

Jack London was a Sonoman

By Bill Lynch

My grand aunt Celeste Granice Murphy, was the editor and publisher of the Index-Tribune from 1915 to 1946. Before that, Harry Granice, her father (my great grandfather), was the editor. They both knew Jack London. The people of Sonoma Valley took great pride that he was a fellow Sonoman.

He was already famous when he came here in 1904 to live and write. His novel, "Valley of the Moon," was just one of his many books, but to his new friends and neighbors in the Valley, it was his greatest work. They loved him for it.

Aunt Celie was in her early twenties working at Index-Tribune, when London and his new bride, Charmian, bought several farms in the hills above Glen Ellen that would become their "Beauty Ranch."

In later years, she and Charmian became good friends. Charmian wrote the forward to Celie's book, "The People of the Pueblo," a saga of Sonoma published in 1937.

Aunt Celie was also one of the founders of the Sonoma Valley Women's Club. Shortly after the London's arrived, she invited Jack to speak to the club.

I have her original invitation and his response to her.

He accepted and said he would speak on... "the subject...that which is nearest my heart and about which I know the most." A paragraph later he stated, "I am known as a socialist, socialism is the dearest thing in my world to me, and that is the subject I lecture upon."

But when it came time to fix the date, London, was heading out of town. He sent Celie a note that read, "I am going east next month on my long lecture-trip and have already engaged myself to the limit between now and my departure."

He added he would return in the early winter and suggested they arrange another lecture, which they did.

Aunt Celie wrote with great fondness about Jack and Charmian. She said that after their adventure on their boat, the "Snark," the couple came home to Sonoma "...more convinced that life in the heart of the Sonoma hills was life at it best."

She said London was an active and sociable member of the community.

"His 1,400-acre ranch was the pride of the countryside. London, the literary genius, with his tousled and friendly mien, was of the people. Sonoma and Glen Ellen loved him well. He had a cheery greeting for all – Bill Ping, the white bearded stage driver with the southern drawl; Charley Poppe of the country store, with his merry chuckle; Paine, the blacksmith, where Bob Fitzsimmons, the Australian prizefighter made a huge horseshoe for Jack and his admirers around the forge; Pancrazi, who wrote Italian poetry and served good wine; the boys at the Melvyn and the mineral springs who were always sure of the drinks as Jack London's bell-decked team drew up at the swinging doors." Having listened to her stories and read most of what she wrote about Jack London, I have no doubt that he would have loved the spirit, energy and courage of Transcendence Theater Company founders and the Jack London Park Partners who have brought his ranch back to life and made it a joyful place for his fellow Sonomans.

In her forward to Celie's book, Charmian began: "Touched I am by the bid of my gifted

journalist friend, Celeste Granice Murphy, knows as well to Jack London, to preface her new volume of a glamorous California region. I am further affected by her graceful selection, for my inspiration, of this remembered toast from one of Jack's books: 'Fill your glass and lets look at the parchments of the dreamers of yesterday who dreamed their dreams on your own warm hills.'

Charmian added, "It sets bemusing, as not seldom, upon the past and the present of the Valley of the Moon, which was modernly so christened from my husband's novel of that name. He was enchanted by the ancient Indian word, Sonoma, with its significance to the first known race upon this magnetic stretch of country."

Chairman concluded her forward of the book with the following:

'From my mountainside of aged vineyard and woodland I look over the storied mission settlement, ever hearing Jack's tribute; 'A sweet land, Mate Woman, a sweet land.'

Bill Lynch is the former editor and publisher of The Sonoma Index-Tribune and Sonoma Magazine. A native Sonoman, he has written and edited hundreds of articles on local history. During his nearly 50-year tenure at the Index-Tribune, the newspaper published numerous special historical editions and "The Sonoma Valley Story," a book on Sonoma Valley history. Now retired, he continues to write "Musings of a Sonoma Son," a column published in the Index-Tribune twice a month