

Truths about Twain and Tahoe unfold in painful prose

By Kathryn Reed

Mark Twain and Lake Tahoe; I never thought those two subjects put into one book could bore me.

I like Twain, Tahoe and history, but “Fairest Picture: Mark Twain at Lake Tahoe” by David Antonucci was painful to get through. Part of the problem is I don’t think it was edited well. And the writing falls flat. I almost felt like I was in a boring lecture hall.



If it weren’t for the author being from the Lake Tahoe Basin, history guru Dave Borges singing the praises of the book, and Antonucci’s book “Snowball’s Chance” getting a favorable review on *Lake Tahoe News* nearly two years ago, I would have put the book down without completing it.

Delving into what part is true, what is embellished and what are falsehoods when it came to what Twain wrote about Tahoe and what others have subsequently said are worthy endeavors. For that, Antonucci should be applauded. His research skills are not in question.

Maybe it was my mistake in assuming I was about to read something different. It read much like research paper – all 294 pages. Maybe I was just hoping for a little Twain to come out on the pages.

One problem is the book is disjointed. Thus, the need for a better editor.

Another is it took too long to get into the parts about Twain.

While the history at the beginning is interesting, if that's what you are looking for, it's not what I expected to read from the get-go.

On pages 240-41 are charts giving "yes" and "no" answers to where things actually are compared to what Twain or others wrote. Had this been at the beginning and then the supporting material for the answers outlined, it would have read better and been more interesting.

The diagrams, old photos – those are what makes this book worth picking up.

Chapter 7 "In the footsteps of Mark Twain" is also a highlight. It tells readers how to retrace the steps of the famous author. That would have made for a perfect final chapter. That goes back to the editing process.

The one thing I learned is Twain did not call the lake the "Jewel of the Sierra". Antonucci says credit for that phrase should be given to David Starr Jordan, who was a naturalist, president of Stanford University and director of the Sierra Club.

Some of the references to lake clarity were also interesting, especially in light of all that is going with that subject.

Antonucci writes, "According to the 1985 scientific study, existing beaches at Lake Tahoe formed in one of two ways. The sediment discharges of nearby streams nourished the formation of beaches under natural pre-Tahoe Dam conditions. Other beaches formed more recently, when the Tahoe Dam raised the lake to an unnatural level that initiated erosion of the otherwise stable waterfront cliffs and backshore."