

JACK LONDON, THE SAILOR

The water around him beckoned Jack London at an early age. Growing up, mostly in Oakland, California, Jack London always had San Francisco Bay close by. This provided him the opportunity to experience adventures on the bay that inevitably led to adventures in far off waters.

The main source for Jack London's early experiences in sailing is found in his writing. The book John Barleycorn is the main source. Here he mentions sailing a skiff on the bay at age fourteen. The skiff was a large rowboat with a centerboard and a small sail. In San Francisco Bay the young London observed ships from foreign countries which triggered a yearning to experience the adventures he envisioned were to be found in other parts of the world.

THE RAZZLE DAZZLE

Jack London's next sailing adventures were on the Razzle Dazzle, a sloop for which he paid oyster pirate, French Frank, three hundred dollars that he had borrowed from his wet nurse, Virginia Prentiss. With his own vessel, London now felt tremendously free and wasted no time in raiding the oyster beds with his one-man crew, Spider Healy. The oyster beds were on government land that had been taken over by the Southern Pacific Railroad and leased to oyster growers. London sailed the Razzle Dazzle until the mainsail burned, then he teamed up with young Scratch Nelson on his boat and continued as an oyster pirate. Eventually, London realized it was only a matter of time before he would be either caught or killed, so he agreed to become a deputy for the Fish Patrol operating out of Benicia. His pay was half of the fines collected from the fishermen he arrested for breaking the law. It was during this period of his life he had a near-death adventure.

In John Barleycorn, Jack London describes this experience. After a night of drinking, he stumbles off a sloop and falls into Carquinez Straits waters and is borne away by the heavy current. In his drunken condition he imagines drifting off to die in the water. With time and the cold of the water he starts to sober up and feels a strong desire to live. He tries to swim to shore but finds himself too weak to fight the current. As he feels the end is near a Greek fisherman rescues him thus allowing him the rest of his life.

Many Fish Patrol adventures, true or not, can be found in Jack London's book, The Tales of the Fish Patrol as well as in John Barleycorn.

THE SOPHIA SUTHERLAND

At the age of seventeen Jack London had his first ocean sailing adventure. He signed on to the Sophia Sutherland, a three masted sealing schooner on a voyage to the coast of Japan. Here he had to hold his own with older experienced sailors. Initially he was tested by some of the men, but eventually won their respect.

The Sophia Sutherland took fifty-one days to reach Japan's Bonin Islands where the ship was prepared for its work in the Bering Sea. During the voyage a violent typhoon was encountered off the coast of Japan. Jack London successfully took his turn at the wheel in the middle of the typhoon. Later, on returning home, he wrote an essay of his experiences as an entry in a writing contest for the San Francisco Morning Call. He was awarded twenty-five dollars for winning first place. Second and third places were won by students from Stanford and U.C. Berkeley. This represented quite an accomplishment for a high school student in competition with college students.

THE SPRAY

In 1903 Jack London bought an old but fast sloop, The Spray. This boat was used for cruises on San Francisco Bay, the Sacramento Delta, and the Petaluma River.¹ Records show cruises from Oakland that include trips to Stockton, Black Point, and through the Delta. Jack London spent much time on the Spray through the end of 1903. This allowed him quiet time, not only to write, but to contemplate leaving his marriage. That summer he rented a tent cabin for his family at Wake Robin, a resort in Glen Ellen which Charmian Kittredge's aunt, Ninetta had just purchased. Ninetta and Charmian were part of his literary circle as Ninetta was an editor for the Overland Monthly magazine. He sent Bessie, his wife, ahead with their two daughters while he planned to first sail on the Spray. Before he could do that, a wagon in which he was riding threw a wheel and Jack was thrown out, spraining his knee and scraping skin off his arms and legs. Bessie had asked Charmian to do some shopping for her, so Charmian took the items to give to Jack at his house. Jack's childhood friend, Frank Atherton was there helping Jack pack. Jack managed to get out of bed to talk to Charmian for about half an hour on the front porch. He then impulsively pulled her close and kissed her. This moment changed everything. Jack went on to Wake

Robin as did Charmian. It was there that Jack announced to Bessie that he was leaving her.

There followed many events in Jack London's life that prevented him from doing much sailing on the Spray. These included the break-up of his first marriage, the Russian-Japanese War, a lecture tour across the country, and the building and sailing of the Snark, a boat that was designed to have Jack and his second wife, Charmian, sail around the world. The Spray was sold in July 1905. The focus was now on the voyage of the Snark, an adventure that was planned to last seven years.

THE SNARK

The Snark voyage from April 23, 1907 to December 8, 1908 proved to be a great sea adventure for both Jack and Charmian. Jack London's desire of making a voyage around the world started with the knowledge that a Captain Slocum had accomplished this feat in 1898 in his small boat, the Spray. Jack's thinking was, "We can do this too." Projects of building a house and developing a ranch were put on hold when Jack found that Charmian was equally enthusiastic in undertaking such a great adventure. Jack decided on building a ketch-rigged sailboat that would be forty-five feet at the water line. A seventy-horsepower engine was chosen to be used when necessary. Jack was to spare no money in achieving this enormous feat of sailing around the world.²

Initial construction of the Snark took place at Anderson Shipyard in San Francisco. Finishing was later done in Oakland. Construction delays started with the 1906 earthquake, and then continued all the way to sailing day, a date that was postponed endless times. The cost, initially estimated at \$7,000, finally reached \$30,000. Jack finally decided to sail even though some finishing work was undone. This was later completed in Hawaii along with some much-needed repair. On April 23, 1907, the Snark finally left port. The crew of the Snark consisted of Jack and Charmian London, Roscoe Eames, Bert Stolz, Martin Johnson, and Paul Tochigi.

Shortly after starting the voyage, a series of problems developed on the Snark. The cook and cabin boy got seasick, fresh fruits and vegetables were spoiled, the Snark leaked, water-tight compartments were not water-tight, and the iron works broke and fell apart. In short, the Snark had been made with many sub-standard materials. Also, in the face of a strong wind, it was impossible to have the Snark heave-to no matter what was tried. The series

of mishaps seemed to have no end. Roscoe, who Jack had chosen to be navigator, proved to be sorely deficient in navigation skills, forcing Jack to quickly learn navigation. After about a week of study, Jack felt quite proficient and was proud of his new skill. Twenty –seven days after starting the voyage, the Snark arrived at Oahu.

Five months were spent in the Hawaiian Islands awaiting the completion of work which needed to be done on the Snark. This period was not spent being idle on the beach. The Londons visited the lepers on Molokai, explored the large cattle ranches on the Big Island and Maui, rode around the slopes of Haleakela, and Jack learned to ride a surfboard. Much time was spent exploring the islands. The crew changed with the leaving of Roscoe Eames, Bert Stolz, and Paul Tochigi and the addition of Captain James Langhorne Warren and Yoshimatsu Nakata.

On leaving Hawaii, Jack London attempted what had been called “the impossible traverse” to the Marquesa Islands to begin the South Pacific adventure. The successful, difficult voyage took them to Melville’s chosen home, Typee. From the Marquesas the Snark continued a leisurely voyage through the many island chains, including stops in Tahiti, Bora Bora, Suva, and Savaii, until it reached the Solomon Islands.

The Solomon Islands became the beginning of the end for the voyage of the Snark. Aside from malaria, and other common tropical diseases, the crew of the Snark now encountered the deadly yaws disease, which was spread by bacteria in contact with open sores or wounds and possibly by mosquitoes. There was extremely poor sanitation in the islands. Jack London was afflicted far more than the others. The yaws bacteria, a direct relative of syphilis, carries with it severe consequences if not treated. The common name for the disease was “Solomon Sores.” Jack London described it as “excessively active ulcers.” “Immediately the ulcer commences to eat. It eats in every direction, consuming skin and muscle with astounding rapidity. The pin-point ulcer of the first day is the size of a dime by the second day, and by the end of the week a silver dollar will not cover it.” Without antibiotics, which were not yet discovered, metallic poisons were widely used at this time to treat bacterial infections. Jack London’s choice for treatment was mercury chloride applied to all his open sores for the nearly four-month period he was in the Solomon Islands. The mercury would have proceeded directly through the open sores into the bloodstream to settle mostly in the kidneys where it would slowly do its damage for the next eight years. It

became primary in causing Jack London's kidney failure and death on November 22, 1916.

It was in December of 1908 that Jack London made the decision to end the dream voyage around the world. Aside from yaws, he also had developed a double fistula in his rectum, psoriasis, accelerated growth of his toenails, and severe inflammation of his hands that included several layers of dry, scaling skin that made it impossible to grip anything. It was after an operation and treatment in Sydney, Australia that he realized it would be impossible to continue the voyage. Charmian cried when she realized the voyage must end. On April 8, 1909, Jack, Charmian, and their man servant, Nakata, left Sydney for Ecuador to make their way home. The Snark, put up for sale had not sold, so was left for sale in Sydney.

THE ROAMER

In 1910, Jack London found his perfect boat, The Roamer.³ For one hundred and seventy-five dollars he bought a thirty-foot yawl that was forty years old. It had a wide beam, an extra-large cabin, and huge sails that helped make the boat very responsive. Upon acquiring the Roamer Jack London became a member of the Vallejo Yacht Club, which became the starting point for many cruises.⁴ The typical trip was first to Benicia, and then on to the Delta and up the Sacramento River. Two Japanese servants accompanied Jack and Charmian with one acting as cook. Yoshimatsu Nakata, who had sailed with the Londons on the Snark from Hawaii in 1907 was always aboard. The daily schedule would include writing for Jack and typing for Charmian every morning. Afternoons were for fishing, swimming, lounging, and playing cards. In Jack London's article, "Small Boat Sailing," published in the Yachting Monthly, he expressed his love of sailing:

"And once a sailor, always a sailor. The savour of the salt never stales. The sailor never grows so old that he does not care to go back for one more wrestling bout with wind and wave. I know it of myself. I have turned rancher, and live beyond sight of the sea. Yet I can stay away from it only so long. After several months have passed, I begin to grow restless. I find myself day-dreaming over incidents of the last cruise, or wondering if the striped bass are running on Wingo Slough, or eagerly reading the newspaper reports of the first northern flights of ducks. And then, suddenly, there is a hurried packing of suitcases and overhauling of gear, and we are off to Vallejo where the Roamer lies, waiting, always waiting, for the skiff to come alongside, for the lighting of the fire in the galley-stove, for the pulling off

of gaskets, the swinging up of the mainsail, and the rat-tat-tat of the reef-points, for the heaving short and the breaking out, and for the twirling of the wheel as she fills away and heads up Bay or down.”⁵

In what may have been the last time, Jack, Charmian, and Nakata took the Roamer on a cruise during the first weeks of 1915 as a temporary relief from stress. The Roamer was the last sailboat Jack London would own. There would be no more relaxing cruises up the Delta and Sacramento River. This floating sanctuary had been his salvation from the problems and stresses he endured while on land. On the water he was a free man enjoying the life of a sailor which he had begun in boyhood. It was this love of the life of a sailor that made him choose the title, Sailor on Horseback for a future autobiography which he was never to write.⁶ On November 22, 1916, Jack London died of kidney failure in the cottage on his beloved Beauty Ranch, where he had become a true Sailor on Horseback.

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