

Humanizing the Other
Mark Twain and the Struggle Against Imperialism Part 7
By Philip Chin

Many hours in the final years in the life of Samuel Clemens (universally called by his pen name of Mark Twain by then) were spent in contemplation of the past. He spent much time working on his autobiography and memoirs. As written about in the first chapter of this series, these memories included the brutal and unprovoked mauling and beating of a Chinese man by white butchers and their dogs on Brannan Street in San Francisco in 1864. This shocking incident had started the gradual process of changing Clemens' mind about minorities in the United States and set him on the course to eventually oppose imperialism and speak out against racism in the United States.

How far had Samuel Clemens advanced in his views in the over 40 years since 1864? Prior to that time we know him as a supporter of the anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic political movement named as the Know-Nothing Party in the 1850s. He also expressed prejudiced views about non-whites in a letter home to his mother in Missouri during his time in New York City, calling them "vermin." He typified the small-town Missouri prejudices of the time. The youthful Samuel Clemens had grown up with slaves in the family so he hadn't naturally grown up with any qualms about the institution. This was not the background of someone anyone would expect would eventually grow up to write so sympathetically about the Chinese, African Americans, and exploited non-white people around the world.

Among the stories of his San Francisco sojourn in 1864 was one that indicated his early views of the Chinese weren't all that different from most of his contemporaries. As a young down and out reporter, he shared a series of lodgings with a friend and fellow reporter, Steven Gillis. They never stayed in any one location in the city for more than a month at a time, such was their poverty. "Their most satisfactory residence was on a bluff on California Street. Their windows looked down on a lot of Chinese houses — 'tin-can houses,' they were called — small wooden shanties covered with beaten-out cans. Steve and Mark would look down on these houses, waiting until all the Chinamen were inside; then one of them would grab an empty beer-bottle, throw it down on those tin can roofs, and dodge behind the blinds. The Chinamen would swarm out and look up at the row of houses on the edge of the bluff, shake their fists, and pour out Chinese vituperation. By and by, when they had retired and everything was quiet again, their tormentors would throw another bottle. This was their Sunday amusement."

The young Samuel Clemens must have been aware that the Chinese he tormented as his "Sunday amusement" couldn't complain to the San Francisco Police. The police would have ignored their complaints anyway, if not beaten them up for daring to approach them in the first place. Significantly, Mark Twain's indignation against the San Francisco Police Department, as expressed in his jaundiced comments about their corruption and unwillingness to help the Chinese in his newspaper articles, came after he witnessed the mauling and beating of the Chinese man. A police officer had stood by laughing as the dogs mauled the completely innocent laundryman and continued to watch as one of the butchers then decided to knock out the wounded man's teeth with a brick. This shocking incident and official amusement of the violence had shaken Samuel Clemens world view to the core and started a process of changes in the way he

thought of non-white people that brought him further and further away from mainstream thought in his writings over the next few decades.

The first work attributed to him by modern scholars that spoke out against lynching appeared on August 26, 1869 in the *Buffalo Express* newspaper in New York. Samuel Clemens was part-owner and the editor of the newspaper from 1869 to 1871. Much of the language, including the sarcastic tone, closely resemble his other writings at the time. That the subject was a dangerous and controversial one to write about was evidenced in the fact that the article appeared without attribution to him or any other writer at the newspaper. Throughout the piece, the word “nigger” is put in quotation marks to emphasize the writer’s awareness that the term is denigrating to African Americans. For its time the piece is remarkable for the strong underlying sentiment that African Americans are human beings that deserve to be treated equally and as fairly as whites. This underlying argument in favor of a common humanity between the races reappears again and again in the writings of Mark Twain, especially in *Huckleberry Finn* in 1885 and the *United States of Lyncherdom* in 1901.

Only a Nigger

A dispatch from Memphis mentions that, of two negroes lately sentenced to death for murder in that vicinity, one named Woods has just confessed to having ravished a young lady during the war, for which deed another negro was hung at the time by an avenging mob, the evidence that doomed the guiltless wretch being a hat which Woods now relates that he stole from its owner and left behind, for the purpose of misleading. Ah, well! Too bad, to be sure! A little blunder in the administration of justice by Southern mob-law; but nothing to speak of. Only "a nigger" killed by mistake -- that is all. Of course, every high toned gentleman whose chivalric impulses were so unfortunately misled in this affair, by the cunning of the miscreant Woods, is as sorry about it as a high toned gentleman can be expected to be sorry about the unlucky fate of "a nigger." But mistakes will happen, even in the conduct of the best regulated and most high toned mobs, and surely there is no good reason why Southern gentlemen should worry themselves with useless regrets, so long as only an innocent "nigger" is hanged, or roasted or knouted to death, now and then. What if the blunder of lynching the wrong man does happen once in four or five cases! Is that any fair argument against the cultivation and indulgence of those fine chivalric passions and that noble Southern spirit which will not brook the slow and cold formalities of regular law, when outraged white womanhood appeals for vengeance? Perish the thought so unworthy of a Southern soul! Leave it to the sentimentalism and humanitarianism of a cold-blooded Yankee civilization! What are the lives of a few "niggers" in comparison with the preservation of the impetuous instincts of a proud and fiery race? Keep ready the halter, therefore, oh chivalry of Memphis! Keep the lash knotted; keep the brand and the faggots in waiting, for prompt work with the next "nigger" who may be suspected of any damnable crime! Wreak a swift vengeance upon him, for the satisfaction of the noble impulses that animate knightly hearts, and then leave time and accident to discover, if they will, whether he was guilty or no.

By 1901, Samuel Clemens was an increasingly frustrated and angry old man deploring what was happening in the United States. He became much more willing to speak out against lynchings and was quoted by the newspapers denouncing the practice. Events on August 19, 1901 in Pierce City in his native state of Missouri attracted his indignation and inspired him to write *The United States of Lyncherdom*. A young white woman, Casselle Wilds, on her way home from church that Sunday, had been found with her throat cut in a culvert with signs of a struggle. It was vaguely reported that a “copper-colored negro” had been seen in the vicinity. A terrible rumor arose, later denied by the authorities, that the young woman had also been raped. Even innocuous or non-existent contact between white women and African American men could instigate a lynching in

the South in those years. The very real murder of a white woman, and the rumor that an African American was seen nearby, resulted in a mob of whites that promptly lynched two African American men, Will Godley and the elderly Eugene Carter. In further retaliation that night, the lynch mob raided the African American neighborhood of the city, burning down their houses and chasing families away. They killed the elderly grandfather of the younger lynched man, French Godley, and accidentally shot to death a young white boy with a stray bullet in the confusion.

The United States of Lyncherdom threw away all of the circumspect language that Mark Twain had used in previous years to inveigh against this kind of violence. The original intent was that this article would be the introduction to a new subscription book talking about the history of lynching in the United States. For some reason Clemens gave up on the book project and the introductory article wasn't printed in his lifetime. The edition we see today, which is the most widely known version, was first printed in 1923 in a collection of his work released by his literary executor, Albert Bigelow Paine. Paine also wrote the biography of Mark Twain from which the anecdote about the beer bottles thrown at the Chinese houses in 1864 was drawn.

The text released in 1923 contains several significant alterations made by Paine to the original work. Several direct references to the Christian missionaries that Clemens was feuding with at the time over Boxer Rebellion reparations were removed. "Theft and extortion!" Mark Twain had thundered in his article, *To the Person Sitting in Darkness*. However, his commentary at the start of the article about the failure of Christian missionaries in China to win a significant number of converts in China was left in the 1923 article. Cutting that out would have rendered the entire article senseless, as will be seen. Other changes made were in deference to the acceptable language standards of the time. The reference to Missourians engaged in lynching being "renegades" had originally called them "bastards." This was very strong language unsuitable for mainstream publications in 1923 and would have been the same back in 1901.

The United States of Lyncherdom

And so Missouri has fallen, that great state! Certain of her children have joined the lynchers, and the smirch is upon the rest of us. That handful of her children have given us a character and labeled us with a name, and to the dwellers in the four quarters of the earth we are "lynchers," now, and ever shall be. For the world will not stop and think--it never does, it is not its way; its way is to generalize from a single sample. It will not say, "Those Missourians have been busy eighty years in building an honorable good name for themselves; these hundred lynchers down in the corner of the state are not real Missourians, they are renegades." No, that truth will not enter its mind; it will generalize from the one or two misleading samples and say, "The Missourians are lynchers." It has no reflection, no logic, no sense of proportion. With it, figures go for nothing; to it, figures reveal nothing, it cannot reason upon them rationally; it would say, for instance, that China is being swiftly and surely Christianized, since nine Chinese Christians are being made every day; and it would fail, with him, to notice that the fact that 33,000 pagans are born there every day, damages the argument. It would say, "There are a hundred lynchers there, therefore the Missourians are lynchers"; the considerable fact that there are two and a half million Missourians who are not lynchers would not affect their verdict.

Oh, Missouri!

The tragedy occurred near Pierce City, down in the southwestern corner of the state. On a Sunday afternoon a young white woman who had started alone from church was found murdered. For there are churches there; in my time religion was more general, more pervasive, in the South than it was

in the North, and more virile and earnest, too, I think; I have some reason to believe that this is still the case. The young woman was found murdered. Although it was a region of churches and schools the people rose, lynched three negroes--two of them very aged ones--burned out five negro households, and drove thirty negro families into the woods.

I do not dwell upon the provocation which moved the people to these crimes, for that has nothing to do with the matter; the only question is, does the assassin *take the law into his own hands*? It is very simple, and very just. If the assassin be proved to have usurped the law's prerogative in righting his wrongs, that ends the matter; a thousand provocations are no defense. The Pierce City people had bitter provocation--indeed, as revealed by certain of the particulars, the bitterest of all provocations--but no matter, they took the law into their own hands, when by the terms of their statutes their victim would certainly hang if the law had been allowed to take its course, for there are but few negroes in that region and they are without authority and without influence in over-awing juries.

Samuel Clemens approached the subject of combating lynchings not by making the point that these actions were wrong in and of themselves, but from the more practical point that such extrajudicial killings set a bad example that other people would follow. Publicize African Americans raping white women and murdering them by lynching the African Americans and other African Americans would do so as well. Academics and others have criticized what seems a very odd and troubling stance from our modern point of view, but it should be remembered that Clemens claimed to have witnessed two lynchings in his life, something very few academics or others have had any personal experience of seeing today. Clemens knew very well through his own eyes and ears about the wild mob mentality of people willing to callously murder others based upon little to no evidence. These mobs were not made up of people that could be swayed by moral persuasion. Only practical self-interest could prevent lynchings in the rabidly racist and violent atmosphere in America at the turn of the 20th Century.

Why has lynching, with various barbaric accompaniments, become a favorite regulator in cases of "the usual crime" in several parts of the country? Is it because men think a lurid and terrible punishment a more forcible object lesson and a more effective deterrent than a sober and colorless hanging done privately in a jail would be? Surely sane men do not think that. Even the average child should know better. It should know that any strange and much-talked-of event is always followed by imitations, the world being so well supplied with excitable people who only need a little stirring up to make them lose what is left of their heads and do things which they would not have thought of ordinarily. It should know that if a man jump off Brooklyn Bridge another will imitate him; that if a person venture down Niagara Whirlpool in a barrel another will imitate him; that if a Jack the Ripper make notoriety by slaughtering women in dark alleys he will be imitated; that if a man attempt a king's life and the newspapers carry the noise of it around the globe, regicides will crop up all around. The child should know that one much-talked-of outrage and murder committed by a negro will upset the disturbed intellects of several other negroes and produce a series of the very tragedies the community would so strenuously wish to prevent; that each of these crimes will produce another series, and year by year steadily increase the tale of these disasters instead of diminishing it; that, in a word, the lynchers are themselves the worst enemies of their women. The child should also know that by a law of our make, communities, as well as individuals, are imitators; and that a much-talked-of lynching will infallibly produce other lynchings here and there and yonder, and that in time these will breed a mania, a fashion; a fashion which will spread wide and wider, year by year, covering state after state, as with an advancing disease. Lynching has reached Colorado, it has reached California, it has reached Indiana--and now Missouri! I may live to see a negro burned in Union Square, New York, with fifty thousand people present, and not a sheriff visible, not a governor, not a constable, not a colonel, not a clergyman, not a law-and-order representative of any sort.

Clemens then showed that instances of lynching had increased year after year and blamed this on the examples set in previous years:

Increase in Lynching.--In 1900 there were eight more cases than in 1899, and probably this year there will be more than there were last year. The year is little more than half gone, and yet there are eighty-eight cases as compared with one hundred and fifteen for all of last year. The four Southern states, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi are the worst offenders. Last year there were eight cases in Alabama, sixteen in Georgia, twenty in Louisiana, and twenty in Mississippi--over one-half the total. This year to date there have been nine in Alabama, twelve in Georgia, eleven in Louisiana, and thirteen in Mississippi--again more than one-half the total number in the whole United States.--Chicago Tribune.

He then listed the reason why he thought such violence had been perpetuated; the unwillingness of people to stand up and object publicly to something they all knew was wrong for fear of sticking out from their neighbors. This was what today we would acknowledge as peer pressure.

It must be that the increase comes of the inborn human instinct to imitate--that and man's commonest weakness, his aversion to being unpleasantly conspicuous, pointed at, shunned, as being on the unpopular side. Its other name is Moral Cowardice, and is the commanding feature of the make-up of 9,999 men in the 10,000. I am not offering this as a discovery; privately the dullest of us knows it to be true. History will not allow us to forget or ignore this supreme trait of our character. It persistently and sardonically reminds us that from the beginning of the world no revolt against a public infamy or oppression has ever been begun but by the one daring man in the 10,000, the rest timidly waiting, and slowly and reluctantly joining, under the influence of that man and his fellows from the other ten thousands. The abolitionists remember. Privately the public feeling was with them early, but each man was afraid to speak out until he got some hint that his neighbor was privately feeling as he privately felt himself. Then the boom followed. It always does. It will occur in New York, some day; and even in Pennsylvania.

It has been supposed--and said--that the people at a lynching enjoy the spectacle and are glad of a chance to see it. It cannot be true; all experience is against it. The people in the South are made like the people in the North--the vast majority of whom are right-hearted and compassionate, and would be cruelly pained by such a spectacle--and would attend it, and let on to be pleased with it, if the public approval seemed to require it. We are made like that, and we cannot help it. The other animals are not so, but we cannot help that, either. They lack the Moral Sense; we have no way of trading ours off, for a nickel or some other thing above its value. The Moral Sense teaches us what is right, and how to avoid it--when unpopular.

It is thought, as I have said, that a lynching crowd enjoys a lynching. It certainly is not true; it is impossible of belief. It is freely asserted--you have seen it in print many times of late--that the lynching impulse has been misinterpreted; that it is act the outcome of a spirit of revenge, but of a "mere atrocious hunger to *look upon human suffering*." If that were so, the crowds that saw the Windsor Hotel burn down would have enjoyed the horrors that fell under their eyes. Did they? No one will think that of them, no one will make that charge. Many risked their lives to save the men and women who were in peril. Why did they do that? Because *none would disapprove*. There was no restraint; they could follow their natural impulse. Why does a crowd of the same kind of people in Texas, Colorado, Indiana, stand by, smitten to the heart and miserable, and by ostentatious outward signs pretend to enjoy a lynching? Why does it lift no hand or voice in protest? Only because it would be unpopular to do it, I think; each man is afraid of his neighbor's disapproval--a thing which, to the general run of the race, is more dreaded than wounds and death. When there is to be a lynching the people hitch up and come miles to see it, bringing their wives and children. Really to see it? No--they come only because they are afraid to stay at home, lest it be noticed and

offensively commented upon. We may believe this, for we all know how we feel about such spectacles--also, how we would act under the like pressure. We are not any better nor any braver than anybody else, and we must not try to creep out of it.

He then cited leaders that stood up against mobs and quelled them singlehandedly. Savonarola, the charismatic friar of the Italian Renaissance in the 15th Century had stood up against the authority of the pope. Clemens said such a man “can quell and scatter a mob of lynchers with a mere glance of his eye.” He then cited more recent examples from 1901, Merrill and Beloat, without listing any other details about what those men had done. Their actions had received nationwide attention so Clemens must have assumed that everyone would have understood the references. Sheriff Joseph Merrill of Carroll County, Georgia was holding an African American man convicted of murder and sentenced to hang in June 1901. A stay of execution was issued at the last minute leaving a disappointed mob of whites outside waiting to see the public hanging. The mob stormed the jail, knocking down the doors in their eagerness to lynch the man. Sheriff Merrill ordered them to disperse. When they continued their attack, he gave the order to open fire on what were probably his own neighbors, killing one man and wounding two others. The mob was successfully driven away. The Atlanta Constitution newspaper said about the incident. “It will be argued that the life of a Negro murderer is not worth the sacrifice, that the sheriff might easily have winked at the work of the mob, and better lives than that of the Negro wretch would have been spared. That sort of argument is entirely beside the question. Other sheriffs have done such things, but for the good name of Carroll it is fortunate that hers is not of that stripe. It was Sheriff Merrill’s highest duty as the representative of the law of the state to keep his prisoner from the hands of that mob, and he did his duty, bravely, valiantly. All honor to his conception of his duty and his courage in fulfilling it.” More telling was the next paragraph that was echoed in sentiment in newspapers across the nation, “If there were more sheriffs like him, there would be less lynching.” Sheriff Thomas Beloat was also credited as having stopped a lynch mob in Princeton, Indiana. In his notes in the article, Clemens said, “By that formidable power which lies in an established reputation for cold pluck they faced lynching mobs and securely held the field against them.”

These brave leaders set examples for the people. Clemens argued, “For no mob has any sand in the presence of a man known to be splendidly brave. Besides, a lynching mob would like to be scattered, for of a certainty there are never ten men in it who would not prefer to be somewhere else--and would be, if they but had the courage to go. When I was a boy I saw a brave gentleman deride and insult a mob and drive it away; and afterward, in Nevada, I saw a noted desperado make two hundred men sit still, with the house burning under them, until he gave them permission to retire. A plucky man can rob a whole passenger train by himself; and the half of a brave man can hold up a stagecoach and strip its occupants.”

He suggested a solution for lynching could be found through the example of good men such as the two sheriffs that had bravely stood against the lynch mobs. These were examples of a much rarer form of moral courage to stand against public sentiment in support of what was right, versus purely physical courage, which could be found in abundance because nobody objected to that. As an example of physical courage, strangely enough, given Clemens’ public antipathy towards the Spanish-American War as the prelude to America’s imperial aggrandizement by this time, he cited the physical heroism of Lieutenant Richmond Hobson of the United States Navy in that war. Lieutenant Hobson and some volunteer sailors had unsuccessfully attempted to sink a ship across the harbor channel of Santiago, Cuba in 1898 to prevent the Spanish fleet from coming out to

fight. He became a national hero despite failing the mission and being captured by the Spanish. Hobson, who parlayed his fame into a stint as a United States Representative from Alabama and rank as admiral, was eventually awarded the Medal of Honor in 1933, 35 years after the failed action.

Then perhaps the remedy for lynchings comes to this: station a brave man in each affected community to encourage, support, and bring to light the deep disapproval of lynching hidden in the secret places of its heart--for it is there, beyond question. Then those communities will find something better to imitate--of course, being human, they must imitate something. Where shall these brave men be found? That is indeed a difficulty; there are not three hundred of them in the earth. If merely *physically* brave men would do, then it were easy; they could be furnished by the cargo. When Hobson called for seven volunteers to go with him to what promised to be certain death, four thousand men responded--the whole fleet, in fact. Because *all the world would approve*. They knew that; but if Hobson's project had been charged with the scoffs and jeers of the friends and associates, whose good opinion and approval the sailors valued, he could not have got his seven.

No, upon reflection, the scheme will not work. There are not enough morally brave men in stock. We are out of moral-courage material; we are in a condition of profound poverty. We have those two sheriffs down South who--but never mind, it is not enough to go around; they have to stay and take care of their own communities.

But if we only could have three or four more sheriffs of that great breed! Would it help? I think so. For we are all imitators: other brave sheriffs would follow; to be a dauntless sheriff would come to be recognized as the correct and only the dreaded disapproval would fall to the share of the other kind; courage in this office would become custom, the absence of it a dishonor, just as courage presently replaces the timidity of the new soldier; then the mobs and the lynchings would disappear, and--

However. It can never be done without some starters, and where are we to get the starters? Advertise? Very well, then, let us advertise.

Mark Twain's warped sense of humor showed through in his subsequent paragraphs. He skewers both lynchers and Christian missionaries in China alike, imploring the missionaries to come back from China to convert white Americans to Christianity. He also expresses his admiration of the Chinese and their virtues and contrasts them to the Americans who are implied to be barbarians. This stood completely against the overwhelming American public sentiment against the Chinese at the time. He even warns against converting the Chinese to Christianity lest they become "civilized" and engage in the horrors of lynching like the Americans.

In the meantime, there is another plan. Let us import American missionaries from China, and send them into the lynching field. With 1,500 of them out there converting two Chinamen apiece per annum against an uphill birth rate of 33,000 pagans per day, it will take upward of a million years to make the conversions balance the output and bring the Christianizing of the country in sight to the naked eye; therefore, if we can offer our missionaries as rich a field at home at lighter expense and quite satisfactory in the matter of danger, why shouldn't they find it fair and right to come back and give us a trial? The Chinese are universally conceded to be excellent people, honest, honorable, industrious, trustworthy, kind-hearted, and all that--leave them alone, they are plenty good enough just as they are; and besides, almost every convert runs a risk of catching our civilization. We ought to be careful. We ought to think twice before we encourage a risk like that; for, once civilized, China can never be uncivilized again. We have not been thinking of that. Very well, we ought to think of it now. Our missionaries will find that we have a field for them--and not only for the 1,500, but for

15,011. Let them look at the following telegram and see if they have anything in China that is more appetizing. It is from Texas:

The negro was taken to a tree and swung in the air. Wood and fodder were piled beneath his body and a hot fire was made. *Then it was suggested that the man ought not to die too quickly, and he was let down to the ground while a party went to Dexter, about two miles distant, to procure coal oil.* This was thrown on the flame and the work completed.

We implore them to come back and help us in our need. Patriotism imposes this duty on them. Our country is worse off than China; they are our countrymen, their motherland supplicates their aid in this her hour of deep distress. They are competent; our people are not. They are used to scoffs, sneers, revilings, danger; our people are not. They have the martyr spirit; nothing but the martyr spirit can brave a lynching mob, and cow it and scatter it. They can save their country, we beseech them to come home and do it. We ask them to read that telegram again, and yet again, and picture the scene in their minds, and soberly ponder it; then multiply it by 115, add 88; place the 203 in a row, allowing 600 feet of space for each human torch, so that there be viewing room around it for 5,000 Christian American men, women, and children, youths and maidens; make it night for grim effect; have the show in a gradually rising plain, and let the course of the stakes be uphill; the eye can then take in the whole line of twenty-four miles of blood-and-flesh bonfires unbroken, whereas if it occupied level ground the ends of the line would bend down and be hidden from view by the curvature of the earth. All being ready, now, and the darkness opaque, the stillness impressive--for there should be no sound but the soft moaning of the night wind and the muffled sobbing of the sacrifices--let all the far stretch of kerosened pyres be touched off simultaneously and the glare and the shrieks and the agonies burst heavenward to the Throne. There are more than a million persons present; the light from the fires flushes into vague outline against the night the spires of five thousand churches. O kind missionary, O compassionate missionary, leave China! come home and convert these Christians!

I believe that if anything can stop this epidemic of bloody insanities it is martial personalities that can face mobs without flinching; and as such personalities are developed only by familiarity with danger and by the training and seasoning which come of resisting it, the likeliest place to find them must be among the missionaries who have been under tuition in China during the past year or two. We have abundance of work for them, and for hundreds and thousands more, and the field is daily growing and spreading. Shall we find them? We can try. In 75,000,000 there must be other Merrills and Beloats; and it is the law of our make that each example shall wake up drowsing chevaliers of the same great knighthood and bring them to the front.

These were powerful and disturbing words in 1901. It was a tragedy that Samuel Clemens chose not to publish them at the time. We can never know his exact reasons for doing so beyond the suspicion by historians and lay people that the subject was too contentious and controversial for the times or for any publisher to touch. Perhaps Samuel Clemens had just grown too depressed to continue writing an entire book about the gruesome subject at further length. Another explanation could lay in the fact that many of the projects created by his restless mind remained incomplete for years awaiting his return to work on them. His powerful voice might have stood as an example, like the kind set by the two heroic sheriffs facing off the lynch mobs in 1901 that he so admired. Sadly, we'll never know. Samuel Clemens passed away in 1910. Completed and incomplete works of his never seen by the public before continue to be published to this day.

The United States of Lyncherdom article came out in the same year as the Rosewood Massacre that occurred in January 1923. Racial tensions had led to such an upsurge in lynchings in Florida over the past decade that many weren't even being reported in the newspapers anymore. A white

woman in Sumner, Florida reported being beaten by a black man, although eyewitnesses suggested her white lover had done it. This quickly became inflated into a false story of her being beaten and raped by a black man. A lynch mob was quickly gathered by the woman's husband, including many members of the Ku Klux Klan who had been holding a rally in a nearby town. They marched on the majority African American town of Rosewood, indiscriminately torturing and killing the first African American man they met on the way. Another part of the mob grabbed another African American man out of bed, tortured him by dragging him behind a car, and beat him nearly to death. Just as they were about to shoot him dead, the local sheriff said, "No! I'll finish the nigger off!" Sheriff Robert Elias Walker instead smuggled the severely injured man to the neighboring county jail and enlisted the help of the sheriff there to hide him and tend to his wounds. That man survived. The sheriff would save many African Americans in the days ahead through his heroic actions.

The mob meanwhile had attacked a house filled with children and adults hiding from them. The armed response by these innocent African Americans to protect themselves led the media to quickly spread the false news that armed African Americans had risen up and started a race war against white people. Hundreds of armed whites from all over Florida and even from out of state converged on Rosewood as a result. They shot at any African American they saw and burned the entire town down, causing all the residents to flee in terror. After three days of violence that was widely reported across the entire country, six African Americans and two whites were killed according to the official account. Unofficially, up to twenty-seven African Americans might have been killed with an unknown number of whites killed. The African Americans never returned, and the community entirely disappeared from the map and from history. An all-white special grand jury convened in the aftermath of the incident found no evidence to base any indictments on. The history of the Rosewood Massacre was forgotten or actively suppressed from public recognition by survivors, perpetrators, and their descendants until the 1990s.

By 1923, the Ku Klux Klan were established as a powerful and influential organization across much of the United States, even electing state governors. Their influence over politicians extended nationally. They would reach their greatest membership numbers in 1924 with somewhere between 1.5 million and 4 million members. They marched annually through the streets of Washington D.C. from 1925 to 1928, the biggest march involving 50,000 members wearing full Klan regalia.

Maybe Mark Twain's suggestion about bringing the missionaries back from China to convert Americans to Christianity and civilization wasn't so funny after all.

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