gate City* on July 18, 21, and 24. None of these items betrays any hint of the attitude of the local people with regard to Mark Twain or his biographer; but on August 2nd a long and critical article appeared that reveals the primary causes for the controversies that arose. The following extract is particularly pertinent:

It is a peculiar fact that in all his writings Mark Twain mentions Keokuk but once. That is in his "Life on the Mississippi" where he refers to the city in passing on a steamboat. The fact that his brother lived there for many years, and that his mother spent the last year of her life, and finally went to her reward there, make it odd that the city should have been omitted from any of the writings of a personal nature put forth by Mr. Clemens. This fact, and the rather harsh manner in which Mr. Clemens referred to his brother Orion, in the recent published extracts from his autobiography aroused the people of Keokuk to the point of protest. While they thought it strange that Keokuk should have been so ignored by the humorist, they deeply resented in particular the apparent slight on the brother.

The "apparent slight" on Orion had appeared in *The North American Review* during January and February of 1907² and consisted of a number of episodes which presented Orion in a ludicrous light. The defects that Mark Twain had particularly pointed out were Orion's utter in-

¹ Letter from G. Walter Barr to the writer, December 21, 1931.

² *The North American Review*, Vol. 184, pp. 113-118, 226-232, 337-344.

stability of character, especially in matters of religion and politics, his desire for approval, his political bungling in Nevada which, according to Mark Twain, had lost Orion the governorship of that State, and his pathetic lack of business and professional sense.

Incensed by Mark Twain's harsh treatment of his brother, whose gentle and lovable personality had, in the later years, endeared him to all Keokuk, Orion's friends were quick to come to his defense. Had not Orion done a good deal for Sam in the early days when, after the death of the father, he had helped much to support the family? Had he not given Sam employment in his newspaper and printing offices? Had he not made him his private secretary when Orion was appointed Secretary of the Territory of Nevada; and had he not paid Sam's salary out of his own pocket? In addition to these claims, two others precipitated controversies far in excess of their merit. One was the claim that Orion had given Mark Twain literary aid in the composition of some of his earlier books. This opinion, widely current in Keokuk for many years, probably rested upon the fact that when Mark Twain was planning his book *Roughing It*, Orion supplied him with a journal which he had kept on the trip west, following his secretarial appointment. It contained such valuable detail concerning the trip to Nevada and the early experiences in the Territory that Mark Twain at once offered, and did pay, Orion a thousand dollars for its use. While it is probable that Orion may have sent Mark Twain additional manuscripts containing recollections of the Nevada venture, no record has yet been brought to light to indicate that he rendered other literary aid to his famous brother.³

³ An interesting sidelight into the state of feeling at Keokuk is also apparent in the following extract from a letter, written April 20, 1928, by Mr. Jesse Benjamin who, after the death of Jane Clemens (Mark Twain's mother), occupied the room she had formerly occupied. "I was one of the many friends who

ALBERT BIGELOW PAINE'S VISIT TO KEOKUK 195

The second point of controversy rose out of Paine's claim that Sam had paid Orion's stagecoach fare to Nevada Territory. Relatives of Mrs. Orion Clemens contended that Orion had borrowed the money for the trip from his father-in-law, Mr. Stotts. The *Gate City* article of August 2nd alludes to this point of the controversy as follows:

Mr. Paine, who is an inordinate admirer of the man of whose life he is preparing a history, explained many things concerning Mr. Clemens. He said that out of the great amount of correspondence which had accumulated, written between Samuel and Orion, and their wives, he had come into possession of absolute proof that it was not Orion who was the benefactor, but Samuel. According to the letters passing between the two brothers, it is made clear that Samuel gave his brother six hundred dollars which had been saved from the wages as river pilot. It was this money which financed the trip to Nevada. Orion could not have accepted the secretaryship without the financial aid given by Samuel.

How accurately the newspapers reported Mr. Paine's statements about the money cannot now be ascertained.⁴ In a letter to the writer, dated October 29, 1927, Mr. Paine said, with reference to the controversy about the money:

As to the money feature, I am certain that Sam paid for the tickets to Carson City. My recollection is that Orion himself said so in his autobiography. I remember M. T. said so repeatedly. It is not impossible that Mr. Stotts also lent Orion some money. He

were disgusted with Twain's sacrifice of fraternal loyalty for mere literary force . . . Orion and Molly (Orion's wife) commenced keeping friendly roomers soon after the mother's death. . . . Some 'pinch' seemed to prompt this, though their sensitiveness about it was gracefully covered in a rare home spirit, in which we tried to help them. . . . My personal impression is that Molly felt the sting of appearing as Twain's pensioners. I also recall her references to Orion's literary assistance to Twain's earlier work. There was never a word of bitterness or disappreciation and very little was said about Sam. Twain's wife and daughters seemed especially loved by both Orion and his wife."

⁴ In his *Chapters from My Autobiography* in *The North American Review*, Vol. 187, p. 229, Mark Twain states that he paid the stagecoach fares to Nevada Territory and carried with him about eight hundred dollars in silver.

would do so, I suppose, if he had it, but it has been my impression that he was never overburdened with funds. I do not think it worthwhile to pay attention to idle talk in Keokuk. There are always a number of wiseacres who have "special information" long after the event, especially if it contradicts generally accepted opinion. They are the bane of the historian . . . Orion Clemens had many good qualities; with a proper balance-wheel he could have made his mark. Much of his record [Orion's autobiography] that was not used [by Mr. Paine in writing some of the early chapters of *Mark Twain: A Biography*] was a succession of humiliating confessions. His memory will not suffer if they are forgotten.

It will be observed that Mr. Paine's statement about the money in the letter just quoted is more cautious than that printed in the *Gate City* of August 2, 1910. He is certain that Mark Twain paid for Orion's trip to Nevada, but he makes no further reference to the six hundred dollars and admits that Orion may have received help elsewhere.⁵ In view of the fact that none of the correspondence between Sam and Orion Clemens, which Mr. Paine later published, alludes to the money matter, and in view of the additional fact that Mark Twain destroyed most of the manuscript of Orion's autobiography⁶ and that the remaining portion of it has not yet been found there is now little opportunity to discover the truth. The question about the money has, of course, little importance in itself. For Mr. Paine, on the occasion of his visit to Keokuk in 1910, it became quite important, for it served to provoke distrust and bad feeling which can still be detected in Keokuk today.

The controversies in Keokuk led Mr. Paine to treat Orion with more cautious consideration in his writings about

⁵ That Orion did receive help elsewhere is probable, according to Mrs. Louis B. Schmidt of Ames. She reports that a relative of hers, Mr. David Schenk, son of Adam Schenk, once a prominent banker of Memphis, Missouri, showed her in 1909 an unpaid note of several hundred dollars given by Orion Clemens. Mrs. Schmidt does not remember the date of the note but believes that Orion may have given it during his residence in Memphis in 1860-1861.

⁶ See *The North American Review*, Vol. 184, p. 344.

ALBERT BIGELOW PAINE'S VISIT TO KEOKUK 197

Mark Twain than he might have done had the controversies not occurred. That Paine was aware of Orion's good qualities is unquestioned. He had evidence of these in the letters that passed between the brothers, and more particularly in Orion's unusually frank autobiography, which Paine used extensively in writing the early chapters of his *Mark Twain: A Biography*. What Paine apparently did not know, or gravely underestimated, was the general esteem that Orion enjoyed in Keokuk. Getting his cue about Orion from such letters as the one dated February 9, 1879 (written to Orion but sent to William Dean Howells) and the one of October 9, 1879, both of which present Orion as a character of such childlike simplicity and instability that Mark Twain urges Howells not to "fool away this treasure . . . but take it up and use it", Paine blundered by assuming that the people of Keokuk viewed Orion in the same light.⁷

By 1918, seven years after his visit to Keokuk, when he published *Mark Twain's Letters*, Paine wrote of Orion:

He was one of the most human creatures that ever lived; indeed, his humanity excluded every form of artificiality — everything that needs to be acquired. Talented, trusting, childlike, carried away by the impulse of the moment, despite a keen sense of humor he was never able to see that his latest plan or project was not bound to succeed.⁸

Had Paine not visited Keokuk and felt the depth and sincerity of local esteem for Orion, it is doubtful that he could have made so generous a statement here or elsewhere in his treatment of Orion Clemens.

FRED W. LORCH

IOWA STATE COLLEGE
AMES IOWA

⁷ James O'Donnell Bennett made the same blunder in his *Chicago Tribune* article of August 14, 1926, under the caption "Orion Clemens' Ghost Seems to Haunt Keokuk".

⁸ Vol. I, p. 352.