

THE LIFE OF JACK LONDON: UNSETTLED CHILDHOOD, FINDING
IDENTITY, DEALING WITH SUCCESS, HARDSHIPS, AND DREAMS
One of Six Training Sessions for Park Volunteers

Flora Wellman in San Francisco

Flora, the mother of Jack London, was the daughter of Marshall Daniel Wellman, known as “The Wheat King” of Massillon, Ohio. Flora was age three when her mother died. She contracted typhoid fever at age thirteen, ran away at age sixteen to live with her sister for a few years, and left Ohio after the Civil War, and went to Seattle at age thirty to board with former mayor of Springfield, Ohio, and his wife. It was in their home that she met William Chaney, astrologer, twenty-two 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 many years later, in a letter to Jack, that Flora had been having sex with two other men, because he was impotent. They argued, she tried suicide which caused an uproar in San Francisco, so Chaney left town. Flora had her baby and entered the name John Griffith Chaney on the birth certificate. Chaney offered a different account of the “suicide,” saying that a deputy reported no one in the neighborhood heard shots and that the supposed suicide pistol smelled of oil and not of smoke.

John London

Flora was not able to nurse, so she hired a wet nurse, Virginia Prentiss, who had just lost her baby. Jack lived in the Prentiss household until he could be weaned. Virginia’s husband, Alonzo, knew a fellow carpenter, a widower named John London. This connection is how Flora met and married John and gave little “Jack” his new last name. John London had admired a shirt that Alonzo was wearing and asked how he could get one for himself. They met when Flora made a shirt for John. When Virginia Prentiss was wet nurse for Jack she called him “Jackie” which is probably the reason Jack London took on the name, Jack. As Jack grew up, the Prentiss' were part of his family. John London's daughters, Eliza and Ida, joined the family soon after the marriage of John and Flora.

In 1879, Jack and Eliza almost died during a diphtheria epidemic. Eliza remembered many years later hearing Flora ask, “Can the two be buried in the same coffin, doctor, to spare expense?” Eliza said this scared her so

much that she tied very hard to recover. John London refused to accept the doctor's belief that nothing could be done, so he brought in a doctor who was known for having success in curing diphtheria. The doctor was successful, and saved the lives of Jack and Eliza.

The many moves of the London family

Review list is on separate sheet: "Homes Where Jack London Lived From Birth to First Marriage"

Adventures

Oyster pirating, the Sophia Sutherland, the Snark and other sailboats will be covered in another session.

Coxey's Army

The year 1893 was one of severe economic recession in America. Worker wages hit new lows and unemployment escalated. Jacob Coxey, 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 ten 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 and being pursued by lawmen, along with enduring hunger, extreme cold and wet weather. In Hannibal, Missouri, Jack caught up with Kelly'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 four 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. The Falls impressed him so much that he stayed until midnight, slept in a hayfield, and started back to see the Falls again. He was arrested for vagrancy and then sentenced in court to one month in jail. His sentence was served at Erie County penitentiary due to over crowded jails. His travels as a hobo and his arrest and time in prison changed his whole outlook on life. This new outlook is explained in his essay "How I Became a Socialist," or in his book, The Road. a further account is made in Earle Labor's book, Jack London, An American Life.

Klondike Gold

In 1897 a ship docked in San Francisco with some of the men who had struck it rich in the Yukon gold strike. Jack and his 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 two days of packing loads to convince Shepard to go home. He did not have the physical strength to do 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 eight claims and did find some gold, but Jack came home with very little after suffering scurvy and being 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 is Jack London and the Klondike by Franklin Walker.

Writing Career

Jack's first early published work was "A Typhoon Off The Coast Of Japan," which he entered in an essay contest sponsored by The Morning Call, a San Francisco newspaper. Jack's essay described his experiences as an able-bodied seaman on the Sophia Sutherland hunting seals in the Bering Sea. Jack won the first prize of twenty-five dollars. Second place went to a Stanford student and third place to a U.C. Berkeley student. Jack was seventeen and already showed his writing talent and potential. The Oakland High School literary magazine Aegis published several of his essays and short stories.

Upon return from the Klondike, Jack pushed himself to write and succeed. On December 31, 1898, Jack wrote 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" was published in the Overland Monthly magazine. A door opened. Jack had applied and taken a test to work for the post office. He was offered employment, but could not accept, because he now saw the possibility of becoming a successful published writer. Three more short stories were published by the Overland Monthly. He had not made much money yet. "Odyssey of the North" was published by The

Atlantic Monthly magazine. This allowed Jack to be recognized on the East Coast. Writing at high speed, he pawned his bicycle to buy stamps to submit more and more manuscripts. His first book, The Son of the Wolf was published by Houghton Mifflin in April, 1900. Many other short stories were published by various magazines. He then got a contract for his first novel, A Daughter of the Snows, from McClure. Jack London was now a successful writer.

In 1903, with the publication of The Call of the Wild, he achieved even higher success.

Personal Life, Anna Strunsky

Jack met Anna Strunsky, who was one year younger than himself, 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 a Stanford student and was now taking classes at U.C. Berkeley. Jack offered to be her mentor by helping to 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 and less well read compared to Anna.

Many years later Anna recalled a day, four months into their friendship, when they walked up a hill near the University of California 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.

First Marriage, 1900

After the marriage to Bessie, 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 A.M. 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 current marriage. Anna 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 park volunteers to read.

Separation to divorce

On his return from Europe in 1902, Jack was excited over the birth of his second daughter, Becky. He 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 soon coming, Jack bought a sailboat he named 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 affair. 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 a war correspondent for William Randolph Hearst, to cover the war between Japan and Russia, which was 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, so she quickly returned home. 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 and that upon returning from Korea he had a 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, in February of 1906. Returning to Oakland Jack bought a house for his mother and reserved the large upstairs room for himself and Charmian when they were in town. Jack and Charmian settled down at Wake Robin in an annex Jack had constructed. The keel of the Snark was been laid, and construction was started on a stone barn. Less than two months later the Londons and everyone else were awakened by the San Francisco earthquake.

We will continue the relationship of Jack and Charmian in later sessions and also the voyage of the Snark, the development of the ranch, the building of Wolf House, the history of the cottage, and a presentation of the major controversies surrounding Jack London.

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SOURCES

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