

Life In ...

Isabel V. Lyon remembered

by Marie Lavendier

Our "new" house is a charming brown cedar shingle with white trim. Built in 1893, it sits back from Main Street behind four towering maples.

When we bought it, we learned that it had formerly belonged to a woman named Isabel Lyon who had been Mark Twain's secretary. However, we hadn't bought it for its history, we bought it because it was the right scale for soon to be empty nesters and we liked it a lot.

Turns out, it had a lot of history. When my friend John Pogson, who is a Mark Twain impressionist and performs all over the place, e-mailed me of Isabel Lyon "there's quite a story behind her," my interest was piqued.

This year marks the centennial of Mark Twain's death, so a plethora of material abounds. Three books come to mind about the relationship between Lyon and Twain. Depending on which one you believe, Lyon is cast as a villainess, victim or admirable woman.

The first I read was "Dangerous Intimacy" by Karen Lystra, who portrayed Lyon in an extremely negative light. The author accused her of trying to seduce Twain, embezzle his money and keep his daughter Jean, who had severe epilepsy, away from him.

Twain was cast as the victim there, which didn't quite ring true for me. Wasn't he the savviest, wittiest man in the Western Hemisphere during his time?

When I met Lyon's grand-nephew David Moore this past May, he told me he began reading it, but became so upset he couldn't finish it because he remembers his great-aunt with fondness.

I browsed "Mark Twain: Man in White: The Grand Adventure of his Final Years" by Mark Sheldon, who believes Lyon was just a pawn in the machinations of her husband, Ralph Ashcroft, Twain's business manager.

Then I came across Laura Skandera Trombley's book "Mark Twain's Other Woman: The Hidden Story of His Final Years." Trombley, president of Pitzer College in California, had researched 16 years, assiduously reading Lyon's journals.

She presented a much more favorable and balanced picture. But let me give you a bit of Isabel Lyon's history first.

Lyon came to Farmington circa 1884 with her widowed mother Georgiana Van Kleek Lyon and her siblings. Her father was Charles Lyon, a professor and landholder. They had lived on an estate in the Hudson River Valley and when he died, they were left without a means to make a living.

It is not clear why they came to town, but Isabel and her family lived at Oldgate on Main Street for a time. Lyon worked as a governess and nanny for a number of families and with money she had saved, coupled with the sale of her father's estate in New

York, in 1893 she and her mother were able to build the house we live in now.

They called it Choisy, perhaps a play on the French word "choisi" which means "chosen."

Apparently, Lyon was working as a governess for the Whitmore family in Hartford when she first caught Twain's eye. She was his whist partner in a card game. When Twain was invited back, he agreed to return only if she would be playing.

However, it wasn't until 12 years later that she began working for Mark Twain and his family.

When Olivia Clemens, Twain's wife, took sick in 1902, Lyon was hired as a secretary to Twain. When Olivia Clemens died in 1904, Lyon was asked to live with the family.

According to Susan Boone Durkee, who now lives in the Lobster Pot in Redding, a house Twain built for Lyon, she became Mark Twain's "secretary, book-keeper, social companion, literary critic, household manager and power of attorney" until they had a "falling out" circa 1909.

Trombley reveals in her biography that prior to Lyon's marriage to Ashcroft in 1909, Twain and Lyon spent most of the previous six years together. She adored Twain and cared for him. They traveled to Bermuda together and spent Christmas together.

She ran his bustling household, managed his daughter Jean with her debilitating illness and oversaw the family finances for Twain, who was known for having poor judgment when it came to investments.

Twain's other daughter, Clara, traveled Europe as a singer, having a love affair with her pianist, who was a married man with children. According to the book, Clara liked to spend money and pay for the entourage with whom she traveled.

Perhaps because Lyon controlled the finances and tried to limit Clara's spending, their relationship became contentious. However, there seemed to have been other reasons for that. According to Trombley, Clara was also very instrumental in Twain's split with Lyon, possibly because of jealousy.

After Lyon's marriage to Ashcroft in 1909, Twain accused them of embezzling his money. Twain dropped his suit against them, but wrote the scathing, unpublished Ashcroft-Lyon manuscript, virtually slandering the two. He also took back the Lobster Pot house he had built for Lyon.

This past May, the Mark Twain House had a panel presentation of three Twain biographers; Trombley and Sheldon were among them. My husband, thinking this would be a golden opportunity to learn more about our former house owner, invited Trombley to see our house and come for lunch.

She was gracious and well spoken. I picked her

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Twain on the Twain-Lyon relationship, wondering what drove her to focus on it.

Having written two previous books about Mark Twain, she was a bona fide Twain scholar, and in her research, she kept coming across Lyon's numerous and intimate journals about her life with him.

That and the fact that Twain wrote the 429 page Lyon-Ashcroft manuscript, completely denigrating her, while Albert Bigelow Paine, Twain's official biographer, had devoted only one reference to her in the official biography, intrigued her.

She deduced that Lyon had obviously meant a great deal to Twain for him to spend so much time writing about her. What she found in her research proved her right.

Why didn't Twain marry Lyon if she had meant so much to him? Why did Lyon marry Ralph Ashcroft if Twain meant so much to her?

In our lunch discussion, Trombley said pretty much that no one could replace Twain's deceased wife, Olivia. Their love letters to each other are

Isabel Lyon and Mark Twain in Bermuda.



famous and still presented on Valentine's Day.

Then there were the rumors that Lyon was Twain's mistress, which could have led to a scandal. Trombley implies Lyon's relationship with Twain may have been more than platonic.

Also, Isabel Lyon lived in a time before women had much power, before the vote. There was not

much future besides marriage or an inheritance for a woman. Seamstress and governess were two acceptable occupations.

Twain had promised Lyon she could edit his letters, which would probably have provided her with

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financial independence, but then reneged on his promise because of his daughter Clara's protestations. So, perhaps, for some or all of those reasons, she married Ralph Ashcroft.

I am simplifying a pretty complicated story here, but if you would like more details, read the biographies.

John Pogson said he believes that if Twain were living today, he might be diagnosed with bipolar disorder, given his severe mood swings. Pogson has this to say about the last years of Lyon's relationship with Twain.

"There are always two or three or four sides to every story ... Sam Clemens was not a nice man, to say the least, in his final years. Clara, was by no means

a charmer. So what was the draw?

Maybe she (Lyon) just liked old, cranky, mean, white-haired men with 20-a-day cigar habits? Maybe she wanted to build a house just like Livy (Olivia) did. He (Twain) sure didn't need it. He wasn't having parties and he died two years after it was finished. Who the heck knows? And so the story goes on."

Was Isabel a villainess or a victim? Or was she a fascinating woman who was ahead of her time?

My opinion is she was a complex human being with an agenda and flaws like everyone else, especially including the iconic Twain, who treated her so cruelly toward the end of their relationship.

Trombley writes in the preface of her book that Lyon was a "forgotten woman" whose extensive collection of journals was scattered "all over the country" and ignored by Twain biographers for various reasons. She alludes to a deliberate cover up by Twain

and his daughter Clara.

"For Isabel was a possessor of secrets about the Clemens family so enormous that Twain and his daughter Clara were determined that she be forever silenced."

After Lyon's mother died in 1926, she inherited Choisy, but chose to rent it and live in New York. By that time she and Ashcroft had divorced.

She worked as a secretary and never criticized the Clemens family in spite of her poor treatment by them. She sold Choisy in 1946. Sixty-four years later, it became ours.

Isabel Lyon is buried in Riverside Cemetery in Farmington. Rumor has it her 1909 diary is missing, a most significant year. We have kept an eye out for it, but have yet to find it. **FL**

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