Women’s History Month 2020
Young Charmian Kittredge London
By Iris Jamahl Dunkle

Before she met Jack London and after she attended Mills College, Charmian worked as a stenographer at the Harding & Forbes shipping firm earning $30 a month. Charmian saved this money and before long, she hired a Swedish woman named Hannah to do her cleaning and laundry.¹ She also managed to purchase a rental property, thanks to an inheritance from her father and an uncle in Maine.² Charmian took care in decorating her new rooms, which she called her “den”.³ Her shelves were filled with books and every surface held reproductions of her favorite marble sculptures. She hung paintings on the walls and installed an upright piano and what she called an “absurdly elaborate little tea-table.”⁴ Each morning, as she sat at her dressing table crowned with photos of her family and friends, pinning back her chestnut hair, she thought about the day ahead of her. She would join the commuters at Dwight Way Station and take a Key Route rail car to the ferry terminal,⁵ from which she would ferry across the Bay to the San Francisco waterfront. Her office was a few blocks’ walk up Market Street and then a right turn to 212 Sansome Street.

When she wasn’t working during this period of her life, Charmian was out riding a rented horse (until she could save enough of her salary and rental property income to buy a horse of her own) in the Berkeley Hills. She insisted on riding astride. For a woman, riding astride or cross-saddle was still controversial, even though many young women were riding bicycles at the time. Charmian refused to ride side-saddle because she found it both dangerous and cumbersome, but women’s fashions of the time were not intended for riding astride, so Charmian designed her
own split skirt: a skirt she converted into loose pants like culottes.\textsuperscript{vi} Raine Edward Bennett,\textsuperscript{vii} a neighbor of Charmian’s Aunt and Uncle the Eames’, wrote of seeing Charmian riding in Berkeley in the late 1890s, when he was eight years old: “The first glimpse of Charmian Kittredge sparked a bright, windy morning in Berkeley when, with tresses flying, she galloped past our cottage on Dana Street astride a white horse, shouted ‘I’m a Valkyrie!’ to a startled child, and vanished down the highway in a cloud of dust.”\textsuperscript{viii} Riding empowered her, so it is not surprising Charmian identified with the Norse women warriors.

![Charmian London, stenographer courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, CA](image-url)
Clarice Stasz states in *American Dreamers* and *Jack London's Women* that Charmian obtained this money through an inheritance from her father’s brother; in addition to this Charmian also inherited shares in several schooners from her paternal grandmother, as she later writes to Mark. W. Hennessy in the 1930s, while writing a chapter on her experiences on the *Dirigo* for his book *The Sewall Ships of Steel*. These shares may have also contributed to her financial independence during this period of her life.

Raine Edward Bennett grew up in the same neighborhood as Charmian and was a frequent visitor to the ranch when Jack and Charmian lived there.


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