

A Huck of a Good Time

Celebrate America's birthday in Hannibal, Mo., the town that Twain made famous.

BY PENNY MUSCO

You could go to a big Midwestern city for an Independence Day getaway, but how about this year enjoying a simpler, cozier Fourth of July? For instance, consider a little municipality snug against the mighty Mississippi River, one made famous by the man author William Faulkner called “the father of American literature.”

For 64 years, Hannibal, Mo., has thrown a party known as National Tom Sawyer Days to not only mark our country's birthday, but to commemorate favorite son Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known by his pen name, Mark Twain. And as 2019 marks the town's 200th birthday, the annual festival — July 3–6 — promises to be better than ever, says Megan Rapp, assistant director at the Hannibal Convention & Visitors Bureau.

GET OUT YOUR BUCKETS AND BRUSHES

Twain's beloved character, the mischievous Tom Sawyer, lived with his Aunt Polly, and — as you might recall — his punishment for playing hooky from school and getting into a fight was to whitewash the fence. The imaginative scalawag soon schemes to enlist friends to do the work; thus, a chief feature of National Tom Sawyer Days is the fence painting tournament on July 5 and 6.

Contestants ages 10 to 13 are judged on painting speed and coverage, plus costume authenticity. The champs go on to compete in the state trial against entrants from across the U.S. Those frontrunners advance to the national contest. But the fun isn't exclusive to children; there's also an “over 30” match, with prizes to boot.

HOP TO IT

Before his Tom and Huck books, Twain gained national recognition for a quirky short story inspired by a tale he heard while trying his luck mining for silver in California. *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* inspired another key fixture of Tom Sawyer Days: the frog jumping contest on July 6.

Entrants sign up for one of two categories: those age 5 and younger, and those 6 and older. Can't catch your own contestant? No problem. You can rent one from the local Boy Scouts of America troop for a modest donation. Even if you don't have any particular croaker to root for, it's entertaining just to watch which way the unpredictable amphibians leap. Afterwards, they're released back into their natural habitat.

A fence painting contest is a big part of the National Tom Sawyer Days.

Below: The fireworks display during the festival can be seen from anywhere downtown. Visit Hannibal photos



GET DOWN AND (MAYBE) DIRTY

The mud volleyball tournament, July 4–6, attracts participants from all over, says Rapp. Her hint for those on the sidelines is to avoid the seats nearest the pits or risk getting splattered.

Another sporting event is the Hannibal Cannibal 5/10/15K Run and 5K Walk, so named, Rapp explains, because “the course tends to eat people up.” Why? Two words: Lover’s Leap. The July 6 race begins downtown and includes an all-out sprint up the steep bluff to the park overlooking the Mississippi.

MUSIC AND MORE

The place to shop and find food stands during Tom Sawyer Days is at the Kiwanis’ arts and crafts festival held July 4–6 in Central Park. Stick around for fireworks on July 4, which Rapp says are visible from anywhere downtown.

Another bicentennial extra is the ramped-up concert series. This year’s headliner is Grammy Award-winning bluegrass legend

Rhonda Vincent & The Rage, scheduled to perform July 3.

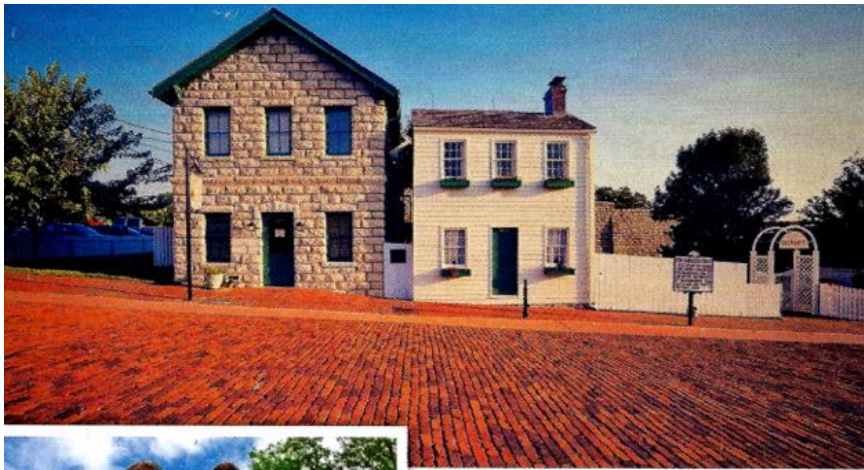
Don’t be surprised to spot Twain characters making the rounds. Tom and Becky contestants are Hannibal’s goodwill ambassadors, and a new couple is selected July 4. The anniversary brings a reunion of former winners, so you just may see several duos. But the best part of Tom Sawyer Days, though, might be the cost.

“There’s no cover charge,” says Rapp. “Everything is free to watch. We have something for everyone [and] you aren’t waiting for hours and hours in line.”

WHILE YOU’RE THERE

A visit to Hannibal wouldn’t be complete without taking in other Twain sights. Hop on an old-fashioned trolley for a guided tour. Stop in at his Boyhood Home & Museum to catch a Twain re-enactor relate how his youthful experiences gave rise to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, then view family photos, original manuscripts, and the desk at which he penned the novel.





Above: Don't miss the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum while in town. Visit Hannibal

Left: The Tom and Huck statue in Hannibal commemorates Twain's most beloved characters. Missouri Tourism

The fictitious McDougal's Cave is where Tom and Becky lost their way (and the boys later discovered stolen treasure), but you'll stay safe in Mark Twain Cave, which observes the bicentennial of discovery this year. The cave also has an interesting history aside from Twain.

Take a sightseeing or dinner cruise on the river aboard the triple-decker Mark Twain Riverboat. Rapp says the July 4 cruise is a great way to take in the fireworks. Dinner cruise tickets are available. And no trip to Hannibal would be complete without a souvenir photo in front of the Tom and Huck statue at North and Main streets at the foot of Cardiff Hill.

SLEEP ABOVE GROUND

Tom and Becky might have had to spend the night in a cave, but you don't have to. The Best Western on the River (AAA Three Diamonds) is within walking distance of downtown and the city's main attractions, as well as several stores and eateries. Quality Inn & Suites and the Sleep Inn & Suites (both AAA Three Diamonds) are farther out.

Families might consider Fiddlesticks Food & Spirits Co. (AAA Two Diamonds), which has a good children's menu. Logue's Restaurant (AAA Two Diamonds) is a well-established local stop that's known for hearty home cooking.

BEFORE YOU GO

For additional information, contact the Hannibal Convention & Visitors Bureau, (573) 221-2477 or visithannibal.com.

To visit Hannibal, first stop by your nearest AAA service office for maps, lodging reservations, and TourBook® guides. A list

of offices to serve you is on page 6. For a TripTik® Travel Planner, click on AAA.com/travel.

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You probably won't find a robber's stash of gold when you're in Hannibal. What you will find is a Fourth of July filled with nostalgia and a "feel of Americana," Rapp says.

Penny Musco is a new contributor from Sarasota, Fla.

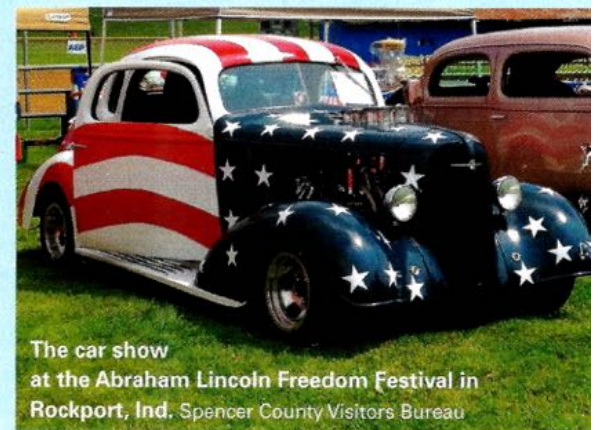
Three More for the Fourth

If you can't make it to Hannibal, here are three additional cities that do a bang-up job with their Independence Day celebrations.

Smithsonian magazine dubbed **Abilene, Kan.**, one of its "Top 20 Best Small Towns to Visit," and the city's Old Fashioned Fourth of July (on July 4) provides a good reason to do so. The all-day affair culminates in fireworks, but before that, catch Wild West-style action on the streets of Old Abilene Town. Other activities include a tractor pull and turtle races in Eisenhower Park. To learn about the park's namesake (a former resident and U.S. president), stop by his library and museum. Information: Abilene Convention & Visitors Bureau, (785) 263-2231 or abilenecityhall.com

The Family Fun Fest in **Godfrey, Ill.**, on July 4 will feature activities to appeal to every member of the family at Robert E. Glazebrook Community Park, located at 1401 Stamper Lane. Starting at noon, visitors will enjoy vendors, inflatables, games, a zipline, cow train, concessions, arts and crafts, and more. The fireworks display begins at 9:15 p.m. Admission is free. Information: Godfrey Parks and Recreation, (618) 466-1483 or RiversandRoutes.com

In **Rockport, Ind.**, the Abraham Lincoln Freedom Festival is held on July 6 at the city park. Enjoy a rummage sale, car show, music, and fireworks. While at the park, tour the 13 replica cabins at the Lincoln Pioneer Village and Museum, which depicts farming life a young Lincoln might have known when he lived in Indiana with his family. Free admission to city park; \$5 for pioneer village. Information: Spencer County Visitors Bureau, (888) 444-9252 or santaclausind.org.



The car show at the Abraham Lincoln Freedom Festival in Rockport, Ind. Spencer County Visitors Bureau