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STORIES FROM THE PAST

Jack London's Sonoma County

by History Editor
Skip Sommer

Jack London's impact on the world of writing was profound, and his personal impact on Sonoma County will always be remembered. His name was a household word by the time he was 24.

London settled here as an adult -- in Glen Ellen, on what he called "The Beauty Ranch" in the Valley of the Moon. He was an author, sailor, gold miner, war correspondent, farmer and traveler who chose our county as his home port over any in the world. A rough and tumble happy character who loved his family, his horses, his boats and his booze, the controversial Jack London made news wherever he went.

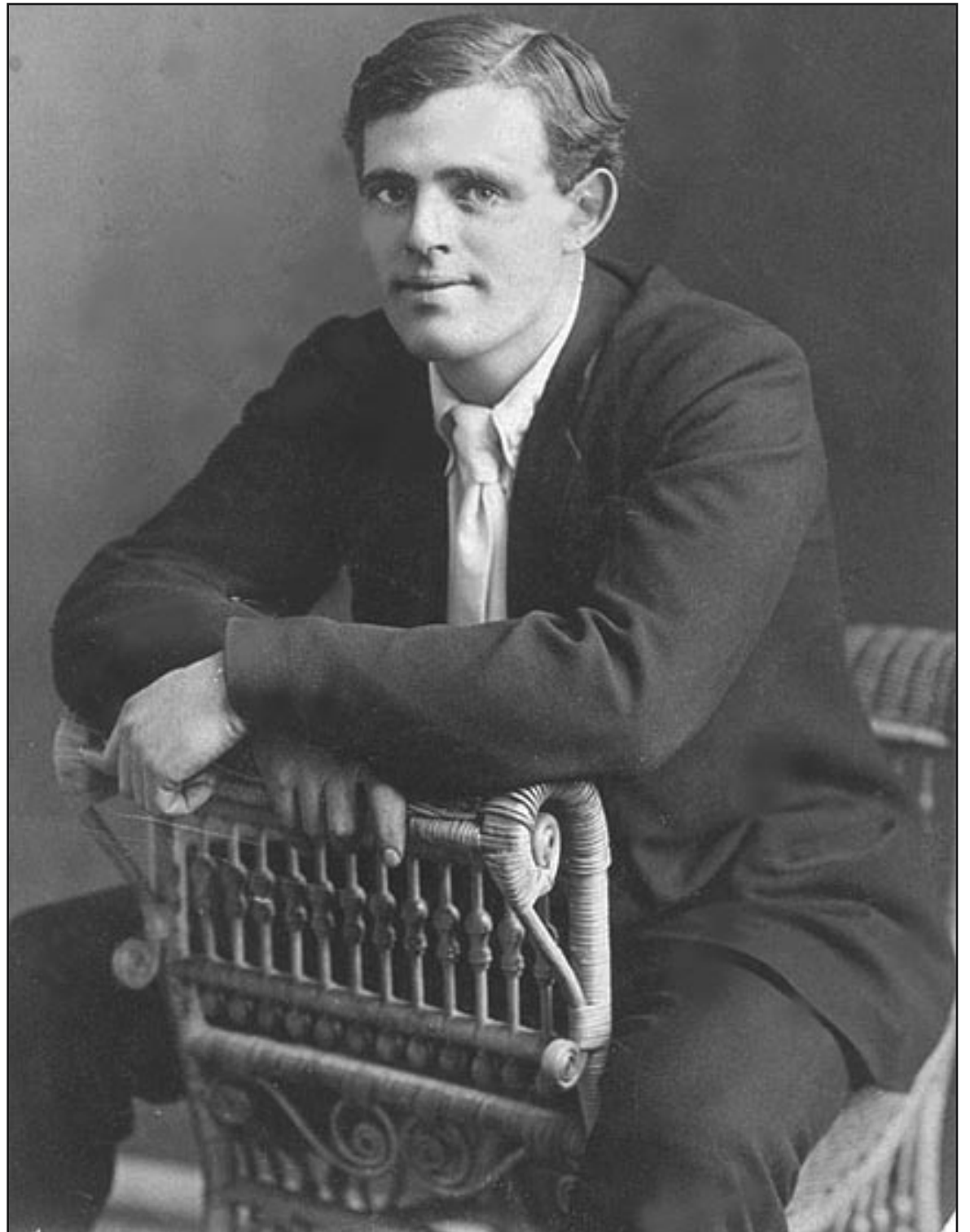
Among other adventures, London tried his hand at fencing, boxing, sailing the oceans, architecture, racing horses, pirating oysters, and even riding the rails. He drew stories from all his real-life adventures and almost always pounded out his "1,000 words a day". In his short life span, he produced more than 51 books and hundreds of articles. It was said he only slept five hours a night.

Jack London called Sonoma County "the most beautiful primitive land to be found in California." All he

wanted was "a quiet place". Don't we all? He purchased some of his rolling stock from Petaluma wagon makers. Much of his feed came from McNear's on Main Street in Petaluma and his White Leghorn chickens were specially bred in Petaluma for the highest egg production. London wanted his farm experiment to be a model, and he was helped in tree- and vine-selection by his good friend Luther Burbank of Santa Rosa.

Scientific agriculture became an avid pursuit and London won many local livestock awards. He said, "I am putting this ranch into first class shape and am laying a foundation for a good paying industry here. Everything I build is for years to come." He was entranced with the simple pleasures of country life. "I'm for California and all its latent possibilities," he said. "This ranch is to me what actresses, race horses or collecting postage stamps are to other men." London once described a buggy trip as follows: "We rode across the blossomed hills of Marin County over the divide and up the lovely Petaluma Valley and on to the grassy feet of Sonoma Mountain and home."

London was driven by many competing interests and



goals -- his writing, the constant call of adventure, the demands of parties and entertaining, his need to improve and enlarge the ranch. It was all to be too great a burden. His life was like a rocket. He said, "I would rather that my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled by dry-rot."

His Sonoma ranch hands loved him. One of them said, "He was mighty good to us, and there was never a man who came here who went

away hungry."

Many stories are told about Jack London riding or driving a buggy around our county. His saddle and harness carried small bells that let the children know he was coming. He was always greeted with shouts and love. He always responded by tossing out candy kisses. When he got to town, he usually picked a saloon that matched his mood. He would stand drinks for the house and argue politics or farming techniques until the

moment dulled. He was a big man, with big consumption and big dreams.

He often talked of his favorite view in the world, which was from the top of Sonoma Mountain, across the Petaluma Valley and all the way to the Bay. "I see my farm in terms of the world and the world in terms of my farm," he said. It was a romantic statement, but London's Sonoma farm experiment was very hard work. It was a

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Jack London's "House of Happy Walls" in Glen Ellen