

How To Make History Dates Stick

Mark Twain

These chapters are for children, and I shall try to make the words large enough to command respect. In the hope that you are listening, and that you have confidence in me, I will proceed.

Dates are difficult things to acquire; and after they are acquired it is difficult to keep them in the head. But they are very valuable. They are like the cattle-pens of a ranch--they shut in the several brands of historical cattle, each within its own fence, and keep them from getting mixed together. Dates are hard to remember because they consist of figures; figures are monotonously unstriking in appearance, and they don't take hold, they form no pictures, and so they give the eye no chance to help. Pictures are the thing. Pictures can make dates stick.

They can make nearly anything stick--particularly IF YOU MAKE THE PICTURES YOURSELF. Indeed, that is the great point--make the pictures YOURSELF. I know about this from experience. Thirty years ago I was delivering a memorized lecture every night, and every night I had to help myself with a page of notes to keep from getting myself mixed. The notes consisted of beginnings of sentences, and were eleven in number, and they ran something like this:

"IN THAT REGION THE WEATHER--"

"AT THAT TIME IT WAS A CUSTOM--"

"BUT IN CALIFORNIA ONE NEVER HEARD--"

Eleven of them. They initialed the brief divisions of the lecture and protected me against skipping. But they all looked about alike on the page; they formed no picture; I had them by heart, but I could never with certainty remember the order of their succession; therefore I always had to keep those notes by me and look at them every little while. Once I mislaid them; you will not be able to imagine the terrors of that evening. I now saw that I must invent some other protection. So I got ten of the initial letters by heart in their proper order--I, A, B, and so on--and I went on the platform the next night with these marked in ink on my ten finger-nails. But it didn't answer. I kept track of the figures for a while; then I lost it, and after that I was never quite sure which finger I had used last. I couldn't lick off a letter after using it, for while that would have made success certain it also would have provoked too much curiosity. There was curiosity enough without that. To the audience I seemed more interested in my fingernails than I was in

my subject; one or two persons asked me afterward what was the matter with my hands.

It was now that the idea of pictures occurred to me; then my troubles passed away. In two minutes I made six pictures with a pen, and they did the work of the eleven catch-sentences, and did it perfectly. I threw the pictures away as soon as they were made, for I was sure I could shut my eyes and see them any time. That was a quarter of a century ago; the lecture vanished out of my head more than twenty years ago, but I would rewrite it from the pictures--for they remain. Here are three of them: (Fig. 1).

The first one is a haystack--below it a rattlesnake--and it told me where to begin to talk ranch-life in Carson Valley. The second one told me where to begin the talk about a strange and violent wind that used to burst upon Carson City from the Sierra Nevadas every afternoon at two o'clock and try to blow the town away. The third picture, as you easily perceive, is lightning; its duty was to remind me when it was time to begin to talk about San Francisco weather, where there IS no lightning--nor thunder, either--and it never failed me.

I will give you a valuable hint. When a man is making a speech and you are to follow him don't jot down notes to speak from, jot down PICTURES. It is awkward and embarrassing to have to keep referring to notes; and besides it breaks up your speech and makes it ragged and non-coherent; but you can tear up your pictures as soon as you have made them--they will stay fresh and strong in your memory in the order and sequence in which you scratched them down. And many will admire to see what a good memory you are furnished with, when perhaps your memory is not any better than mine.

Sixteen years ago when my children were little creatures the governess was trying to hammer some primer histories into their heads. Part of this fun--if you like to call it that--consisted in the memorizing of the accession dates of the thirty-seven personages who had ruled England from the Conqueror down. These little people found it a bitter, hard contract. It was all dates, and all looked alike, and they wouldn't stick. Day after day of the summer vacation dribbled by, and still the kings held the fort; the children couldn't conquer any six of them.

With my lecture experience in mind I was aware that I could invent some way out of the trouble with pictures, but I hoped a way could be found which would let them romp in the open air while they learned the kings. I found it, and they mastered all the monarchs in a day or two.

The idea was to make them SEE the reigns with their eyes; that would be a large help. We were at the farm then. From the house-porch the grounds sloped gradually down to the lower fence and rose on the right to the high ground where my small work-den stood. A carriage-road wound through the grounds and up the hill. I staked it out with the English monarchs, beginning with the Conqueror, and you could stand on the porch and clearly see every reign and its length, from the Conquest down to Victoria, then in the forty-sixth year of her reign--EIGHT HUNDRED AND SEVENTEEN YEARS OF English history under your eye at once!

English history was an unusually live topic in America just then. The world had suddenly realized that while it was not noticing the Queen had passed Henry VIII., passed Henry VI. and Elizabeth, and gaining in length every day. Her reign had entered the list of the long ones; everybody was interested now--it was watching a race. Would she pass the long Edward? There was a possibility of it. Would she pass the long Henry? Doubtful, most people said. The long George? Impossible! Everybody said it. But we have lived to see her leave him two years behind.

I measured off 817 feet of the roadway, a foot representing a year, and at the beginning and end of each reign I drove a three-foot white-pine stake in the turf by the roadside and wrote the name and dates on it. Abreast the middle of the porch-front stood a great granite flower-vase overflowing with a cataract of bright-yellow flowers--I can't think of their name. The vase of William the Conqueror. We put his name on it and his accession date, 1066. We started from that and measured off twenty-one feet of the road, and drove William Rufus's stake; then thirteen feet and drove the first Henry's stake; then thirty-five feet and drove Stephen's; then nineteen feet, which brought us just past the summer-house on the left; then we staked out thirty-five, ten, and seventeen for the second Henry and Richard and John; turned the curve and entered upon just what was needed for Henry III.--a level, straight stretch of fifty-six feet of road without a crinkle in it. And it lay exactly in front of the house, in the middle of the grounds. There couldn't have been a better place for that long reign; you could stand on the porch and see those two wide-apart stakes almost with your eyes shut. (Fig. 2.)

That isn't the shape of the road--I have bunched it up like that to save room. The road had some great curves in it, but their gradual sweep was such that they were no mar to history. No, in our road one could tell at a glance who was who by the size of the vacancy between stakes--with LOCALITY to help, of course.

Although I am away off here in a Swedish village [1] and

those stakes did not stand till the snow came, I can see them today as plainly as ever; and whenever I think of an English monarch his stakes rise before me of their own accord and I notice the large or small space which he takes up on our road. Are your kings spaced off in your mind? When you think of Richard III. and of James II. do the durations of their reigns seem about alike to you? It isn't so to me; I always notice that there's a foot's difference. When you think of Henry III. do you see a great long stretch of straight road? I do; and just at the end where it joins on to Edward I. I always see a small pear-bush with its green fruit hanging down. When I think of the Commonwealth I see a shady little group of these small saplings which we called the oak parlor; when I think of George III. I see him stretching up the hill, part of him occupied by a flight of stone steps; and I can locate Stephen to an inch when he comes into my mind, for he just filled the stretch which went by the summer-house. Victoria's reign reached almost to my study door on the first little summit; there's sixteen feet to be added now; I believe that that would carry it to a big pine-tree that was shattered by some lightning one summer when it was trying to hit me.

We got a good deal of fun out of the history road; and exercise, too. We trotted the course from the conqueror to the study, the children calling out the names, dates, and length of reigns as we passed the stakes, going a good gait along the long reigns, but slowing down when we came upon people like Mary and Edward VI., and the short Stuart and Plantagenet, to give time to get in the statistics. I offered prizes, too--apples. I threw one as far as I could send it, and the child that first shouted the reign it fell in got the apple.

The children were encouraged to stop locating things as being "over by the arbor," or "in the oak parlor," or "up at the stone steps," and say instead that the things were in Stephen, or in the Commonwealth, or in George III. They got the habit without trouble. To have the long road mapped out with such exactness was a great boon for me, for I had the habit of leaving books and other articles lying around everywhere, and had not previously been able to definitely name the place, and so had often been obliged to go to fetch them myself, to save time and failure; but now I could name the reign I left them in, and send the children.

Next I thought I would measure off the French reigns, and peg them alongside the English ones, so that we could always have contemporaneous French history under our eyes as we went our English rounds. We pegged them down to the Hundred Years' War, then threw the idea aside, I do not now remember why. After that we made the English pegs fence in European and American history

as well as English, and that answered very well. English and alien poets, statesmen, artists, heroes, battles, plagues, cataclysms, revolutions--we shoveled them all into the English fences according to their dates. Do you understand? We gave Washington's birth to George II.'s pegs and his death to George III.'s; George II. got the Lisbon earthquake and George III. the Declaration of Independence. Goethe, Shakespeare, Napoleon, Savonarola, Joan of Arc, the French Revolution, the Edict of Nantes, Clive, Wellington, Waterloo, Plassey, Patay, Cowpens, Saratoga, the Battle of the Boyne, the invention of the logarithms, the microscope, the steam-engine, the telegraph--anything and everything all over the world--we dumped it all in among the English pegs according to its date and regardless of its nationality.

If the road-pegging scheme had not succeeded I should have lodged the kings in the children's heads by means of pictures--that is, I should have tried. It might have failed, for the pictures could only be effective WHEN MADE BY THE PUPIL; not the master, for it is the work put upon the drawing that makes the drawing stay in the memory, and my children were too little to make drawings at that time. And, besides, they had no talent for art, which is strange, for in other ways they are like me.

But I will develop the picture plan now, hoping that you will be able to use it. It will come good for indoors when the weather is bad and one cannot go outside and peg a road. Let us imagine that the kings are a procession, and that they have come out of the Ark and down Ararat for exercise and are now starting back again up the zigzag road. This will bring several of them into view at once, and each zigzag will represent the length of a king's reign.

And so on. You will have plenty of space, for by my project you will use the parlor wall. You do not mark on the wall; that would cause trouble. You only attach bits of paper to it with pins or thumb-tacks. These will leave no mark.

Take your pen now, and twenty-one pieces of white paper, each two inches square, and we will do the twenty-one years of the Conqueror's reign. On each square draw a picture of a whale and write the dates and term of service. We choose the whale for several reasons: its name and William's begin with the same letter; it is the biggest fish that swims, and William is the most conspicuous figure in English history in the way of a landmark; finally, a whale is about the easiest thing to draw. By the time you have drawn twenty-one whales and written "William I.--1066-1087--twenty-one years" twenty-one times, those details will be your property; you cannot dislodge them from your memory

with anything but dynamite. I will make a sample for you to copy: (Fig. 3).

I have got his chin up too high, but that is no matter; he is looking for Harold. It may be that a whale hasn't that fin up there on his back, but I do not remember; and so, since there is a doubt, it is best to err on the safe side. He looks better, anyway, than he would without it.

Be very careful and ATTENTIVE while you are drawing your first whale from my sample and writing the word and figures under it, so that you will not need to copy the sample any more. Compare your copy with the sample; examine closely; if you find you have got everything right and can shut your eyes and see the picture and call the words and figures, then turn the sample and copy upside down and make the next copy from memory; and also the next and next, and so on, always drawing and writing from memory until you have finished the whole twenty-one. This will take you twenty minutes, or thirty, and by that time you will find that you can make a whale in less time than an unpracticed person can make a sardine; also, up to the time you die you will always be able to furnish William's dates to any ignorant person that inquires after them.

You will now take thirteen pieces of BLUE paper, each two inches square, and do William II. (Fig. 4.)

Make him spout his water forward instead of backward; also make him small, and stick a harpoon in him and give him that sick look in the eye. Otherwise you might seem to be continuing the other William, and that would be confusing and a damage. It is quite right to make him small; he was only about a No. 11 whale, or along there somewhere; there wasn't room in him for his father's great spirit. The barb of that harpoon ought not to show like that, because it is down inside the whale and ought to be out of sight, but it cannot be helped; if the barb were removed people would think some one had stuck a whip-stock into the whale. It is best to leave the barb the way it is, then every one will know it is a harpoon and attending to business. Remember--draw from the copy only once; make your other twelve and the inscription from memory.

Now the truth is that whenever you have copied a picture and its inscription once from my sample and two or three times from memory the details will stay with you and be hard to forget. After that, if you like, you may make merely the whale's HEAD and WATER-SPOUT for the Conqueror till you end his reign, each time SAYING the inscription in place of writing it; and in the case of William II. make the HARPOON alone, and say over the inscription

each time you do it. You see, it will take nearly twice as long to do the first set as it will to do the second, and that will give you a marked sense of the difference in length of the two reigns.

Next do Henry I. on thirty-five squares of RED paper.
(Fig. 5.)

That is a hen, and suggests Henry by furnishing the first syllable. When you have repeated the hen and the inscription until you are perfectly sure of them, draw merely the hen's head the rest of the thirty-five times, saying over the inscription each time. Thus:
(Fig. 6).

You begin to understand how how this procession is going to look when it is on the wall. First there will be the Conqueror's twenty-one whales and water-spouts, the twenty-one white squares joined to one another and making a white stripe three and one-half feet long; the thirteen blue squares of William II. will be joined to that--a blue stripe two feet, two inches long, followed by Henry's red stripe five feet, ten inches long, and so on. The colored divisions will smartly show to the eye the difference in the length of the reigns and impress the proportions on the memory and the understanding. (Fig. 7.)

Stephen of Blois comes next. He requires nineteen two-inch squares of YELLOW paper. (Fig. 8.)

That is a steer. The sound suggests the beginning of Stephen's name. I choose it for that reason. I can make a better steer than that when I am not excited. But this one will do. It is a good-enough steer for history. The tail is defective, but it only wants straightening out.

Next comes Henry II. Give him thirty-five squares of RED paper. These hens must face west, like the former ones. (Fig. 9.)

This hen differs from the other one. He is on his way to inquire what has been happening in Canterbury.

How we arrive at Richard I., called Richard of the Lion-heart because he was a brave fighter and was never so contented as when he was leading crusades in Palestine and neglecting his affairs at home. Give him ten squares of WHITE paper. (Fig. 10).

That is a lion. His office is to remind you of the lion-hearted Richard. There is something the matter with his legs, but I do not quite know what it is, they do not seem right. I think the hind ones are the most unsatisfactory; the front ones are well enough, though it would be better if they were

rights and lefts.

Next comes King John, and he was a poor circumstance.
He was called Lackland. He gave his realm to the Pope.
Let him have seventeen squares of YELLOW paper. (Fig. 11.)

That creature is a jamboree. It looks like a trademark, but that is only an accident and not intentional. It is prehistoric and extinct. It used to roam the earth in the Old Silurian times, and lay eggs and catch fish and climb trees and live on fossils; for it was of a mixed breed, which was the fashion then. It was very fierce, and the Old Silurians were afraid of it, but this is a tame one. Physically it has no representative now, but its mind has been transmitted. First I drew it sitting down, but have turned it the other way now because I think it looks more attractive and spirited when one end of it is galloping. I love to think that in this attitude it gives us a pleasant idea of John coming all in a happy excitement to see what the barons have been arranging for him at Runnymede, while the other one gives us an idea of him sitting down to wring his hands and grieve over it.

We now come to Henry III.; RED squares again, of course--fifty-six of them. We must make all the Henrys the same color; it will make their long reigns show up handsomely on the wall. Among all the eight Henrys there were but two short ones. A lucky name, as far as longevity goes. The reigns of six of the Henrys cover 227 years. It might have been well to name all the royal princes Henry, but this was overlooked until it was too late. (Fig. 12.)

This is the best one yet. He is on his way (1265) to have a look at the first House of Commons in English history. It was a monumental event, the situation in the House, and was the second great liberty landmark which the century had set up. I have made Henry looking glad, but this was not intentional.

Edward I. comes next; LIGHT-BROWN paper, thirty-five squares. (Fig. 13.)

That is an editor. He is trying to think of a word. He props his feet on a chair, which is the editor's way; then he can think better. I do not care much for this one; his ears are not alike; still, editor suggests the sound of Edward, and he will do. I could make him better if I had a model, but I made this one from memory. But is no particular matter; they all look alike, anyway. They are conceited and troublesome, and don't pay enough. Edward was the first really English king that had yet occupied the throne. The editor in the picture probably looks just as Edward looked when it was first borne in upon him that

this was so. His whole attitude expressed gratification and pride mixed with stupefaction and astonishment.

Edward II. now; twenty BLUE squares. (Fig. 14.)

Another editor. That thing behind his ear is his pencil. Whenever he finds a bright thing in your manuscript he strikes it out with that. That does him good, and makes him smile and show his teeth, the way he is doing in the picture. This one has just been striking out a smart thing, and now he is sitting there with his thumbs in his vest-holes, gloating. They are full of envy and malice, editors are. This picture will serve to remind you that Edward II. was the first English king who was DEPOSED. Upon demand, he signed his deposition himself. He had found kingship a most aggravating and disagreeable occupation, and you can see by the look of him that he is glad he resigned. He has put his blue pencil up for good now. He had struck out many a good thing with it in his time.

Edward III. next; fifty RED squares. (Fig. 15.)

This editor is a critic. He has pulled out his carving-knife and his tomahawk and is starting after a book which he is going to have for breakfast. This one's arms are put on wrong. I did not notice it at first, but I see it now. Somehow he has got his right arm on his left shoulder, and his left arm on his right shoulder, and this shows us the back of his hands in both instances. It makes him left-handed all around, which is a thing which has never happened before, except perhaps in a museum. That is the way with art, when it is not acquired but born to you: you start in to make some simple little thing, not suspecting that your genius is beginning to work and swell and strain in secret, and all of a sudden there is a convulsion and you fetch out something astonishing. This is called inspiration. It is an accident; you never know when it is coming. I might have tried as much as a year to think of such a strange thing as an all-around left-handed man and I could not have done it, for the more you try to think of an unthinkable thing the more it eludes you; but it can't elude inspiration; you have only to bait with inspiration and you will get it every time. Look at Botticelli's "Spring." Those snaky women were unthinkable, but inspiration secured them for us, thanks to goodness. It is too late to reorganize this editor-critic now; we will leave him as he is. He will serve to remind us.

Richard II. next; twenty-two WHITE squares. (Fig. 16.)

We use the lion again because this is another Richard. Like Edward II., he was DEPOSED. He is taking a last sad look at his

crown before they take it away. There was not room enough and I have made it too small; but it never fitted him, anyway.

Now we turn the corner of the century with a new line of monarchs--the Lancastrian kings.

Henry IV.; fourteen squares of YELLOW paper. (Fig. 17.)

This hen has laid the egg of a new dynasty and realizes the magnitude of the event. She is giving notice in the usual way. You notice I am improving in the construction of hens. At first I made them too much like other animals, but this one is orthodox. I mention this to encourage you. You will find that the more you practice the more accurate you will become. I could always draw animals, but before I was educated I could not tell what kind they were when I got them done, but now I can. Keep up your courage; it will be the same with you, although you may not think it. This Henry died the year after Joan of Arc was born.

Henry V.; nine BLUE squares. (Fig. 18)

There you see him lost in meditation over the monument which records the amazing figures of the battle of Agincourt. French history says 20,000 Englishmen routed 80,000 Frenchmen there; and English historians say that the French loss, in killed and wounded, was 60,000.

Henry VI.; thirty-nine RED squares. (Fig. 19)

This is poor Henry VI., who reigned long and scored many misfortunes and humiliations. Also two great disasters: he lost France to Joan of Arc and he lost the throne and ended the dynasty which Henry IV. had started in business with such good prospects. In the picture we see him sad and weary and downcast, with the scepter falling from his nerveless grasp. It is a pathetic quenching of a sun which had risen in such splendor.

Edward IV.; twenty-two LIGHT-BROWN squares. (Fig. 20.)

That is a society editor, sitting there elegantly dressed, with his legs crossed in that indolent way, observing the clothes the ladies wear, so that he can describe them for his paper and make them out finer than they are and get bribes for it and become wealthy. That flower which he is wearing in his buttonhole is a rose--a white rose, a York rose--and will serve to remind us of the War of the Roses, and that the white one was the winning color when Edward got the throne and dispossessed the Lancastrian dynasty.

Edward V.; one-third of a BLACK square. (Fig. 21.)

His uncle Richard had him murdered in the tower. When you get the reigns displayed upon the wall this one will be conspicuous and easily remembered. It is the shortest one in English history except Lady Jane Grey's, which was only nine days. She is never officially recognized as a monarch of England, but if you or I should ever occupy a throne we should like to have proper notice taken of it; and it would be only fair and right, too, particularly if we gained nothing by it and lost our lives besides.

Richard III.; two WHITE squares. (Fig. 22.)

That is not a very good lion, but Richard was not a very good king. You would think that this lion has two heads, but that is not so; one is only a shadow. There would be shadows for the rest of him, but there was not light enough to go round, it being a dull day, with only fleeting sun-glimpses now and then. Richard had a humped back and a hard heart, and fell at the battle of Bosworth. I do not know the name of that flower in the pot, but we will use it as Richard's trade-mark, for it is said that it grows in only one place in the world--Bosworth Field--and tradition says it never grew there until Richard's royal blood warmed its hidden seed to life and made it grow.

Henry VII.; twenty-four BLUE squares. (Fig. 23.)

Henry VII. had no liking for wars and turbulence; he preferred peace and quiet and the general prosperity which such conditions create. He liked to sit on that kind of eggs on his own private account as well as the nation's, and hatch them out and count up their result. When he died he left his heir 2,000,000 pounds, which was a most unusual fortune for a king to possess in those days. Columbus's great achievement gave him the discovery-fever, and he sent Sebastian Cabot to the New World to search out some foreign territory for England. That is Cabot's ship up there in the corner. This was the first time that England went far abroad to enlarge her estate--but not the last.

Henry VIII.; thirty-eight RED squares. (Fig. 24.)

That is Henry VIII. suppressing a monastery in his arrogant fashion.

Edward VI.; six squares of YELLOW paper. (Fig. 25.)

He is the last Edward to date. It is indicated by that thing over his head, which is a LAST--shoemaker's last.

Mary; five squares of BLACK paper. (Fig. 26.)

The picture represents a burning martyr. He is in back of the smoke. The first three letters of Mary's name and the first three of the word martyr are the same. Martyrdom was going out in her day and martyrs were becoming scarcer, but she made several. For this reason she is sometimes called Bloody Mary.

This brings us to the reign of Elizabeth, after passing through a period of nearly five hundred years of England's history--492 to be exact. I think you may now be trusted to go the rest of the way without further lessons in art or inspirations in the matter of ideas. You have the scheme now, and something in the ruler's name or career will suggest the pictorial symbol. The effort of inventing such things will not only help your memory, but will develop originality in art. See what it has done for me. If you do not find the parlor wall big enough for all of England's history, continue it into the dining-room and into other rooms. This will make the walls interesting and instructive and really worth something instead of being just flat things to hold the house together.

1. Summer of 1899.