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MARK TWAIN CONTEST

Learning from the master

It will take quite an imagination to write an award-winning ending for an unpublished tale by premiere story-teller and one-time Buffalo resident Mark Twain.

Luckily for the contestants, Buffalo & Erie County Public Library officials aren't competing, because they've already shown how imaginative they can be just by coming up with a fantastic idea — or at least recognizing one when they see it.

Twain's unpublished "A Murder, a Mystery, and a Marriage" will provide the subject matter for an innovative contest in which writers will read the first part of the short story — but not its final pages — and then supply their own endings.

More important than challenging writers' creative juices, the short-story contest will provide the vehicle for publicizing Buffalo's connection to one of America's best-known authors.

The contest is part of a carnival of Twain activities slated here next year when the library and the University at Buffalo unveil a new "Huckleberry Finn" CD-ROM the two institutions are jointly developing. Release of the new disc will capitalize on the fact that the library's Mark Twain Room houses the re-visited first and second halves of the completed original manuscript of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn."

The fact that Buffalo has the original manuscript of a literary classic by a writer so universally known has to be one of the pillars of any effort by Western New York to capitalize on the growing cultural tourism trade. The manuscript is arguably this area's single greatest cultural treasure. Finding a way to let others know it's here should be at the top of any "to do" list for area promoters.

An international contest sure to draw worldwide media attention of both the serious and the whimsical nature, as would-be Twains try to compete with the master, is an inspired way of doing that.

And actually, some of the credit must go to Twain himself, who worked here as a newspaper editor in the late 1800s. When the author came up with the idea for "A Murder," he thought of simply proposing an outline and then asking other writers to flesh it out. "He thought about doing a competition 100 years ago," says library Deputy Director Michael Mahaney.

But it took modern-day officials to recognize the wisdom of dusting off that concept and incorporating it into an effort to market "Huckleberry Finn" and Buffalo's connection to it.

Though many details are still being worked out, the contest is expected to start this fall and run concurrent with the school year. Prizes will be awarded in several categories to both students and professional writers, and the winning submissions will probably be included on the "Huckleberry Finn" CD-ROM that will be released next year.

Fortunately for the contestants, organizers just want to see good writing. Matching Twain's ability to unravel plot twists en route to an ending that perhaps only he could get to will not be the sole criteria for judging submissions.

On the other hand, the brilliant way in which the library chose to capitalize on its Twain connection does set a new standard for judging promoters of this region's other treasures. Just like Twain, the library and UB are demonstrating what a little imagination can do.