TWAIN BROUGHT MINING'S PERIL TO SURFACE

It's been several weeks since the trapped Chilean miners were rescued from the San Jose Mine in Copiapo. On that day, I was asked to comment for a radio program. I declined because I wasn't willing to repeat the obvious, had no relevant personal angle and couldn't interest the producer in a discussion of diorite-hosted, disseminated, metal-sulfide ores from a magmatic arc.

Since that day, however, I've wanted to share something with a local angle. In 1872, a then little-known author named Mark Twain published a book in Hartford that described underground mining in the Nevada Territory of the early 1860s.

In August 1862, after publishing a few free-lance letters, Sam Clemens was offered his first writing job as a regular correspondent for the Virginia City Territorial Enterprise in Nevada. Success there sent him to the territorial capital of Carson City, where he was the paper's legislative correspondent from 1863 to 1864. This stint "gave him a particularly good opportunity to appear as the defender of the public interest" for mine safety, something we've heard plenty of since Aug. 5 when the Chilean miners were trapped by a cave-in.

The quote above is from the introduction to the 1953 Rineheart edition of Twain's "Roughing It," which I've read on and off for most of my life. Rodman W. Paul, who wrote that introduction, convinced me that: "It was on the Comstock Lode that Sam Clemens, the former printer, pilot and now prospector, finally turned to writing as a career and adopted the pen name of Mark Twain." 

Remember the rescue vehicle that hauled the miners up into daylight? Mark Twain wrote of a low-tech version of something similar: After "you reflect frequently that you are buried under a mountain, a thousand feet below daylight," and after you are exhausted from climbing endless vertical wooden ladders, "you lie down in a small box car in a cramped 'incline' like a half-up-ended sewer and are dragged up to daylight feeling as if you are crawling through a coffin that has no end to it. Arrived at the top, you find a busy crowd of men."

Going back down is "shooting like a dart down a shaft ... like tumbling down through an empty steeple, feet first."

For me, these words do a better job of conveying the visceral emotions of the recent mine rescue than anything I saw or heard on the 24-7 multimedia spectacle of last month, ranging from President Sebastian Pinera to the pettiest of pundits.

When reporting on a cave-in at the Comstock Lode, Twain witnessed things that would be inconceivable in the modern world of mine safety in developed nations.

Below Virginia City was another completely unregulated city, with "some 30 miles of streets and a population of five or six thousand. ... Sometimes men fall down a shaft, there, a thousand feet deep. In such cases, the usual plan is to hold an inquest."

Twain was as frightened as he was amazed by his underground visits: "You could hear things cracking and giving way, and it was not pleasant to know that the world overhead was slowly and silently sinking down upon you. The men down in the mine do not mind it, however," perhaps because they needed to feed their families, both then and now.

Reflecting on the inherent danger of underground mining, and the shift from historic to modern procedures, makes me thankful for whatever government regulation is in place. Without it, the chaos
and death would be orders of magnitude more than today. And the total cost of underground mine regulation in the U.S. is an infinitesimal fraction of government waste above ground.

Such reflections also make me thankful for the potency of the printed word to get the real message across, the substantive ideas buried by the info-tainment. Media coverage for the Chilean rescue probably cost many millions. Clemens earned only $25 per week, not counting inflation.