

Quarterly



Small Starts to Large Lives

By [Graceann Macleod](#)

I have been spending some time thinking about the beginnings of celebrated lives, and that made me think about how those people have inspired my travel choices. I love seeing where those I admire spent their formative years. It tells me a lot about the people they became, and what informed their art.

I decided to concentrate on three people: Mark Twain, Charles Chaplin and Buster Keaton.

Be good and you will be lonesome – Mark Twain

I've written in the past about Hannibal, Missouri and how it has managed to retain much of its character in a modern, and sometimes unpleasant, world. What makes this very special to me is how easy it makes it for someone like myself to imagine tousle-headed, barefooted Sam Clemens running down to the River with a fishing pole. I would not be surprised to find a raft waiting when I walk down to the pier.

Samuel Clemens was born in 1835 in Florida, Missouri, and his family moved to Hannibal when he was four years old. They moved into the house that is now the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum when he was nine or so. Hannibal was home for young Sam until 1853, when he left to become a journeyman printer. This was just the beginning of his travel, and all of it provided fodder for his pen, much to our benefit.



The Little Tramp

Nobody seems to be quite sure what house Charles Spencer Chaplin was born in, but I've spent a fair amount of time in a place that had a far deeper and harsher impact on him; the Lambeth Workhouse (now the Cinema Museum) in London. Charlie and his brother Sidney were in and out of this place over and over again until they escaped into the music hall, and the ugliness of life within these walls would insinuate itself into Chaplin's films. I re-watched *The Kid* (1921) shortly after my first trip to the site, and I could see everything Chaplin experienced in the most dramatic scenes of the film.



The workhouse is largely unchanged and I don't mind saying that I find it a bit creepy to wander the grounds on a grey,

rainy day. I tune out the air traffic above and I feel very much as if I've stepped back more than a century to a time when it was perfectly acceptable to imprison children for the sin of being poor. The Cinema Museum's use of the space is a fitting tribute to Chaplin's later life and work, in my opinion, and they are attempting to raise funds for a work of art nearby in celebration of him.

Keep Your Eye on the Kid

Buster Keaton was born, almost literally, in a trunk. His parents, Joe and Myra Keaton, were on a vaudeville tour in the town of Piqua, Kansas on October 4, 1895, when he made his appearance in a theatrical boarding house. There is very little left of Piqua from that time, given that most of the town was blown off the map by a tornado several years later. His birthplace is memorialized by a plaque and a museum which is well worth a visit. On the final weekend of September each year, Keaton fans gather from all over the World in order to hear about the man and his work, in nearby Iola.

Buster was the third Keaton in The Three Keatons almost as soon as he could toddle. Myra sewed a valise handle in the back of his little suit, and Buster's dad threw him all over the stage, much to the delight of the audience and, I suspect, Buster. Buster said that it was the roughest act in vaudeville, and I can think of little else that would be as appealing to a little boy than to tumble and jump around, and be applauded for it.



Young Buster toured with his family all over the country and the World until he was 17, when he started his journey into film history. He's now recognized as one of the "Big Three" of silent comedy, and my personal favorite. I have a great family of friends due to Buster, and I love one of them so much that I married him.

These three places are terribly disparate. The home that Mark Twain lived in as a boy is fairly modest by today's standards, but comfortable. The house that Buster was born in no longer exists. The workhouse that Chaplin escaped from speaks more to how far we've come than to the "good old days." In looking at each of them and then looking at the abundant work that each man left us to enjoy, one understands a bit better what it is that gave each person his point of view. When I visit with the people of Piqua, who welcome my husband and me warmly each September, I am reminded of Buster's straightforward, simple attitude toward life. When I stand in the rain outside the Lambeth Workhouse, I wonder how Chaplin could revisit, even in the land of make-believe, that experience for the purposes of cinema. When I look up Mark Twain's childhood home, and feel the warmth that emanates from it more than 150 years after Twain lived there, I am once again charmed by his wit and intelligence.



Scientists have spent their entire working lives trying to determine whether a person's character is formed by their genes or by the circumstances of their childhood. In these three instances, I don't think you need look further than two Midwestern towns and an historic building in London.

Suggested Websites:

- [Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum](#)
- [The Cinema Museum - London](#)
- [Information on Charles Chaplin](#)
- [Buster Keaton Museum – Piqua, KS](#)
- [Buster Keaton Celebration – Iola, KS](#)
- [Information on Buster Keaton and the Damfinos \(the International Buster Keaton Society\)](#)