**Filename: 0704SAWYER TRT: 3:59.000 SOC**

This is KBIA News, I’m Stan Jastrzebski.

Mark Twain’s book “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,” about a mischievous Missouri boy and his friends – including Becky Thatcher, the daughter of the local judge – came out in 1876. And ever since the book’s 80th anniversary, Twain’s hometown has crowned new classes of Toms and Beckys each year.

As KBIA’s own Becky - Rebecca Smith - reports, it’s a contest Hannibal residents take seriously.

**Filename: 0704SAWYER\_V2 TRT: 3:34 OC: “on the cheek.”**

***Nats: the river, the wind, the Riverboat***

Tom Sawyer is late.

*(:XX) “Where’s that Tom? He’s out fishing…”*

And Becky Thatcher is waiting.

*(:XX) “He’s here. Tell him to come to the boat.”*

No, this isn’t a newly discovered scene from a lost Mark Twain novel. Instead it’s two 14-year-olds welcoming visitors to Hannibal, Missouri, as they disembark a riverboat.

*(:XX) “Oh my god, Tom and Becky”*

Becky and Tom – or in this case Emery McHargue and Collin Steinman – are just two of the ten kids that were selected last year to be official ambassadors of the Hannibal community.

Megan Rapp is the executive director of the Mark Twain boyhood home and museum and says the Tom & Becky program has been around since 1956.

(:XX) “*It's definitely not a look-alike contest. It doesn't matter how much they, quote, unquote, look like the characters in the book. It is based on their knowledge of Hannibal history, of Mark Twain, of his works.”*

Students within the Hannibal school district have to sign up in the seventh grade and then undergo a rigorous process that includes a written 120-point history test, numerous public presentations and performances of the famous engagement scene from “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.”

The field is then narrowed down to the final five couples who **will** embody the characters for a year.

*(:XX) They're answering questions about Mark Twain… you know, where it's a good place to eat? How do I get to the riverboat?*

McHargue says she’s loved her experience - and was excited to follow in the footsteps of her aunt, who was a Becky in the late 90s.

*(:XX) It's so much more than, like, just wearing a dress and, like, making people smile, Like, obviously that's important too. But like, the process was so it was a lot of work, but it was definitely worth it.*

Once selected, each family is responsible for putting together their character’s outfits - choosing fabrics for dresses, making Tom’s iconic fishing pole, and each of the kids keep items in their bags that are important to the story of “Tom Sawyer.”

*(:XX) Okay, this is actually a doll my grandma helped me make. It looks just like me, except this one doesn’t have ant braids.*

While this Tom – Collin, carries kite string, a squirrel pelt and old-fashioned marbles.

*(:XX) This is, this has probably been one of my favorite summers, favorite years ever. So, it's kind of funny, me and Emery had our first appearance together, and then now we're having our last appearance together. It's kind of a special memory.*

This program is IMPORTANT to Hannibal – both because it adds to the tourist experience, which in turn makes up a large part of the community’s economy

AND because former Toms and Beckys have a history of being successful – becoming lawyers, the CEO of the local hospital, and doctors, such as Kathy Asbury.

*(XX) I always say that it was truly one of the most impactful experiences I had growing up.*

Kathy was a Becky in 1991 and her son, Korbin, has been the official Tom for the past year.

*(:XX) He really has become so comfortable with speaking in public and talking to people and initiating that contact and communication…*

***Nats: Riverside waves, the Riverboat in the background***

A new crop of Toms and Beckys have been undergoing final judging during the National Tom Sawyer days this week.

Megan Rapp with the Mark Twain Museum says all ten kids will spend the next year attending ribbon cuttings, community events and more in character, but one “official” Tom and Becky will be announced today [4th of July] – outside Mark Twain’s boyhood home – with the handing off of a fishing pole and a peck on the cheek.

In Hannibal, Missouri, I’m Rebecca Smith. ~~KBIA News.~~