

## JACK LONDON, A JOURNEYMAN ALCOHOLIC?

By *Bill Krumbein*

FINDING THE REAL JACK LONDON by Lou Leal is a fascinating piece of research. It's posted on our VMNHA website. Leal's conclusion and comments upon the writings of five other authors and what they wrote of Jack London's drinking habits and behavior are very provocative topics indeed. But it was the title of his local talk, "Was Jack London an Alcoholic?" which prompted this response. It's a question that cannot be answered with certainty; but it can be answered in other ways.

First of all, let me be very clear, NO ONE has the ability with certainty to proclaim Jack London was an alcoholic. ONLY Jack could answer this. Alcoholism is a self-diagnosed disease. In his day, alcoholism carried a huge stigma in society, few would admit to being one, still Jack London wasn't afraid to write about it.

### Comment One – In his own words.

If only Jack was still here to answer some questions. Or has he already given us his answers? This is not too-far-fetched a notion.

Quite a bit of clinical research on the disease of alcoholism has been carried out since then, one example being the "20 questions," a self-assessment questionnaire to determine the extent of one's alcohol use, developed in the 1930s by Dr. Robert Seliger, a Department of Psychology faculty member at Johns Hopkins Hospital. If the patient answers the questions honestly, the results could very well lead to his/her admitting to being an alcoholic.

### **The 20 Questions**

**Take this 20 question test to help you decide whether or not you are an alcoholic.**

**Answer YES or NO to the following questions.**

1. Do you lose time from work due to drinking? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
2. Is drinking making your home life unhappy? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
3. Do you drink because you are shy with other people? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
4. Is your drinking affecting your reputation? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
5. Have you ever felt remorse after drinking? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
6. Have you ever got into financial difficulties as a result of drinking? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
7. Do you turn to lower companions and an inferior environment when drinking? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
8. Does your drinking make you careless of your family's welfare? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_

9. Has your ambition decreased since drinking? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
10. Do you crave a drink at a definite time? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
11. Do you want a drink the next morning? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
12. Does drinking cause you to have difficulty in sleeping? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
13. Has your efficiency decreased since drinking? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
14. Is drinking jeopardizing your job or business? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
15. Do you drink to escape from worries or trouble? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
16. Do you drink alone? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
17. Have you ever had a complete loss of memory as a result of drinking? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
18. Has your physician ever treated you for drinking? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
19. Do you drink to build up your self-confidence? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_
20. Have you ever been to a hospital or institution because of drinking? YES \_\_\_ NO \_\_\_

**What's your score?**

If you have answered YES to any one of the questions, there is a definite warning that you may be an alcoholic.

If you have answered YES to any two, the chances are that you are an alcoholic.

If you answered YES to three or more, you are definitely an alcoholic.

These 20 questions are rarely used at treatment centers today, but are still widely available (as a handout) to those wondering if they may be an alcoholic.

Perhaps there are some enterprising Jack London historians who would dare search for Jack's answers to these 20 questions? . Two more recent clinical screening tests should also be considered in the research – the MAST (Michigan Alcohol Screening Test, 1971) and the CAST (Canterbury Alcoholism Screening Test, 1984).

Searching among all forms of his writings, especially personal letters, might reveal more evidence of his relationship with alcohol. Leal commented in an email to me, "I can only see the possibility of London answering yes to one question" [from the 20 questions]. It would take but a couple more YES answers from Jack's writings to have our question more accurately answered by Jack himself, and thus corroborate the following survey.

## Comment Two – Seeking expert opinion.

Since Jack's personal answers to the 20 questions remains hidden, I offer what may be the next best response by calling upon experts in the field. Via friends, acquaintances, friends-of-friends and the like, I've collected the opinions of 22 experts, long-time sober alcoholics, with some having been professional drug/alcohol counselors. Who better to pick up on the alcoholic nuances presented in Jack's own writing than another alcoholic? I've called upon the perspective of expert opinion, these I call "journeyman" alcoholics; drinking pros; those who have experienced many years deep into the disease, followed by many years of sobriety.

Let's imagine for a moment, instead of writing John Barleycorn, London wrote a book about a plumber called John Plumberlore. Examining such a book, historians might wonder if Jack really was a journeyman plumber or was he merely spinning elaborate plumbing tales? He could change a faucet washer; he knew how to solder a copper pipe; he tossed about plumbing vocabulary and told plumber stories; but was he really a journeyman plumber?

Don't you think it reasonable that journeyman plumbers would be one of the best sources to review "John's" plumbing stories and to hazard an educated guess about London's plumbing credentials? The word "journeyman" evokes professionalism; they would know the ins and outs of plumbing, know the nuances to plumbing and might quickly find plumbing flaws in the story. If Jack London was truly a journeyman plumber, it would show at the deepest levels of his work – technically correct examples that only a journeyman plumber could write.

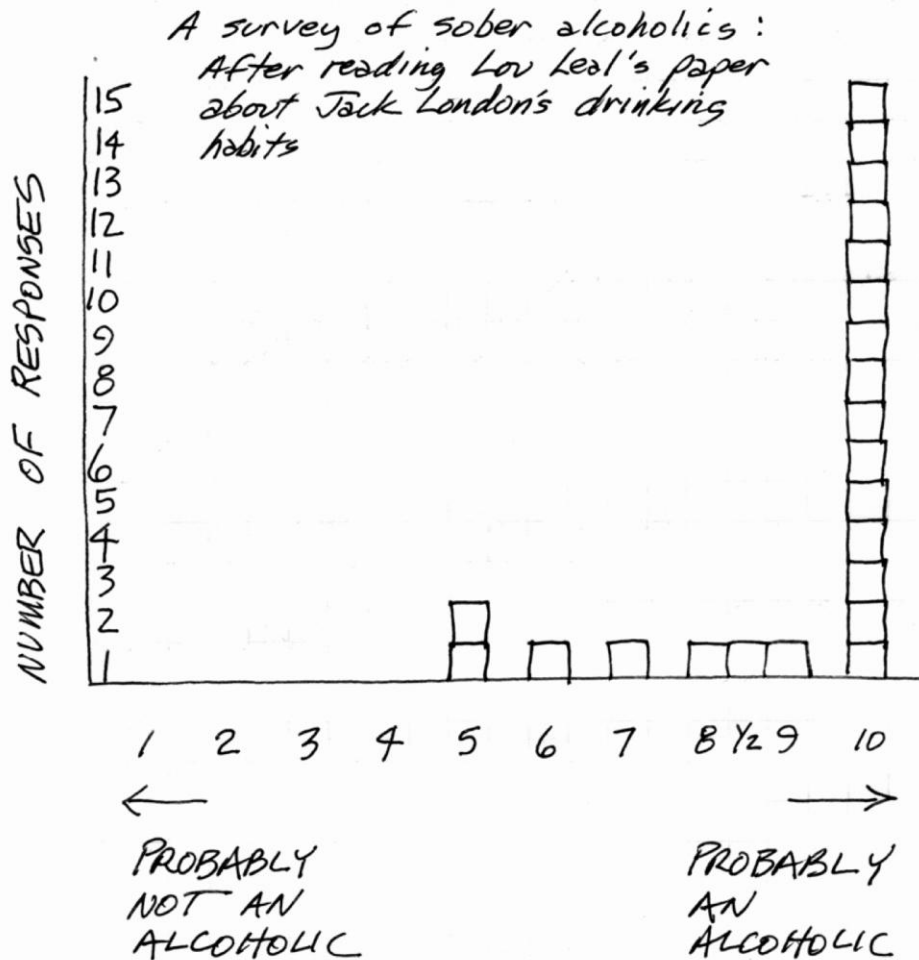
Leal writes in his conclusion, "**...if John Barleycorn is used as proof, then one must also accept Jack's stating that he is writing from the point of view of someone who suffered through part of his life with alcohol, survived that phase, and has conquered the organic need for alcohol.**"

Jack London "writing from the point of view" of an alcoholic? Perhaps his writing reveals a lot more about his true nature with alcohol, much more than simply a point of view. Words, phrases, behavior, responses to conditions, all of these aspects are open to interpretation and opinion. Let's see what some real alcoholics have to say.

Indeed, the writers in Leal's paper were commenting about Jack London's drinking, but what did they know about alcoholism? To my knowledge, they bring no personal alcoholic experience to their comments. How much of Jack's writing came from his personal experience? I maintain that the long-time sober alcoholics – people who have experienced the full breadth of alcoholism – from hitting bottom to finding sobriety, have the ability to see the true alcoholic in Jack's very words.

Twenty-two people responded to my one-question survey; their length of sobriety ranges from 15 years to 42 years, with the average being 23.7. These individuals know intimately how to honestly view their alcoholic behavior.

## SURVEY RESULTS



## FINAL COMMENT

I can't label Jack London as an alcoholic; but the vast majority of "journeyman" alcoholics participating in this survey seem convinced that he *probably* was. If true, this shouldn't in any way detract from his greatness as a writer and innovator. Alcoholism can appear in anyone's family. This happened to be his fate.

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