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Top Story

Angels Camp Museum to unveil Clemens collection

by Krissi Khokhobashvili

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It's been years in the making, but starting May 1, "the little museum that could" will be home to an extensive exhibit featuring a figure who left a tremendous imprint on the city of Angels Camp: Mark Twain.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the author's death, and the 175th since his birth. In advance of the Calaveras County Fair, the theme of which will celebrate "The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain," the Angels Camp Museum is bustling with activity as volunteers toil to get the Twain exhibit up and running.



Bob Rogers, museum administrator, displays one of three banners that will line the Mark Twain exhibit. Enterprise photo by Krissi Khokhobashvili

"We have so much really neat stuff," enthused Bob Rogers, museum administrator. While the displays are still in the making, he assures that come the annual Miner's Picnic on May 1, visitors will be able to peruse writings, artifacts and pictures of Samuel Clemens.

The exhibit is a collaboration of the Mark Twain Boyhood Museum in the author's hometown of Hannibal, Mo.; the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, home to the largest repository of Twain documents in the world; and a literature class at UC Merced.

Students of the class (Lit 165: Great Writers) "adopted" the Angels Camp Museum in 2009, immersing themselves in a project that would eventually become a display. Students researched and wrote "The Five Jumps of the Calaveras Frog," an outline of five drafts of a short story, the third of which would become Angels Camp's claim to fame: Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County."

"What they did is fabulous," Rogers said of the students' work, adding that some alumni will be at the Miner's Picnic to be present at the unveiling of the exhibit.

While Twain was only in Angels Camp from December 1864 to February 1865, he left a legacy here that is seen not only in his Calaveras tale but also in artifacts collected from his time spent in a cabin at Jackass Hill to oral histories passed down through

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generations.

"It is so fascinating to see what he saw," Rogers said.

The Merced students' work combines with rare photos, letters and other writings of Twain's on loan from Bancroft that will lead visitors through a timeline of Twain's life. Graphic artist Linda Gough has designed a three-part exhibit to which photos and information are attached magnetically, enabling the display to become mobile in the future.

The first section of the display outlines Twain's boyhood on the rivers of Missouri to his arrival in California, followed by "The Wild Humorist of the Pacific Slope" section, which displays information about Twain's writings, from fiction to political satire. The third section will outline Twain's time spent here, featuring actual copies of the first and third drafts of the story of Jim Smiley and his jumping frog.

"I think, when the whole thing is put together, it's really going to be stunning," said Kathy Dodge, vice president of the Angels Camp Museum Foundation.

A sidebar of the Twain exhibit will be a display devoted to Gold Rush families of the area, the first being the Menard-Menzies family, which has roots in the area going back seven generations. Information and photos about the family will include a "curatorial notebook" providing family history. Rogers said the museum always welcomes historical information from families in the area that could be included in the exhibit.

"To be able to relate to people, what they did and what Angels Camp was like – that's really fascinating."

The Mark Twain exhibit is possible through the Paul Raggio Memorial Fund, in memory of the late City Councilmember and lifelong Angels Camp resident who took pride in the history of his city.

"This is going to be a wonderful exhibit, and Paul would be so happy to see what's going on here," Rogers said.

Rogers said the exhibit will be a permanent, ever-growing fixture of the museum in a city rich with Twain history.

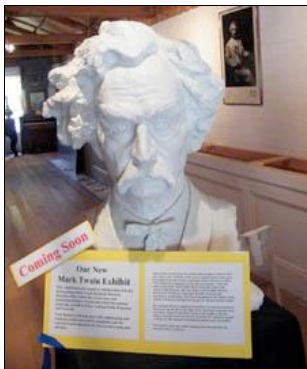
"To tell you the truth, I don't see us ever finishing with Twain," he said.

Museum hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Thursday through Monday, closed Tuesdays and Wednesday. The Angels Camp Museum is at 753 S. Main St., Angels Camp. For more information call 736-2963.

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This bust of Mark Twain on display at the museum was sculpted by Ushangi Kumelashvili, a native of Tbilisi, Georgia, who used to live in Calaveras County. Enterprise photo by Krissi Khokhobashvili



This graphic illustration shows the museum's vision for its Mark Twain exhibit. Enterprise photo by Krissi Khokhobashvili