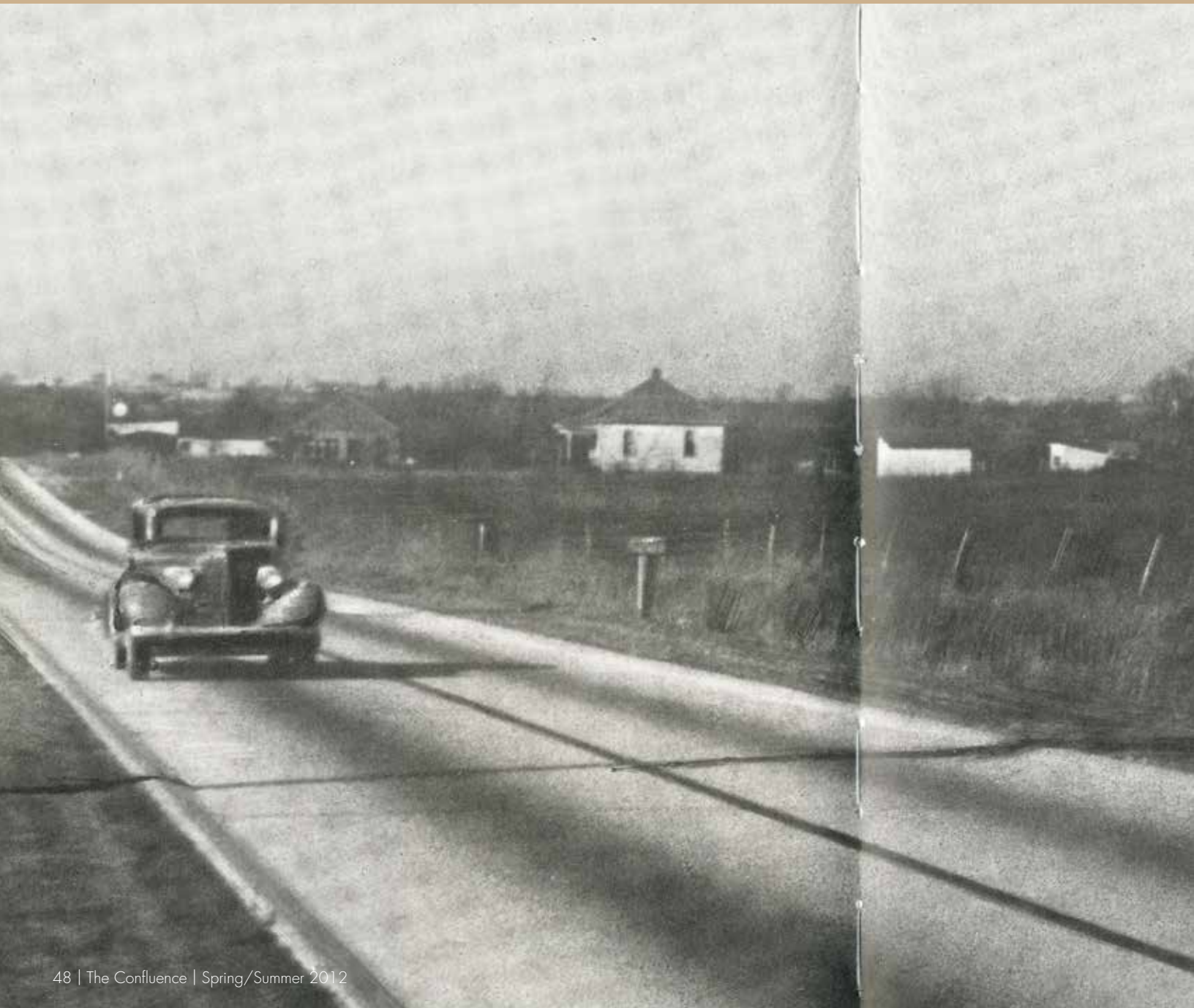


# Missouri Through Soviet Eyes

BY ILYA ILF AND YEVGENY PETROV



Good travel writing can be powerful. Few things offer new insights quite like having familiar surroundings seen through fresh eyes. When that new perspective comes from a very different cultural context, the results can be even more startling.

Such is the case with Soviet satirists Evgeny Ilf (1897-1937) and Yevgeny Petrov (1903-1942), who were immensely popular writers in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and 1930s. While working as special correspondents for *Pravda* (the Communist Party newspaper in the USSR) in 1935, the two came to the United States to embark on a two-month road trip across the country and back. They bought a Ford in New York in late October, teamed up with Solomon Trone (a retired engineer who had worked in the USSR for General Electric)

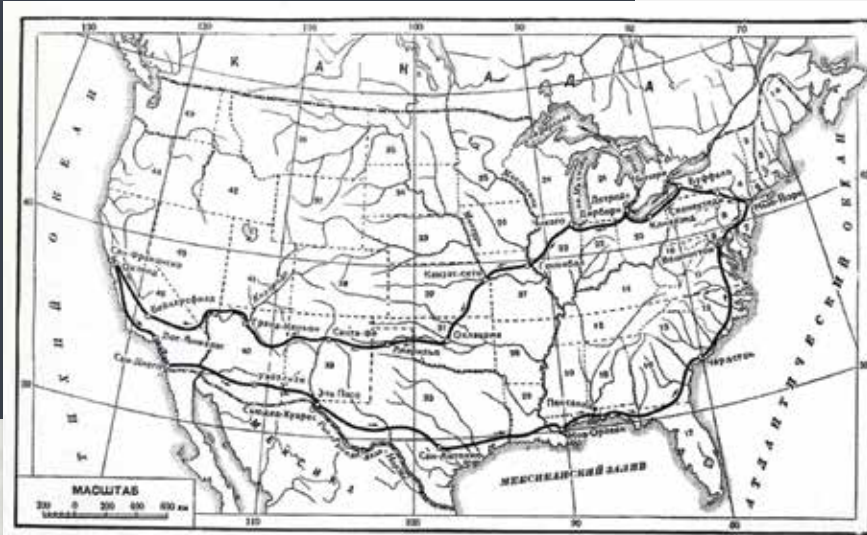
and his wife, Florence, whom they met there, and drove to California and back. In April, *Ogonek* magazine published the first of a series of photo essays based on the pictures Ilf took along the way. A year later, in 1937, an account of their journey and a selection of the photos were published in both the Soviet Union and the United States as *One-Storey America*. More recently, the Princeton Architectural Press published it as *Ilf and Petrov's American Road Trip*; it is by the publisher's permission that an excerpt appears here.

The foursome traveled to Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago before passing through, of all places, Hannibal, Missouri; their account of "The Birthplace of Mark Twain" appears below. From there, they traveled via Kansas City and the Grand Canyon to Hollywood, where they spent two weeks. They returned via El Paso, San Antonio, New Orleans, Charleston, and Baltimore. It was quite a trek.

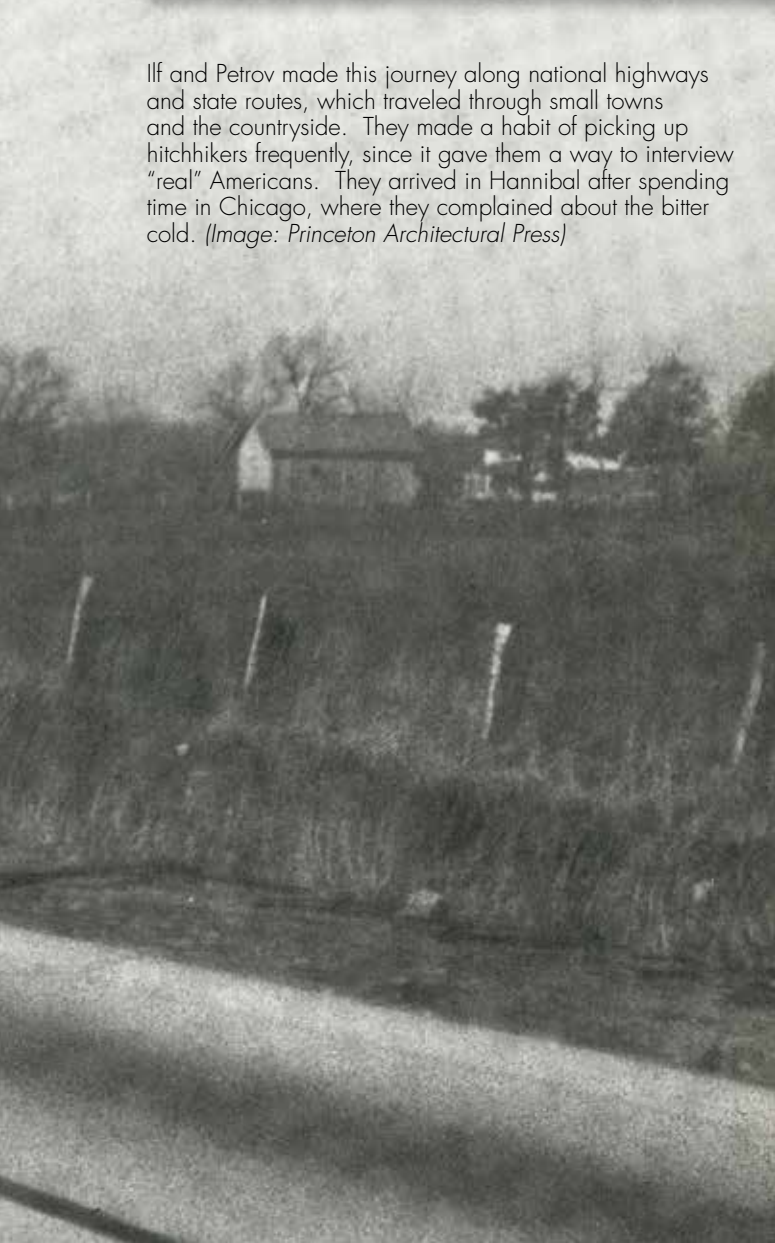
Born Ilya Arnoldovich Fayzilberg, Ilya Ilf first met Yevgeny Petrovich Katayev (who wrote as Yevgeny, or Evgeny, Petrov) when both worked for the Moscow-based *Gudok*, a magazine for railroad workers. They began writing collaboratively the following year. They gained national popularity with their 1928 novel, *The Twelve Chairs* (on which Mel Brooks loosely based a movie of the same name in 1970, with Dom DeLuise), and its 1931 sequel, *The Little Golden Calf*.

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This large photo of rural Illinois gave Russians some idea of how the "American breadbasket" appeared. Pictures like this shaped the way Russians saw the United States for almost three decades. (Image: Princeton Architectural Press)



Ilf and Petrov made this journey along national highways and state routes, which traveled through small towns and the countryside. They made a habit of picking up hitchhikers frequently, since it gave them a way to interview "real" Americans. They arrived in Hannibal after spending time in Chicago, where they complained about the bitter cold. (Image: Princeton Architectural Press)







Born in Virginia, John Marshall Clemens (1798-1847) moved to several towns in Kentucky and Tennessee before moving to Missouri, in 1835, and Hannibal in 1839, when young Samuel was just four. He was trained as a lawyer and served as justice of the peace. His office looked like this when Ilf and Petrov visited Hannibal. It is the only building moved in downtown Hannibal. (Image: Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum)

*One-Storyed America* was very popular with Soviet readers for a time, but the Communists banned it in 1948. By that time, both writers had already died—Ilf in 1937 of tuberculosis, Petrov killed in a plane crash in 1942. The ban was lifted in 1956 after Nikita Khrushchev took office.

Among the striking features of this essay is the fact that they chose to visit Hannibal at all. Clearly, they knew Mark Twain and assumed that Soviet readers would as well. They marveled at the American juxtaposition of fact and fiction, at the way the fictitious stories were superimposed on the real Hannibal landscape.

A note on the photographs: Ilf took the photos, and originals no longer exist. These are the images that accompanied the original publication.

## At the Birthplace of Mark Twain

It was November.

The wind came off Lake Michigan. It strolled about among the skyscrapers of Chicago, drove away the clouds, and bent down the bare trees on the lakeshore. We left Chicago without regret and laid our course to the west.

For a whole day, dense, compact fields of corn and wheat raced towards us. Latticed towers with windmills were built onto the roofs of farmers' houses: water pumps. You could see big red barns in the farmyards. Cows stood completely motionless in the fields like advertisements for

condensed milk.

We crossed the Missouri River. We stopped in Kansas, or rather in its suburb, which is called Missouri, to drink some coffee and warm up a little.

Kansas is the center of the United States. And here in the center of the country is the exact mathematical point of that center, so to speak, the first person we chatted with, a café owner by the name of Morgen, turned out to be both a Bessarabian Jew and a Mason.

"Morgen," he said, introducing himself, "you understand? *Gut morgen*."

And then with a sad irony he added, "Almost Morgan."

A Spaniard and a Pole worked in the barbershop where we got our hair cut. An Italian shined our shoes. A Croat washed our car. This was America.

We had already begun to get used to the rain and cold. And suddenly, waking up early in the morning in the little town of Nevada in the state of Missouri, we saw blue sky. The sun came out. The town was covered in fallen leaves almost all the way to the windows. Although they were a little bit powdered with frost, we could tell the day would be bright and warm.

There are four true signs according to which Americans can determine with no mistake that the genuine West has actually begun. The announcements advertising *Hot Dogs*, which means "hot sausages" (dark New York humor!), disappear from the windows [of] little restaurants and drugstores, and the sign "*Bar-be-cue*" appears, advertising pork sandwiches. Next, the used automotive oil, which in the extravagant East is usually just poured out, is sold in the West to farmers for smearing their pigs with (a preventative measure used only out West to protect them from insects). Then ancient automobiles appear, among which the latest novelty of 1910 doesn't look too bad. And finally, instead of the optimistic "*All right*" and "*Okay*," you hear the no less optimistic but purely local "*You bet*" in the conversational speech of the denizens of the West.

The signs were right. Evidently, the West really had begun. We were driving out of winter and getting closer to summer. Like a film-strip shown backwards, pink, yellow, and even green foliage began to appear on the trees. From November, we returned to October and then to September.

We counted back and reckoned that if things kept up at this pace, in a couple of weeks, or by the beginning of December, we'd arrive in June. That's how it happened in the end. In California we caught up with the real summer. But it was still a very long way to California. We crossed the state of Missouri, heading for Hannibal, the town where Mark Twain spent his childhood.

At the intersection of three roads next to a small clapboard café, there was a signpost to which arrows with the names of towns were fastened. Apart from direction and distance, these arrows showed that in the West, just like in the East, the population selects the most beautiful and majestic names for their towns. It was pleasant to find out that there were only forty-two miles to Edina, sixty-six to Memphis, forty-four to Mexico, and just seventeen to Paris. We also found Hannibal here. The arrow showed that we needed to turn right and that there were thirty-nine



Many of the observations by Ilf and Petrov are tongue-in-cheek—they were, after all, satirists. One involved signs like this one, noting you always know where you are in America because there are always signs telling you so. (Image: Princeton Architectural Press)

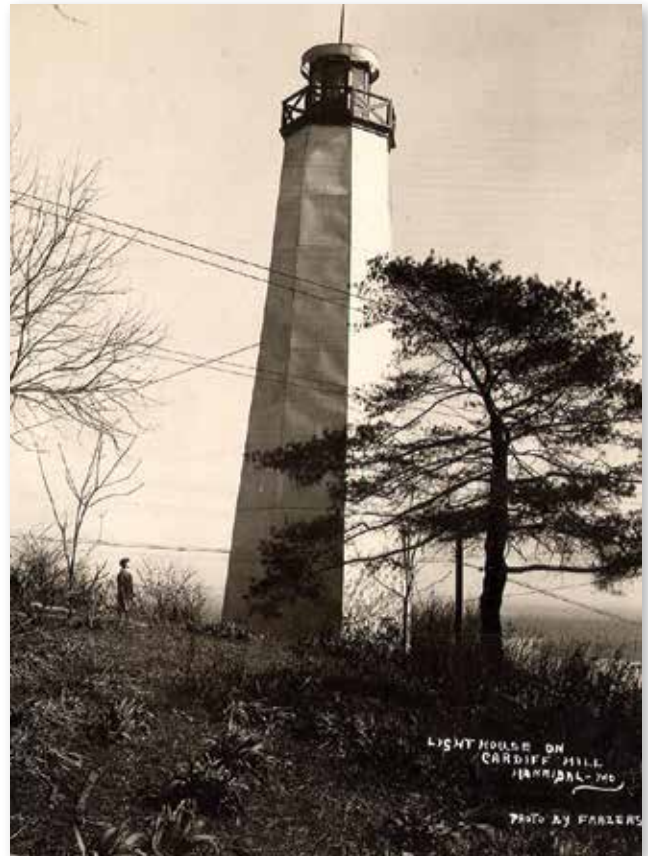
This statue of Samuel Clemens in Hannibal's Riverview Park commemorated its most famous citizen three decades after Twain's death in 1910. (Image: Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum)



miles to go until we got to the city.

And as a matter of fact, after exactly thirty-nine miles, Hannibal appeared. At the entrance to the town stood a large sign announcing that the great humorist Mark Twain had spent his childhood here [and] that in the town could be found Mark Twain's old house, a park with a view of the Mississippi River, statues, caves, and so forth.

While we looked for a place to spend the night, it got dark, and so we had to postpone our survey of the town's sights until the next morning. We had just enough time to visit the museum on the main street. It was [a] temporary museum built during the centenary celebration of Mark Twain's birthday. It was located in the building of a bank called the Hannibal Trust Company, which, in a fortunate coincidence, had gone under not long before the



Completed in 1935, the Mark Twain memorial lighthouse was brand-new when Ilf and Petrov visited Hannibal. It sits on Cardiff Hill, made famous by Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. (Image: Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum)

anniversary. The rudder wheel of a riverboat hung above an enormous fireproof safe (alas, empty for the rest of time!). Mark Twain had spun just such a wheel when he sailed the Mississippi as a youth. There were also a few photographs, the bed in which the writer died (brought in specifically for the jubilee), his papers, and first editions of his books. One has to assume that in the days when the Hannibal Trust Company was at its peak, many more





Being Communists in good standing in the Soviet Union, Ilf and Petrov also photographed workers involved performing laborious jobs they thought portrayed capitalist society, such as these. (Image: Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum)

people came here.

In the morning we set off to walk around the town, which (an amazing thing for America!) is famous neither for automotive manufacturing, like Detroit, nor for battles and bandits, like Chicago. What made it famous were the literary characters of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the dearest and jolliest adventures that ever existed in world literature.

So this is what it's like, the town of Hannibal, the town of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn!

As in all small towns in America, there were almost no

people on the streets. But when we did come across some, they were genuine Twainian types.

The street where Mark Twain, then barefooted Sam Clemens, spent his childhood has remained virtually untouched. A round white lamp with inscription "Mark Twain Home" hangs over the entrance to the house.

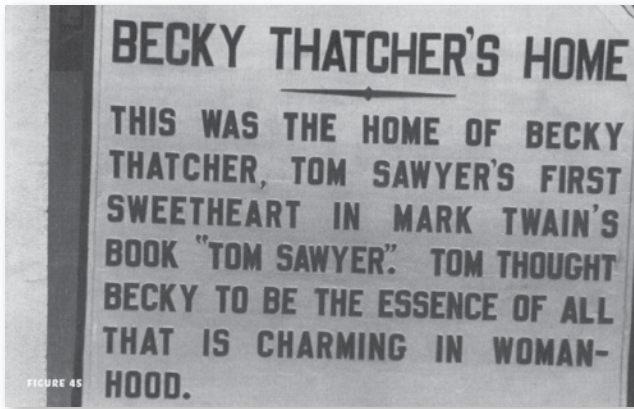
Two poor, virtually indigent elderly women, distant relatives of the Clemens family, live in the house. The two rooms on the first floor of the house are small and dusty. They contain ancient chairs with their springs coming out and wobbly little tables holding photographs.

Mark Twain's boyhood home as it appeared when Ilf and Petrov visited. The house uphill from the Clemens home was razed in 1937 to make way for a new museum, so was probably already gone when they arrived late in the year. (Images: Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum)





Part of the experience for Ilf and Petrov was seeing the recreated scenes from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* such as whitewashing the fence. One of the most striking features of Ilf and Petrov's writing is the assumption that Soviet readers were familiar with Twain and stories like this one from his books. (Images: Princeton Architectural Press; Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum)



The Becky Thatcher home wasn't part of the museum in 1935, although they could still visit and have tea poured by the "real" Becky Thatcher as they photographed her November 30, 1935. (Image: Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum)



"That," said one of the old ladies, "is the chair that Aunt Polly would always sit on. And there's the window that Peter that cat jumped out of after Tom Sawyer gave him the castor oil. And that there's the table where the family sat when they thought that Tom had drowned, when he was standing right here and eavesdropping the whole time."

The old lady was very glad to have guests.

"People so seldom come to see us," she said with a sigh.

A commemorative plaque with a depiction of the writer and an ideologically correct caption composed by an altruistic admirer of Mark Twain, a local banker, hung in the first room. It read, "The life of Mark Twain teaches us that poverty is less an obstacle that holds one back than a stimulus that pushes one forward."

However, the appearance of the poverty-stricken, forgotten old ladies eloquently refuted this fine philosophical concept.

Next to the little [house], there was a fence, a replica of the one Tom Sawyer allowed his friends to paint in exchange for an apple.

Another sign hung opposite the first one: "This was the home of Becky Thatcher, Tom Sawyer's first sweetheart."

Here, in front of this very house is where Tom Sawyer walked on his hands, hoping thus to attract the attention of the nice little girl who strolled decorously about the garden.

And that little [g]irl, who actually did exist, turned into a woman, got married (to a lawyer, apparently), and then grew old in Hannibal, and in 1915 she looked like this. This is the last photograph of her. Not long before his death, Mark Twain came to Hannibal and had his picture taken with her. A big photograph of the two old people with the touching caption, "Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher," hangs in the museum.

There was also an Indian living in Hannibal who was depicted by Twain as the character by the name of "Indian Joe." This picture was taken in 1921. The Indian was around a hundred years old. At least, that's what the inhabitants of the town of Hannibal said.

To conclude our trip we set out for Cardiff Hill, where one of the rarest monuments in the world stands: a monument to literary characters. Tom Sawyer is on the right. Huck Finn is on the left, holding a dead cat by the tail.





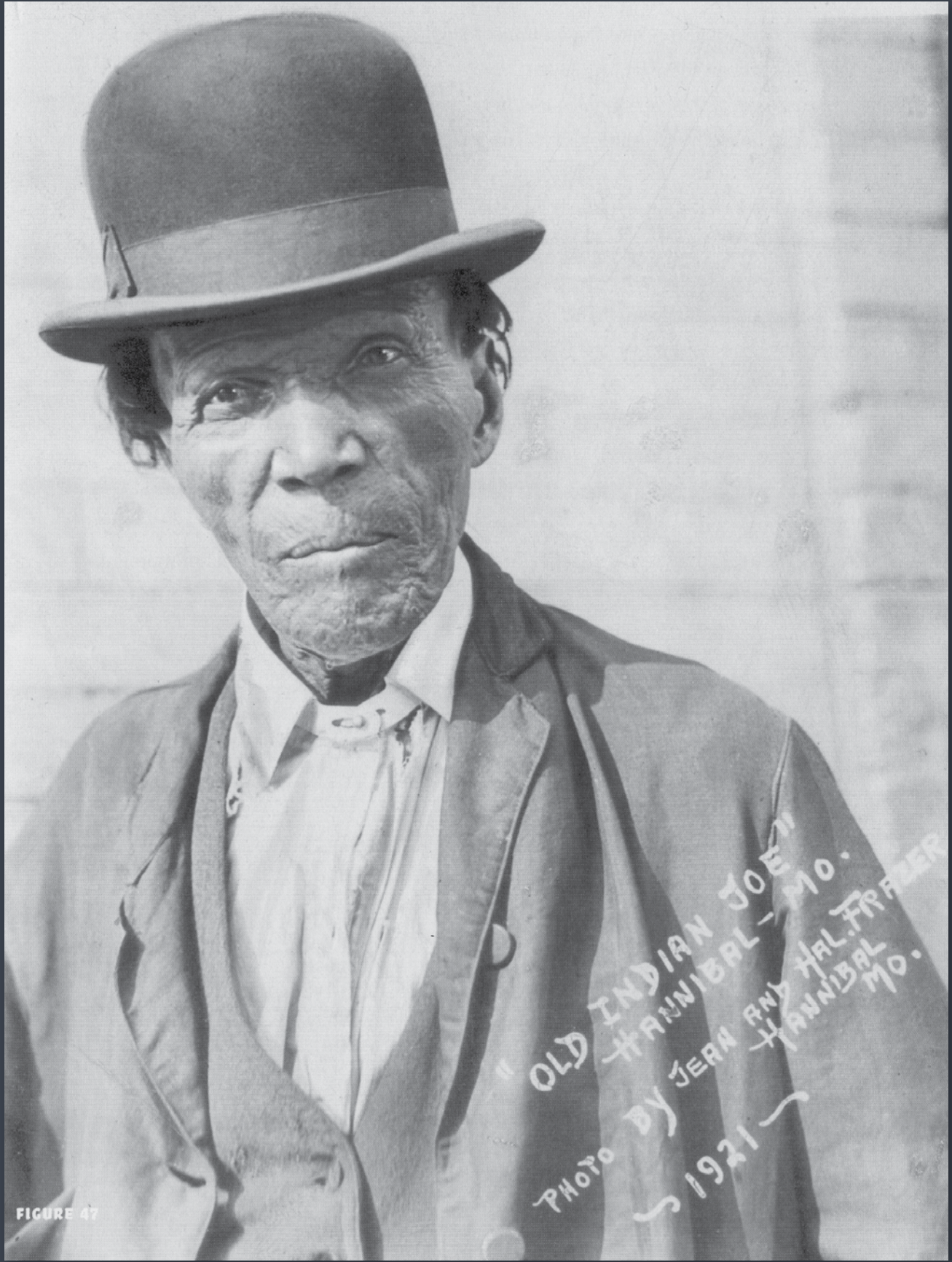


FIGURE 47

OLD INDIAN JOE  
HANNIBAL - MO.  
PHOTO BY JERR AND HAL FRAZER  
1921





The Pilaster Store wasn't part of the museum at the time, although it was among the stops for tourists that built on the mythology of Twain's Hannibal. This Frazer photo suggests that Twain purchased candy here 60 years—although Samuel Clemens left Hannibal in 1853, he returned throughout his life. One wonders if the store sold cigars as well to encourage an older Mark Twain to return. (Image: *Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum*)

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Ilf and Petrov also included this 1921 photo of "Indian Joe" from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, credited to Jean and Hal Frazer. "Injun Joe" was the antagonist in *Tom*; despite this photo, Injun Joe died before the end of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. (Image: *Princeton Architectural Press*)

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This statue of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn (1926) stands at the foot of Cardiff Hill, which appears in both *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Clearly, Ilf and Petrov saw all the sites. (Images: *Princeton Architectural Press*; *Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum*)

