

Virginia City Territorial Enterprise
February 12, 1864

Letter from Mark Twain

Carson City, February 5, 1864

Winters' New House

EDITORS ENTERPRISE: Theodore Winters' handsome dwelling in Washoe Valley, is an eloquent witness in behalf of Mr. Steele's architectural skill. The basement story is built of brick, and the spacious court which surrounds it, and whose columns support the verandah above, is paved with large, old-fashioned tiles. On this floor is the kitchen, dining-room, bathroom, bed-chambers for servants, and a commodious storeroom, with shelves laden with all manner of substantials and luxuries for the table.

All these apartments are arranged in the most convenient manner, and are fitted and furnished handsomely and plainly, but expensively. Water pipes are numerous in this part of the house, and the fluid they carry is very pure, and cold and clear. On the next floor above, are two unusually large drawing-rooms, richly furnished, and gotten up in every respect with faultless taste which is a remark one is seldom enabled to apply to parlors and drawing-rooms on this coast. The colors in the carpets, curtains, etc., are of a warm and cheerful nature, but there is nothing gaudy about them. The ceilings are decorated with pure, white mouldings of graceful pattern. Two large bed-chambers adjoin the parlors, and are supplied with elaborately carved black walnut four-hundred-dollar bedsteads, similar to those used by Dan and myself in Virginia; the remainder of the furniture of these chambers is correspondingly sumptuous and expensive.

On the floor above are half a dozen comfortable bedrooms for the accommodation of visitors; also a spacious billiard-room which will shortly be graced by a table of superb workmanship. The windows of the house are of the "Gothic" style, and set with stained glass; the chandeliers are of bronze; the stair railings of polished black walnut, and the principal doors of some kind of dark-colored wood—mahogany, I suppose. There are two peculiarly pleasant features about this house: the ceilings are high, and the halls of unusual width. The building—above the basement story—is of wood, and strongly and compactly put together. It stands upon tolerably high ground, and from its handsome verandah, Mr. Winters can see every portion of his vast farm. From the stables to the parlors, the house and its belongings is a model of comfort, convenience and substantial elegance; everything is of the best that could be had, and there is no circus flummery visible about the establishment.

I went out there to a party a short time ago, in the night, behind a pair of Cormack's fast horses, with John James. On account of losing the trail of the telegraph poles, we wandered out among the shingle machines in the Sierras, and were delayed several hours. We arrived in time, however, to take a large share in the festivities which were being indulged in by the governor and

the Supreme Court and some twenty other guests. The party was given by Messrs. Joe Winters and Pete Hopkins (at Theodore Winters' expense) as a slight testimonial of their regard for the friends they invited to be present. There was nothing to detract from the pleasure of the occasion, except Lovejoy, who detracted most of the wines and liquors from it.

An Excellent School

I expect Mr. Lawlor keeps the best private school in the territory—or the best school of any kind, for that matter. I attended one of his monthly examinations a week ago, or such a matter, with Mr. Clagett, and we arrived at the conclusion that one might acquire a good college education there within the space of six months. Mr. Lawlor's is a little crib of a school-house, papered from door to ceiling with black-boards adorned with impossible mathematical propositions done in white chalk. The effect is bewildering to the stranger, but otherwise he will find the place comfortable enough. When we arrived, the teacher was talking in a rambling way upon a great many subjects, like a member of the House speaking to a point of order, and three boys were making verbatim reports of his remarks in Graham's phonographic short-hand on the walls of the school-room. These pupils had devoted half an hour to the study and practice of this accomplishment every day for the past four or five months, and the result was a proficiency usually attained only after eighteen months of application. It was amazing.

Mr. Lawlor has so simplified the art of teaching in every department of instruction, that I am confident he could impart a thorough education in a short time to any individual who has as much as a spoonful of brains to work upon. It is in no spirit of extravagance that I set it down here as my serious conviction that Mr. Lawlor could even take one of our Miss Nancy "Meriden" Prosecuting Attorneys and post him up so in a month or two that he could tell his own witnesses from those of the defense in nine cases out of ten. Mind, I do not give this as an absolute certainty, but merely as an opinion of mine and one which is open to grave doubts, too, I am willing to confess, now, when I come to think calmly and dispassionately about it.

No—the truth is, the more I think of it, the more I weaken. I expect I spoke too soon—went off before I was primed, as it were. With your permission, I will take it all back. I know two or three prosecuting attorneys, and I am satisfied the foul density of their intellects would put out any intellectual candle that Mr. Lawlor could lower into them. I do not say that a Higher Power could not miraculously illuminate them. No, I only say I would rather see it first. A man always has more confidence in a thing after he has seen it, you know; at least that is the way with me.

But to proceed with that school. Mr. Clagett invited one of those phonographic boys—Master Barry Ashim—to come and practice his shorthand in the House of Representatives. He accepted the invitation, and in accordance with resolutions offered by Messrs. Clagett and Stewart, he was tendered the compliment of a seat on the floor of the House during the session, and the Sergeant-at-Arms instructed to furnish him with a desk and such stationery as he might require. He has already become a reporter of no small pretensions. There is a class in Mr. Lawlor's school composed of children three months old and upwards, who know the spelling book by heart. If you ask them what the first word is, in any given lesson, they will tell you in a moment, and then go on and spell every word (thirty five) in the lesson, without once referring to the book or making a mistake. Again, you may mention a word and they will tell you which particular lesson it is in, and what words precede it and follow it. Then, again, you may propound an abstruse grammatical enigma, and the school will solve it in chorus—will tell you what language is correct, and what isn't; and why and wherefore; and quote rules and illustrations

until you wish you hadn't said anything. Two or three doses of this kind will convince a man that there are youngsters in this school who know everything about grammar that can be learned, and what is just as important, can explain what they know so that other people can understand it.

But when those fellows get to figuring, let second-rate mathematicians stand from under! For behold, it is their strong suit. They work miracles on a black-board with a piece of chalk. Witchcraft and sleight-of-hand, and all that sort of thing is foolishness to the facility with which they can figure a moral impossibility down to an infallible result. They only require about a dozen figures to do a sum which by all ordinary methods would consume a hundred and fifty. These fellows could cypher a week on a sheet of foolscap. They can find out anything they want to with figures, and they are very quick about it, too. You tell them, for instance, that you were born in such and such a place, on such and such a day of the month, in such and such a year, and they will tell you in an instant how old your grandmother is. I have never seen any banker's clerks who could begin to cypher with those boys. It has been Virginia's unchristian policy to grab everything that was of any account that ever came into the territory—Virginia could do many a worse thing than to grab this school and move it into the shadow of Mount Davidson, teacher and all.

Concerning Undertakers

There is a system of extortion going on here which is absolutely terrific, and I wonder the Carson Independent has never ventilated the subject. There seems to be only one undertaker in the town, and he owns the only graveyard in which it is at all high-toned or aristocratic to be buried. Consequently, when a man loses his wife or his child, or his mother, this undertaker makes him sweat for it. I appeal to those whose firesides death has made desolate during the few fatal weeks just past, if I am not speaking the truth. Does not this undertaker take advantage of that unfortunate delicacy which prevents a man from disputing an unjust bill for services rendered in burying the dead, to extort ten-fold more than his labors are worth? I have conversed with a good many citizens on this subject, and they all say the same thing: that they know it is wrong that a man should be unmercifully fleeced under such circumstances, but, according to the solemn etiquette above referred to, he cannot help himself.

All that sounds very absurd to me. I have a human distaste for death, as applied to myself, but I see nothing very solemn about it as applied to anybody—it is more to be dreaded than a birth or a marriage, perhaps, but it is really not as solemn a matter as either of these, when you come to take a rational, practical view of the case. Therefore I would prefer to know that an undertaker's bill was a just one before I paid it; and I would rather see it go clear to the Supreme Court of the United States, if I could afford the luxury, than pay it if it were distinguished for its unjustness.

A great many people in the world do not think as I do about these things. But I care nothing for that. The knowledge that I am right is sufficient for me. This undertaker charges a hundred and fifty dollars for a pine coffin that cost him twenty or thirty, and fifty dollars for a grave that did not cost him ten—and this at a time when his ghastly services are required at least seven times a week. I gather these facts from some of the best citizens of Carson, and I can publish their names at any moment if you want them. What Carson needs is a few more undertakers—there is vacant land enough here for a thousand cemeteries.