

Was You Ever Up a Stump?

Speech of the Mountain Men

The mountain men were a polyglot crew, speaking one or another dialect of English, French, Spanish, native languages, and sign language. Being mostly from the U.S., the most common language was English, varying widely, for example, from New England forms, to tidewater Virginia, to the speech of the "old South-West" around New Orleans. The most common dialect of English among the mountain men may have been that spoken by men raised in or coming from the mid Mississippi Valley, upriver and downriver from St. Louis. This dialect was called "Pike County" from a county in Missouri on the Mississippi River. It was spoken over a wide region.

By good fortune there is an excellent and vivid depiction of Pike County speech in the novel *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. Twain was raised near Pike County and worked on river steamboats as a young man, all along the Mississippi River, so knew his material first hand. Twain used several dialects in the novel, which appears to take place about the year 1840. Huckleberry Finn himself, the narrator, speaks Pike County, as do the characters Pap, Ben Rogers, Judith Loftus, Tom Sawyer and Aunt Polly who speak a dialect identical with Huck's. Tom throws in a lot of garbled high-falutin' phrases that he gleaned from books. Altogether about three-quarters of the speech in *Huckleberry Finn* is Pike County English. (To linguists: yes, I am simplifying here, just a little. Don't git yer feathers ruffled. I ain't after tenure. For more detail, see "The Dialects in Huckleberry Finn," David Carkeet, *American Literature*, Vol. 51, No. 3, Nov. 1979, pp. 315-332.) And the world described in *Huckleberry Finn* is the rural society along the mid Mississippi Valley, the world many mountain men knew.

Most mountain man reenactors know some 'mountain man words,' which are mainly ordinary Pike County, and throw them into into modern standard English. You can do better than that. Don't trust movies and novels for language when you can have Huck Finn for teacher.

If you want to create the persona of A stereotypical American mountain man, get yourself a copy of *Huckleberry Finn*, read it, and find and absorb the speeches of Huck and the other characters named above. A good reading of Huckleberry Finn is available on CD (narrated By Dick Hill, Brilliance Audio, 2001). (<https://www.brillianceaudio.com/>). This is a wonderful aid to pronunciation and emphasis.