



Jack London's Life in the Delta

Story by Blake Roberts

"I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet....I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them." – Jack London

At the time of Jack London's passing, he was one of the most widely read writers in America. His stories focused on human interactions with nature and the plight of workers, reflecting his many travels around the world, his upbringing in poverty and his socialist political views. His legacy lives on in the many places he visited and wrote about during his life, including the Delta as well as Alaska, the Sonoma Valley, and Oakland. In the Delta's Pittsburg, one of his favorite haunts was the Bay View Saloon, and the Pittsburg Historical Museum contains a reproduction of the interior in its London display. He was inducted into the Pittsburg Entertainment and Arts Hall of Fame, and his name is on an elementary school in Antioch, a park in Benicia and a street in Pittsburg.

London's first adventures in the Delta started when he found himself on both sides of the law, first as a teenage "oyster pirate" – a poacher – and then as a member of the "fish patrol" – a group of maritime game wardens headquartered in Benicia. He turned these experiences into *Tales of the Fish Patrol* (1906), a book of adventure stories for young adults. The stories reference Antioch, Benicia, Collinsville, Pittsburg, and Merryweather, an old coal-mining town east of Antioch.

As he became more successful, London enjoyed spending time in the Delta aboard his boats, called the *Snark* and the *Roamer*. Records show that one of his boats was built for him in Pittsburg, but the name of the craft was not recorded. It was outside of Pittsburg (then known as Black Diamond) that he and his wife, Charmian, appeared in his 1913 novel *Valley of the Moon* as "Jack and Clara Hastings" aboard a boat named the *Roamer*. The Hastings take the novel's protagonists, Billy and Saxon Roberts, on a tour of the southern Delta, pointing out the productivity of the Delta farmland and sermonizing on sustainable agriculture, a passion of London's. *Valley of the Moon* also describes the great cultural diversity of the Delta, though London's views on other racial and ethnic groups certainly reflected his era. As the Roberts travel on foot and boat from Rio Vista to Sacramento, London writes that, "They encountered – sometimes in whole villages – Chinese, Japanese, Italians, Portuguese, Swiss, Hindus, Koreans, Norwegians, Danes, French, Armenians, Slavs, almost every nationality save American."

Jack London was an incredibly prolific author of books, short stories, and poems, served as an overseas war correspondent, traveled around the world for pleasure, and managed his ranch in Glen Ellen (now Jack London State Park). He was indeed a "superb meteor", who certainly didn't "waste his days trying to prolong them."

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