

# THE LIFE OF JACK LONDON: UNSETTLED CHILDHOOD, FINDING IDENTITY, DEALING WITH SUCCESS, HARDSHIPS, AND DREAMS

## I. Flora Wellman in San Francisco

Daughter of Marshall Daniel Wellman, known as "The Wheat King" of Massillon, Ohio. Flora was age 3 when mother died, typhoid fever at age 13, ran away at age 16 to her sister for a few years, left Ohio after the Civil War, went to Seattle at age 30 to board with former mayor of Springfield, Ohio, and his wife. It was in their home she met William Chaney, astrologer, 22 years older. She and Chaney separately went to San Francisco in 1874.

### Life with William Chaney

She lived with Chaney for about a year, assisting him with lectures, until she became pregnant. Chaney said Flora had been having sex with two other men, because he was impotent. They argued, she tried suicide causing uproar in city, he left town. She had her baby with the name John Griffith Chaney on the birth certificate. Chaney offered a different account of the "suicide."

### John London

Flora was not able to nurse, so a wet nurse, Virginia Prentiss, who had just lost her baby, was able to provide the precious milk. Jack lived in the Prentiss household until he could be weaned. Virginia's husband, Alonzo, knew a fellow carpenter named John London. This connection is how Flora met and married John and gave little "Jack" his new last name. Virginia called him "Jackie" which is probably the reason Jack London took on the name. As Jack grew up the Prentiss' were part of his family. John London's daughters, Eliza and Ida were added to the London family. In 1879 Jack and Eliza almost died during a diphtheria epidemic.

## II. The many moves of the London family: review list

## III. Adventures

A. Sailing-oyster pirate, the Sophia Sutherland, the Snark and other sailboats will be covered in another session

### B. Coxey's Army

1893, a year of severe economic recession – worker wages hit new lows, unemployment went way up. Jacob Coxey was a wealthy quarry owner from Massillon, Ohio (Flora's birthplace) tried to organize an army of unemployed workers to protest in Washington D.C. Jack was working in a jute mill for 10 cents an hour. In San Francisco, Charles Kelly organized an

Industrial Army as a contingent of Coxey's Army. Jack and his friend, Frank Davis started east on freight trains. In extremely cold weather, Frank gave up and Jack continued. Jack kept a journal of his adventures, including begging for meals, being pursued by lawmen, enduring hunger and extreme cold and wet weather. In Hannibal Missouri, Jack caught up with Kelley's Army, but found that they had little food. After a couple of days, he deserted, writing that he could not stand starvation. He continued his freight car journey, going on to Chicago where the post office had several letters for him, including one with 4 greenbacks from his mother. At St. Joseph, Michigan he stayed about a month with his aunt Mary Everhard, sister of John London, before continuing his journey east. He made it to Niagara Falls that impressed him so much that he stayed until midnight, slept in a hayfield, and started back to see the falls again. (Relate arrest and Erie County penitentiary) His travels as a hobo and his arrest changed his whole outlook on life. In his essay "How I Became a Socialist," he explains: read excerpt page 78-79 Earle's book. Read Jack London's book THE ROAD

#### C. Klondike Gold

In 1897 a ship docked in S.F. with some of the men that had struck it rich in the Yukon gold strike. Jack and sister Eliza's husband, James Shepard caught the gold fever, so Eliza mortgaged her home to outfit the pair with the extensive amount of equipment, food, and provisions required by the Canadian government to enter the gold country. Once there, it took only 2 days of packing loads to convince Shepard to go home. His body could not hold up to what was required. After this, getting from one place to another required lots of river travel along with quick boat building because it was a long way to the best location to stake a claim. An abandoned cabin on Split Up Island at the mouth of the Stewart River near Henderson Creek was where Jack and his partners, Merritt Sloper, Jim Goodman and Fred Thompson set up their home base. The group filed 8 claims and did find some gold, but Jack came home with very little after suffering scurvy and forced to give up. Fred Thompson kept a journal of their adventures, which has been the main source for the research that has been done through the years. Recommended reading: JACK LONDON AND THE KLONDIKE by Franklin Walker

#### IV. Writing Career

A. Early works – The first work published was "A Typhoon Off the Coast of Japan," a work entered in an essay contest sponsored by The Morning Call San Francisco newspaper. Jack's essay described his experiences as able bodied seaman on the Sophia Sutherland hunting seals in

the Bering Sea. Jack won 1<sup>st</sup> prize of \$20. 2nd place went to a Stanford student and 3<sup>rd</sup> place to a U.C. Berkeley student. Jack was 17 and already showed his writing talent and potential.

Oakland High School literary magazine Aegis – Jack, age 19, back in high school has several essays and short stories published.

Upon return from the Klondike, Jack pushes himself to write and succeed. On December 31, 1898, Jack writes to his friend Ted Applegarth, “I have never been so hard up in my life.” Then at the start of January 1899, his short story “To the man on Trail” is published in the Overland Monthly magazine. The door opens. Jack had applied and taken a test to work for the post office. He is offered employment, but can’t accept, because he now has the possibility to become a successful published writer. Three more short stories are published by the Overland monthly. Not much money yet.

“Odyssey of the North” is published by The Atlantic Monthly magazine. With writing at high speed, he pawns his bicycle to buy stamps to submit more and more manuscripts. His first book, THE SON OF THE WOLF is published by Houghton Mifflin in April 1900. Many other short stories are published by various magazines. He has a contract for his first novel, A DAUGHTER OF THE SNOWS from McClure.

Jack London was now a successful writer. 1903 was to send him higher.

#### B. Personal Life- Anna Strunsky

Jack met Anna Strunsky, who was one year younger than him, at a Socialist Labor Party event in San Francisco in December of 1899. There was instant attraction for both Jack and Anna. He found her to be intellectual and emotional. She saw him as the incarnation of the Platonic ideal of man, the body of an athlete and the mind of a thinker. Anna had been Stanford student and was now taking classes at U.C. Berkeley. Jack offered to be her mentor by helping her get her writing published. Exchange of letters started quickly, and they started meeting regularly, mostly going outdoors for walks and picnics. They enjoyed reading poetry to each other. Jack felt himself to be a rather rough character, less well read than Anna.

Many years later Anna recalled a day, four months into their friendship, they walked up a hill near the UC campus. She had a feeling that something sweet and beautiful was going to happen. Jack ran his fingers through her loose hair. Suddenly, Anna had the feeling that possibly she was being too bold and had been making demands, so she started talking and mentioned that she wanted to go to Russia and share in the revolution. This broke the

closeness they were feeling, so the moment passed where Jack Might have proposed marriage. Possibly he felt rejected, but possibly he might have felt he had no right to prevent Anna from going to Russia, her home country. This moment of indecision where neither declared their love left them both unsatisfied. Anna would have changed Jack's life; There would have possibly been no trips to Glen Ellen and no purchase of land to develop a Beauty Ranch. Certain books would have been written differently or never existed. Possibly there never would have been a Snark voyage and no mercury poisoning from Jack curing himself from the yaws disease in the Solomon Islands. Four days after the miscommunication between Jack and Anna, Jack asked his good friend, Bessie Maddern to marry him, so his life suddenly changed direction. Ninetta Eames of the Overland Monthly magazine had asked Jack to her house to have lunch with her and her niece, Charmian Kittredge, so they could discuss his first book publication, *The Son of the Wolf*. Jack sent a letter to Ninetta to tell her that he wouldn't be able to come to lunch, saying, "You know how I do things quickly," and told her he was getting married.

After the marriage, Anna did not disappear from Jack's life. She had Jack continue as her mentor and became a frequent visitor to the London household where she was welcomed and accepted by Bessie. During this period Jack got the idea of writing the book, *The Kempton Wace Letters* with Anna as a co-writer. This book of letters between a pragmatist and a romantic idealist became an enjoyable project for them both. Jack even had Anna move into his house so they could work faster. Bessie said that Jack and Anna would rise at 4:30 am and disappear into Jack's study for many hours. In the afternoon, Jack and Anna would go out into nature, leaving Bessie at home. Anna noticed that Bessie started to be upset, so this shortened the period Anna lived at the house. The feelings of love between Jack and Anna became so strong that Jack asked Anna to marry him. He would attend to ending his marriage. Anna had said yes to the marriage proposal. Anna's love for Jack now kept her in a waiting mode until she learned that Bessie was pregnant again. This ended any hope that she and Jack would ever marry. Read *Revolutionary Lives* by James Boylan.

#### Escape from marriage, 1902

Jack eagerly accepted a commission from the American Press Association to report on post Boer War conditions in South Africa. He needed the money and he also needed to get away. His assignment was cancelled when he arrived in New York City, so he met with his editor, George Brett at

Macmillan, to propose that he would go to England to live on the east end of London to learn and write about the lives of the poorest people in the city. His book, *The People of the Abyss* was not a financial success. It is an important book for you to read.

### C. Separation to divorce

On his return from Europe in 1902, Jack was excited over the birth of his second daughter, Becky. Jack was happy and immersed himself in family life. However, awareness of his dissatisfaction with his marriage started to resurface. By the next year of 1903 he was totally busy in the writing and selling of his books. This was the year that *the Call of the Wild* was published and resulted in a huge best seller in the U.S. and later in England and other parts of Europe. Jack accepted \$2,000 without royalties, but never regretted it, because Macmillan promoted his writing and helped to make Jack London a famous world writer. With money coming soon, Jack bought a sailboat he names the *Spray* and used it to escape from his failed marriage as much as possible. In June, Jack sent Bessie and the girls to vacation at Wake Robin, the resort owned by Ninetta, Charmian's aunt, so he could go off on *the Spray*, possibly with one of his woman friends to enjoy some freedom. This never happened due to a wagon accident that sprained his knee and scraped the skin off his arms and legs. Now at home with the assistance of his friend Frank Atherton, Jack received a visit from Charmian who delivered items requested by Bessie for Jack to bring up to Wake Robin. Jack started thinking of a possible fling. As Charmian was leaving, Jack kept her in conversation and then impulsively brought her close and gave her a long kiss. This moment changed the course of both their lives. After this incident they wrote letters to each other every day. Jack was now clear as to what he wanted and was able to finally make the decision to leave Bessie. He moved to a six-room flat in Oakland with Frank Atherton and his family. Jack and Charmian kept their relationship out of public eye. In January 1904, Jack was off to Japan as war correspondent for William Randolph Hearst, to cover the war between Japan and Russia, taking place in Korea and Manchuria. While Jack was in Korea, Bessie filed for divorce naming Anna Strunsky.

This was done with the advice of her lawyer. Jack had asked Bessie for a divorce in the past, something she refused to do, thinking things would be better for the children if the marriage continued. Bessie already knew that Charmian was the real other woman. It was thought that Jack would not follow through on the divorce, since Anna's name would be dragged in

public. Somehow, a reporter managed to find the divorce papers in Bessie's house and leaked out the story. The bargaining chip had now disappeared, so Bessie filed for divorce on the grounds of desertion. When Jack came home from Korea, Charmian was not there to meet him. Ninetta had told Charmian to disappear from the area until things had calmed down. She stayed away for two months, until, through letters from Jack, she sensed that in his desperation of not seeing her, he might do something impulsively and that she might lose him. Jack and Charmian did the best they could in not being seen in public together.

In a letter to Charmian Jack admitted that he felt such strong love for his daughters that upon return from Korea he had this strong urge to stay in the marriage. He had had a happy return to Bessie and daughter Joan. Becky was asleep, so they all went to wake her. When she opened her eyes she said, "My daddy!" Bessie informed Jack that these were the first words Becky had ever spoken.

#### Lecture Tour, Second Marriage

In October of 1905, Jack started a lecture tour through the country, being paid \$600 per week plus expenses by the Slayton Lyceum Bureau. In November as his divorce was to become final, he asked Charmian to come to Chicago so they could marry. They married two days after the divorce was final and Jack took a break from his lecture tour for his honeymoon with Charmian in Jamaica and Cuba. After the honeymoon, Jack completed his lecture tour, finishing in February of 1906. Returning to Oakland Jack buys a house for his mother and reserves the large upstairs room for himself and Charmian when they are in town. Jack and Charmian are now settled down at Wake Robin, the keel of the Snark has been laid, and construction has started on a stone barn. Less than two months later the Londons and everyone else is awakened by the San Francisco earthquake. We will continue the relationship of Jack and Charmian in later sessions.

Session 2 of the ongoing training will be about the Jack London Cottage, its' history, the Jack and Charmian period, and the period after Jack's death. This session will start in the terraced picnic area and then continue in the cottage and stone kitchen.

Lou Leal, May 26, 2017

## SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

### HOMES WHERE JACK LONDON LIVED

1876-'79 San Francisco to age 3

1879-'81 West Oakland

1881-'83 Alameda: John London grew fruits and vegetables on old Mathew Davenport place

1883 John London leased 75 acres in San Mateo Co. near Moss Beach  
John London purchased 69 acres in Livermore Valley, planted olive Trees, fruit orchard, vineyard, raised chickens and horses

1886 Livermore ranch lost to foreclosure, family moved back to Oakland to 2262 East 17<sup>th</sup> St. Jack discovers Oakland Library

1887 Rented apartment on San Pablo Ave. near 18<sup>th</sup> St. Jack attends Garfield School. Moves to 944 36<sup>th</sup> St., Jack goes to Cole School, Moves to home on 7<sup>th</sup> St. near Adeline St.

1888-'90 Rented house at 411 Pine St. near bay. Jack experiences Waterfront and Oakland Estuary

1891 931 West St. Jack becomes an Oyster Pirate, buys Razzle Dazzle

1892 915 Park Way

1893 Sailor on Sophia Sutherland for 7 months

1894 Jack headed east to join Coxey's army of unemployed  
1639 22<sup>nd</sup> Ave., entered Oakland High School

1896-1900 1645 25<sup>th</sup> Ave., U.C. Berkeley, gold rush in Yukon, 1914 Foothill Blvd., Jack seriously starts writing, sells first short story in 1898, Jack and mother move to 2268 East 15<sup>th</sup> St., Marries Bessie Maddern in 1900, they live at 1062 First Ave., 56 Bayo Vista, Blair Ave. in 1902. Jack leaves Bessie in 1903.

## PLACES JACK LONDON LIVED OR VISITED

Birth-age 3: San Francisco, age 3-5 Oakland, age 5-7 Alameda, age 9-10 San Mateo Co. near Moss Beach

Age 10-21: various places in Oakland

Age 18, 1894: Hobo trip on freight trains: Ogden, Utah, Evanston, Rawlins, Laramie, Omaha, Des Moines, Hannibal, Chicago, Niagara Falls, back home by way of Canada to Vancouver to take steamer home.

1899 Visits Stanford University and Mt. Hamilton Observatory. Christmas in San Jose, Santa Cruz vacation, lectures in Fresno.

1901 Lectures at Camp Reverie, Forestville

1902 To England and Europe, Aug- Oct. spending time in East End of London studying living conditions of the poor and homeless.

1903 First visit to Glen Ellen for vacation.

1904 January leaves for Tokyo, Japan by way of Hawaii, to cover war between Russia and Japan for William Randolph Hearst, occurring in Korea and Manchuria.

1905 Pasadena Tournament of Roses, buys 129-acre Hill Ranch in Glen Ellen

1905 Starts lecture tour across country- Kansa City, Mattoon, Illinois, Mt. Vernon, Iowa, Columbia, Missouri, Indianapolis, Indiana, Northwestern University, Toledo, Ohio, Madison, Wisconsin, Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, Orange, New Jersey, Oxford, Ohio, Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. December- Jack and Charmian sail to Jamaica and Cuba on honeymoon.

1906 Lectures at Carnegie Hall, Harvard University, University of Chicago, St. Paul, Minn., University of North Dakota. Jack & Charmian travel on horseback to Calistoga, mountains in Mendocino Co., Ukiah, Willits, Ft. Bragg, Greenwood, Philo, Boonville, Cloverdale, home.



1907-09 April- Jack & Charmian sail on their boat, Snark to Oahu, Molokai, Big Island, and Maui. Then down to Nuka Hiva, Typee Valley, Tahiti, Papeete, and Moorea, Bora Bora, Samoa, Suva, Fiji, New Hebrides, Solomon Islands where Jack encounters serious infections and other health issues. Sails to Sydney to hospital, visits Tasmania, makes decision to give up on the voyage. Jack and Charmian sail to Ecuador, go to Panama, sail to New Orleans, visit Grand Canyon, take train back to Oakland July 21, 1909. Visit Winships in Napa.

1910 Train to Carmel, goes to Point Lobos, Monterey, visit Oakville, St. Helena, visit Home for the Feeble Minded (now Sonoma Developmental Center), visit Sebastopol.

Buys sailboat, Roamer-sails on San Pablo Bay to Benicia, Martinez, and up Sacramento River and to Rio Vista and Stockton. Visits Santa Clara, San Jose, Los Gatos, Menlo Park.

1911 Los Angeles, Burbank, Venice

6/2-9/5 Four horse wagon trip to Roseburg, Oregon. Some stops are Duncan Mills, Cazadero, Ft. Ross, Gualala Italian Hotel, Mendocino, Garberville, Fortuna, Eureka, Arcata, Crescent City, Colgrove's Mountain Ranch, Gold Beach, Canyonville, Wolf Creek Inn, Grants Pass, Medford, Crater Lake. Back to California-Montague, Weed, Dunsmuir, Redding, Red Bluff, Orland, Maxwell, Middletown, Calistoga, home.

12/24 Leave on train to NYC, stop in Salt Lake City, Denver, Chicago to Manhattan, then Baltimore in February 1912.

1912 Sail on Dirigo from Baltimore around horn to Seattle from 3/2 to 7/26.

11/26 Roamer cruise in Delta to Sacramento and back. Train from Oakland to Modesto, Sacramento, Davis, Suisun, Napa.

1914 NYC. 4/25 sails from Galveston to Vera Cruz to report the Mexican Revolution. Goes to Tampico, Vera Cruz. Returns 6/17. Buys lots in Pt. Richmond.

1914 July-swimming at Feters Hot Springs and Caliente Springs. Sails to Angel Island and Belvedere.

1915 Takes Matsonia to Hawaii 2/24-7/22. Sails to Hawaii 12/16 and back to Oakland 8/1/1916.

This log is a good sample of how much Jack London traveled.

Lou Leal  
Park Historian  
5/19/17