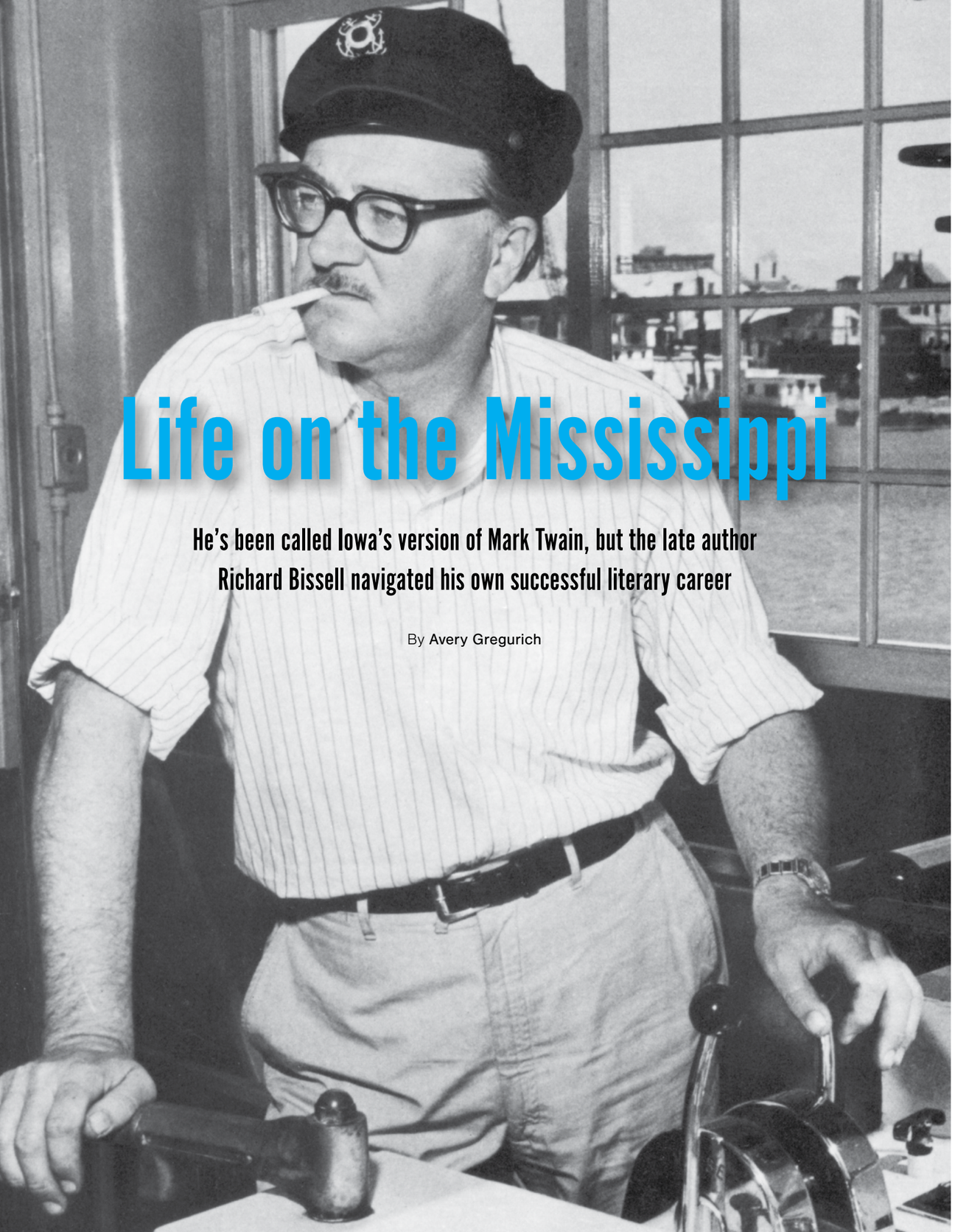


Life on the Mississippi

He's been called Iowa's version of Mark Twain, but the late author Richard Bissell navigated his own successful literary career

By Avery Gregurich

On the day before Independence Day, I was down by the harbor and thinking that Richard Bissell was right: Dubuque has her own notions of time.

"There is no past, present, and future time here in Dubuque; there is just Dubuque time," he wrote back in 1954. "People try to live up to the modern age, but it is a losing game because Dubuque wins out every time."

I had come here to see how Dubuque was and if Richard "Dick" Bissell would have recognized her. Perhaps I had stacked the deck a bit: eating onion rings with a beautiful Iowa woman on the deck of a restaurant called Catfish Charlie's on July 3, the whole town in its freedom finery, with an air show buzzing our heads throughout the afternoon and fireworks lighting the dusk.

Still, I couldn't help seeing him everywhere in his hometown. There he was on a newspaper stand in an advertisement seeking subscriptions for the *Telegraph Herald*. It was his picture, boat helm in hand and dark moustache, hiding on the front page beneath the call for subscribers. He was hanging on a wall of murals in the National Mississippi River Museum, looking much the same but this time in oil paint. And of course he was out by the water on a placard near Dubuque Harbor, saying how he and his wife, Marian, had once purchased the *Canton* and converted it into a pleasure boat.

Today at least, it seemed that Dubuque was winning out against time, and so was Richard Bissell.

In titles alone, his life adds up to a matchless mosaic: a writer, river pilot, playwright, Harvard graduate, "the only steamboat second cook on the entire Mississippi-Missouri-Ohio River system to be also a qualified and Licensed Anthropologist," a business executive, and a houseboater. His life was irreverently offbeat, at times entirely divergent, almost like the Mississippi River herself, in all its moods and temperaments.

In 1913 he was born in "a sweltering upstairs bedroom in the old house on Fenelon Place" to "the music of the seven-year locusts, in time to hear the factory whistles blow for the Armistice five years later," he wrote in *Holiday*. "I had a new tricycle by then, which was far more important."

Years later, when Bissell became nationally recognized for his writing, journalists and critics quickly categorized him as the 20th century's version of Mark Twain, an easy if unfair comparison that both humbled and troubled him. He was quick to outline their differences.

"I wasn't born in a little frame shanty down in Missouri, wouldn't think of it," he wrote in his aptly titled *My Life on the Mississippi, or Why I Am Not Mark Twain*. "I was born in splendor at the top of the Fourth Street Elevator in Dubuque, Iowa, Key City to the West, greatest state in the Union. Missouri — no thanks."

His grandfather was president and his father the general manager of the H.B. Glover Company, a manufacturer of overalls, leather jackets, duck coats, and, of course, pajamas. As a boy, Dick was raised in both Midwestern opulence and rural charm. He attended dance class, which he pretended to hate in front of his friends, and ran away from home as promoted by those boys in Twain's pages. He even took to building his own watercraft.

"The first boat I built was in our cellar out there on the farm three miles from the Mississippi at the top of the hill above Catfish Creek. Built it nights with my buddy Earl when we were 14 years old," he wrote in *My Life*. The plans were laid down in *The American Boy's Handy Book* by Dan Beard, and it was a "'Yankee Pine' with a pointed bow and some sheer to it."

He and his friends took that and other vessels up and down the Mississippi, "trying to emulate Huck and Tom by stealing things to eat, but we didn't know what to do with them." For example: "What can two kids in a rowboat do with five summer squashes?" He wrote in his author's biography for *You Can Always Tell a Harvard Man*, "he attended the public school as little as possible," and at the age of 14, he "floated from Winona to Dubuque on a raft, bummed the freights to Hannibal, Missouri, to prostrate himself at the Mark Twain shrine, and flunked Latin for the first time."

He followed his father's path by being shipped off to New Hampshire to the Phillips Exeter Academy for high school, where he "coxed the crew and flunked Latin three more times." It was there that he met his wife, Marian, at the age of 13.

Then it was off to Harvard to spend his next four years "perfecting his game of pool." His father, Fred Bissell, had been the editor of the *Crimson* at Harvard and encouraged Dick's initial literary efforts. It was anthropology that would sustain Bissell's scatter-shot interests, and he took courses that "covered the entire subject of Man and his works in all ages and climates from the primeval ooze up to Herbert Hoover." In other courses, he studied Greek vase painting and classical archeology, trying and failing to shape arrowheads in a course on the American Indian. He concluded in *You Can Always* that the "Indians bought their arrowheads from an arrowhead factory someplace that has yet to be discovered. Possibly in Pittsburgh or Detroit."

I had lived in Iowa for five years before I even heard Bissell's name. He has a star on the Iowa Avenue Literary Walk in Iowa City, but you won't find any of his books at the Prairie Lights bookstore. Bissell is not taught or studied regularly, and *The Pajama Game* has become his lasting legacy. I visited his papers now kept in the Special Collections at the University of Iowa Library. I read his Christmas cards. I held his first drafts, including his first drafts of "Coal Queen," written in bunkhouses and mess halls on board riverboats between shifts. Some of these are tobacco-charred and coffee-stained, and the lead is fading. He wrote most everything in longhand on yellow legal pad paper and worked mainly in public libraries. (I've written this, too, in the knowing quiet of a public library.)

As I leafed through several feet of his papers housed there, I realized that he might never be able to lose his Twain comparisons. (Hell, Bissell owned an 11-foot mirror that once hung in Twain's New York home.) Perhaps that's a fitting end: both men pegged and remembered as humorists and entertainers, when at their cores, they wrote as humanists who treasured a phrase or greasy detail more than any traditional plot or ending. Both of their hometowns have become sorts of shrines to them, nostalgia-steeped, for better or worse, museums to men who put them forever down on paper.

As I left Dubuque that day, I wondered what Dick Bissell and Mark Twain would think about all of this and imagined them somewhere south of town on a flatboat on the water beneath clouds of cigar smoke attempting to out-yarn one another. I finally understood what he meant by "every minute that ticks by out here by the river is a genuine gold-plated Dubuque minute, medium rare, and with plenty of fried onions and a stein of Star beer on the side." — *Avery Gregurich*

He graduated Harvard in 1936 and in two years' time sailed the Mediterranean with the American Export Line as an ordinary seaman; worked in New York for Harvard dropout Edwin Land and his then-fledgling polarized sunglasses company, Polaroid; and finally returned to Dubuque to work on his first riverboat, the *James W. Good*, a stern-wheel steamer of the Federal Barge Line.

In 1938 he married Marian and took a position at the family's H. B. Glover Company for a steady $28.50 a week. He didn't leave the river behind. No, he and Marian took on the Mississippi full-time, living on the *Prairie Belle,* a houseboat he later described in an article for *Sports Illustrated* as "a mammoth affair, two stories with a gable roof" that he had found at La Crosse, Wisconsin, and had had towed back to Dubuque. Their floating home, complete with a four-poster bed, was anchored in front of the Star Brewery. After his workdays at the garment factory, he would return to his wife and the *Prairie Belle,* "take off the executive flannels, put on overalls, grab a gunnysack, and go pick coal off the railroad tracks," which they would use to fire the stove.

It was an idyllic life on the water, their nights spent "sitting on the deck in the cool evening with a pail of beer, looking at those big steam engines hauling their freight across the bridge, waving at the engineers, who envied us, listening to the drawbridge and the nighthawks beeping over the brewery towers."

It would take a world war to push him away, and when it came, he naturally enlisted in the Navy, which turned him down because of his eyesight (his trademark horn-rimmed glasses were for more than just Harvard fashion). So he decided to work hauling coal for the Central Barge Company of Chicago in service of the country's war efforts. During wartime Bissell worked hauling coal, grain, and pig iron on the inland waterways system of the Mississippi, Illinois, Ohio, Tennessee, and Monongahela rivers. The boats, among others, were the *W. A. Shepard* (later named the *Wheelock Whitney*), the *Alexander Mackenzie*, the *Inland Coal*, and the *Minnesota*. The names sound regal and prestigious to the 21st-century ear, but these were tough, hard-working boats full of tough, hard-working men. It was upon these boats that Bissell, armed with an anthropologist's ear for speech, first captured the dialogue he is most remembered for, often brash, sometimes humorous, and always loud above the engines.

In 1943 Bissell received his pilot's license after he drew from memory a map of the upper Mississippi to the scale of one inch to the mile, the first writer since his lyrical

Opposite: "Intrepid second mate of the Glenn Traer on the Illinois River, 1943," Richard Bissell wrote of this photo in his book *My Life on the Missisippi, or Why I Am Not Mark Twain*. **Above left:** Another photo from the book shows Bissell "Bumming the freights, Clinton, Iowa, to Hannibal, Missouri, 1929." **Above right:** Bissell relaxes aboard *Floating Cave*, one of his houseboats.

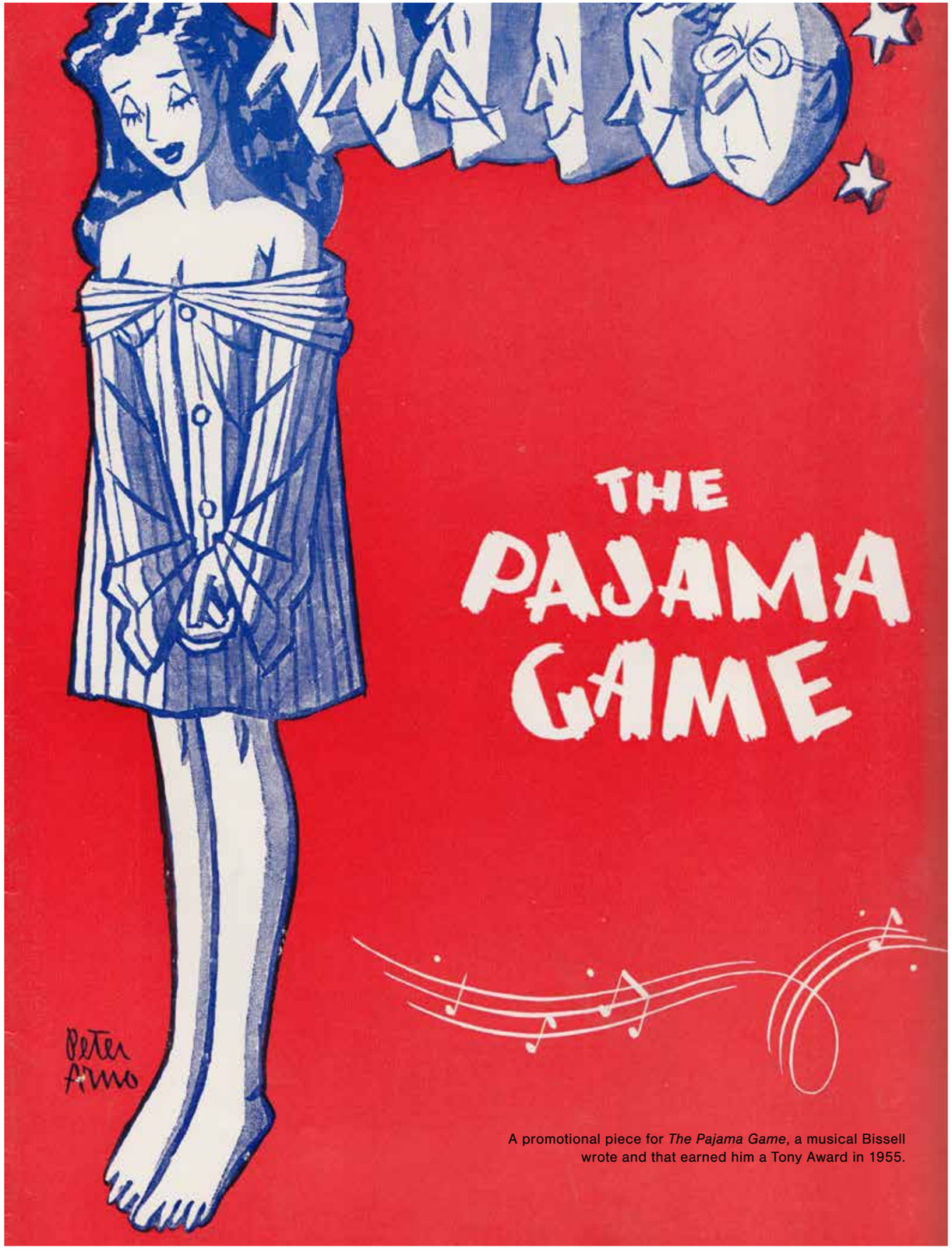
likeness Twain to hold that title. It was while piloting what he described in his book *The Monongahela* as a "dirty old boat with a telescoping pilothouse and a single stack" that Bissell gathered the material he would later set down as the short story "Coal Queen." Marian, his first and toughest editor, rejected his first draft. His second draft won the "I Personally" true-life writing contest held by *Atlantic Monthly* in 1949. A year later Atlantic-Brown published his debut novel, *A Stretch on the River,* presenting Richard Bissell to the American public as heir to the river-writer title.

"In Dubuque my book was simultaneously hailed by the newspaper and banned by the Catholic Mothers Purity Association," he wrote in *My Life*. A *Chicago Tribune* article states that a detective and deputy sheriff made a raid on the Dubuque city library attempting to seize several "allegedly salacious books and magazines." They "also tried to seize a recently published, lusty novel of life on the Mississippi, *A Stretch on the River*, written by Richard Bissell, 37, a Dubuque author and industrialist. But all four of the library's copies of the home-town writer's book were out on loan."

"That sets me into a more popular category than Mark Twain right away. Was he ever banned in Hannibal?" he asked in *My Life*. "Getting your book banned in Boston used to be easy enough, but get these headlines: MODERN MARK TWAIN BANNED IN DUBUQUE!!"

Following the critical acclaim of his first novel, he produced several magazine articles and short stories published in *Atlantic Monthly*, *Holiday*, *Collier's*, and *Esquire* and three full-length novels in four years: *The Monongahela*, an historical portrait and personal remembrance of the river, published as part of the Rivers of America series; *7½ Cents*, a humorous take on the 1890 wage strike that took place at H.B. Glover Company, thinly disguised as the Sleep-Tite Pajama Factory; and *High Water*, a chronicle of Duke Snyder and his fellow deckhands pushing coal up the Mississippi as the water refuses to stop rising.

In 1953 he moved his family to Connecticut (Rowaytown first, later Fairfield, which, it should be noted, are both around 20 miles from Twain's final residence in rural Redding) to be closer to the East Coast literary scene. Thus began a shift in Bissell's work. While maintaining his trademark ear for colloquial language, he removed himself and his characters away from the Mississippi to fit the new, more urban surroundings he found himself in. Following the move, work began with famed theater producer and playwright George Abbott



A promotional piece for *The Pajama Game*, a musical Bissell wrote and that earned him a Tony Award in 1955.

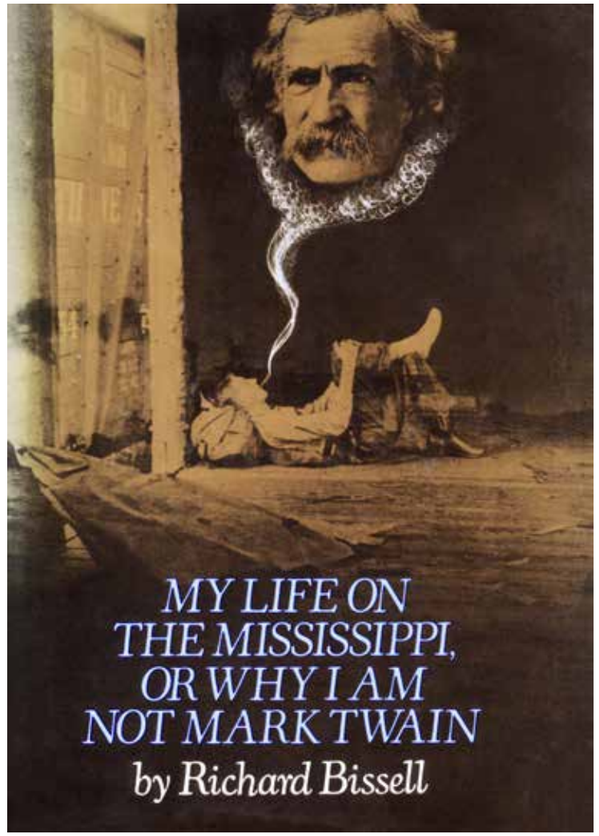
to convert *7½ Cents* into a musical retitled *The Pajama Game*. A year later it opened on Broadway at the St. James Theatre, eventually landing Bissell the 1955 Tony Award for Best Musical. In 1957 he helped prepare the musical for the silver screen, which starred the original Broadway cast along with Doris Day. That, too, was a critical and financial success. He decided then to set down his experiences in adapting his novel for the stage into its own novel, *Say, Darling*, which he also transformed into a play cowritten by Abe Burrows and Marian Bissell. So, in effect, the play was an adaptation of a book about a musical adaptation of a book. Follow? Bissell was a salvage man for sure, through and through.

His family became accustomed to life away from Iowa. In a *Des Moines Sunday Register* interview, Bissell said, "My kids like the public school better than the ones out home, they think Howard Johnson's is terrific, and there are 43 channels on the TV instead of two. Also," he added, "my wife has found out about Gimbels and Macy's and has located a butcher who is giving her edible cuts of meat. So nobody wants to go home, and they will all give me a tough time if I have to go back to running that crazy pajama factory." Through all of this, though, the Bissells did come home often and maintained ties to Dubuque. They returned every summer to live on their houseboats, *No Bottom* and *Floating Cave*, and Richard maintained business interests on the river in the form of a switch boat tug appropriately named *Coal Queen*, the one and only vessel of the Bissell Towing and Transportation Company of Dubuque.

His next book of fiction, and perhaps his best, was *Goodbye, Ava* published in 1960. In it Dick turned his attention back to a boat harbor on the Mississippi in Blue Rock, Iowa (a thinly disguised Dubuque). Among the characters are a wannabe country and western music singer; her husband, a houseboater protecting his "civil rights, human rights, and riparian rights" from a "semi-professional son of a bitch"; and Frank, the protagonist, who sells snow cone machines and confides his desires to an imaginary Ava Gardner.

His later writing turned his attention to memoirs and travel works, including *You Can Always Tell a Harvard Man*, *How Many Miles to Galena?*, *My Life on the Mississippi, or Why I Am Not Mark Twain*. His final book was a biting satire about the founding fathers, *New Light on 1776 and All That.*

In 1975, two years before his death, Dick and Marian returned to his grandfather's house at the top of the Fenelon Place Elevator. He died of a brain tumor at the age of 64. His gravestone in the Linwood Cemetery contains an etching of the upper Mississippi, much like the one he had to draw to get his pilot's license, cutting straight through, from corner to corner.



Top: The first edition cover of *My Life on the Mississippi, or Why I Am Not Mark Twain*, published by Little, Brown in 1973. **Above:** Bissell's towboat, *Coal Queen*, in Dubuque, 1959, as shown the book.