

Mark Twain and Christopher Columbus

By Bill Hobby

In just a few months, it will be 1992, 500 years after Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue and "discovered" America.

Will the anniversary will be the occasion of big celebrations of that event? Well, yes and no. Every year for a long time, stories have appeared about October 1 debunking Columbus' achievement. This year scholars are debunking not only Columbus, but another cherished figure of the American tradition: Mark Twain. They are saying that Twain didn't say a lot of the things that have been attributed to him.

Even the quote most often attributed to the father of Huck Finn may belong to someone else: "When I feel the urge to exercise, I go lie down until it passes away." The first pronouncement of that excellent advice seems to have come from Robert Hutchins, longtime President of the University of Chicago.

The scholars at the University of California at Berkeley who have thus far compiled 21 volumes of Twain's original material can't be sure he said "So I became a newspaperman. I hated to do it, but I couldn't find honest employment."

Or, "There is nothing so annoying as to have two people go right on talking when you're interrupting."

Or, "The Devil is alive and doing well because he has so many damned helpers."

Or, "When the end of the world comes, I want to be in Cincinnati because its always 20 years behind the times."

The Twain scholars even doubt that he ever said "Better to keep your mouth shut and appear stupid than to open it and remove all doubt." Would you believe Abraham Lincoln?

People like to attribute witty sayings to Twain because, as Robert H. Hirst, editor of the Mark Twain papers, said to The Chronicle of Higher Education: "As soon as you say Mark Twain said it, people are ready to laugh. It helps people tell their joke."

For years people have been saying that Columbus did not "discover" America. Of course he didn't "discover" America. Millions of people lived in North and South America when Columbus landed in the West Indies on his first voyage to "New World". They would have been surprised to have been told they had been "discovered".

It is more accurate to say that Columbus "encountered" the Bahamas than to say he discovered the Western Hemisphere.

Christopher Columbus was almost certainly not the first sailor from the Eastern Hemisphere to land on the western shore of the Atlantic or the Eastern shore of the Pacific.

Norsemen certainly landed on Greenland, Newfoundland and Canada about the year 1000. In these days of multiculturalism, other claims are put forth that:

- Japanese fishermen, fleeing a volcanic eruption on Kyushu, landed in Ecuador 5,000 years ago.
- Descendants of Jewish refugees from Roman persecution fled to Tennessee in the second century AD.
- Ancient Gauls discovered America but abandoned it.

- Egyptians in reed rafts discovered America.
- A Chinese Buddhist named Hui-Shen and four other monks landed in Mexico in the fifth century AD.
- St. Brendan the Navigator, a fifth-century Irish monk, sailed to America in a curragh, or leather boat.
- Ten boatloads of Welsh colonists, led by Prince Madoc, settled in or near Florida and intermarried with Indians. Their descendants, according to this theory, are blue-eyed Mandan Indians in the Dakotas.

These speculations have never gained acceptance among historians, but there is fascinating evidence supporting several of them, particularly the Jewish and Welsh theories. A fascinating summary appears in a story by Donald Dale Jackson in the September issue of the Smithsonian Magazine.

Whatever the truth of any of these stories, Columbus' "encounter" was the one that counted. The other voyages, if they took place, did nothing to bring the two hemispheres together in any lasting way.

It remained for Christopher Columbus, The Admiral of the Ocean Sea, to make the truly historic connection. (Columbus' greatest biographer, Samuel Eliot Morison, gave Columbus that poetic title).

Columbus, of course, has another set of critics who do not doubt that he paved the way for European exploration of the Americas, but blame him because he did. It is really a bit much to hold Columbus responsible for the excesses of later Spanish explorers in the New World, slavery, racism, or whatever.

What would Mark Twain have said about the Admiral's detractors? Probably what he said about another historical dispute: "The researches of many commentators have already thrown much darkness on this subject, and it is probable that, if they continue, we shall soon know nothing at all about it."

Written in 1991.