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Tom Sawyer Days

Hannibal, MO, Celebrates July 4th

BY LINDA EGENES



The crowd oohs when Huck (Samuel Ostgaard) gets Becky (Candice Howe) to kiss a frog during Tom Sawyer Days.

It's the day after the 4th of July and in Hannibal, Missouri, the party is in full swing. For the past 54 years on America's birthday, this riverside town of 17,000 has hosted National Tom Sawyer Days, a three-day celebration of its favorite son, Mark Twain. Fireworks, frogs, and paint fly as kids of all ages participate in frog jumping and watermelon seed-spitting contests and boys race barefoot to whitewash fences Tom-Sawyer style.

Unlike other towns downriver and up, Hannibal narrowly escaped the floods of 2008 and is chugging ahead like the steamboat that first beckoned Mark Twain to the muddy Mississippi and on to national fame. In recent years this plucky place has fashioned its warehouses and factories into art galleries, cafes, and antique stores, which attract tourists along with the historical homes of Mark Twain and Becky Thatcher and the famous cave where the fictional Tom and Becky got lost.

At the arts and crafts show in Central Park, my husband and I glimpse a Tom Sawyer with a fishing pole on one arm and a Becky on the other. Despite the wilting heat, Becky looks cool and crisp in an elaborate pink gingham floor-length dress.

A man standing behind them with a "Chaperone" tag asks if I want my picture taken with them. The chaperone (who turns out to be Tom's father) tells me that at age 13 the kids of Hannibal compete to become the reigning Tom and Becky. Twenty Toms and Beckys entered the competition, where they were judged for their authentic costumes, role-playing of scenes from the book *Tom Sawyer*, and knowledge of Hannibal's history and attractions, lodging, and restaurants.

The top five girls and five boys, including this couple, will spend many weekends during the next year strolling the streets and attending various out-of-state events in full costume as ambassadors for the city of Hannibal.

"It's great training for them," says this proud dad. "They have to be able to talk to adults, to tell a

tourist where to find a hotel or a good restaurant." Parents of both children will be taking turns trailing their kids around for the next year.

"They can do the kissing scene for you," the dad offers. Kissing crops up often in Tom Sawyer Days, we find out as we trail our Tom and Becky back to the riverfront. When Tom grasps a live frog around the middle, it's hind legs dangling, Becky actually kisses it! This she does again and again, posing for snapshots, and each time there are exclamations of awe from the crowd that has gathered around them.

Frog-kissing is a warm-up for the Frog-Jumping Contest, just down Main Street, where parents and kids have been plunking down \$2 all afternoon to rent a frog. The Frog Jumping Contest is based on Mark Twain's short story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County."

"You select a frog from the barrel when it's your turn, then you return it after you're done," a lanky Boy Scout explains. It turns out that his troop has caught these frogs with their bare hands, wading knee-deep into local ponds at night, and they'll release the frogs to their watery homes after the contest today.

Soon we're crowded around a space similar to a boxing ring—except yellow crime-tape forms the ropes—to watch the contest for kids aged one to six.

A mom with a frisky five-year-old daughter in tow selects her frog. The minute the frog is plopped on the mat it sprints for freedom, flying out of the arena in two hops, slipping over my foot and landing in the midst of a screaming crowd. Teenage helpers scramble to grab it back.

"Fifteen feet, three inches!" shouts the judge.

As our last stop for the day, we drop by the fence-painting contest. We've already met the contest's youngest contestant while floating on the Mark Twain Steamboat earlier in the day. It was easy to spot 10-year-old Dylan Behl from New London, a small town just down the road from Hannibal. With freckles and a fresh, wholesome look, he's the perfect Tom Sawyer in red gingham shirt, ragged cut-off jeans, paint splattered on his legs.

The paint is a remnant from yesterday, when he and his mother, LaRhonda, both carried off trophies—Dylan for the age 10-13 Fence Painting Contest, his mom for an Over 30 Fence Painting Contest that she entered on the spur of the moment. "It looked like a lot of fun, so I thought I'd try it," she says. There's still a spot of paint on her elbow.

Dylan says he's "scared, nervous, and excited" about the national race coming up. "When they say 'go' you get an adrenaline rush and you run down the line, you don't care where paint goes, you just try to go fast!"

Before the race begins, judges with clipboards tiptoe between the contestants, examining their homemade costumes and Tom Sawyer memorabilia, neatly arranged on blankets.

"He's a shy kid," confides his dad, Danny Behl. "This has been good for him. The kids have to read the books and are judged for their costumes and props as well as speed and accuracy in the race."

Contestant #6, who has come from Japan, dangles a bottle of stinkwater from his belt loop. Dylan's props include dozens of items from Tom Sawyer scenes, including antique clay marbles, orange peels, and wart medicine.

Finally, the boys are ready to race. Four fences stand at the end of the running lanes, each with a bucket of milk paint and a brush next to it.

Dylan is poised like a runner, his boyish energy focused and taut. He bolts to his fence, grabs the brush, and leaps into the air, slapping paint, whitewash flying. Then he handily dashes back to the finish line ahead of the others.

He's surely made it into the final heat, and his dazzling smile shows he knows it. His dad is waiting for him across the finish line, wiping paint from his son's eyes with a towel.

Now Dylan faces three finalists, including the main competitor from Hannibal, 12-year-old Wesley Hjelm. It turns out there's been a rivalry between Hannibal and New London for years.

In this final round Dylan slaps paint even faster and races back, crossing the finish line first. I find myself screaming for him, emotionally invested in this youngest of contestants. But, alas, Dylan's final score places him second and Wesley first. I congratulate both boys and leave quickly, trying not to add my own disappointment to Dylan's.

Fast forward another year. I phone the family and find out that yes, this talented boy, now 11, will compete again. If he wins the Fence Painting Contest of the World, he will travel to Jefferson City and present the trophy to Missouri's governor, who will keep it in his office until the next 4th of July. And that would surely be a moment to remember from Dylan's own "Tom Sawyer" days.

The 2009 National Tom Sawyer Days will take place July 2-4. See

www.hannibaljaycees.org/tomsawyer.htm.

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