

# *Living Life Large, like Jack London*

An Interview with Doc Stull 2/15/13

1. *How did you get interested in the park? Jack London?*

I first came to the park with my mother as a small boy, perhaps as early as 1960 when it first opened. She was a classical singer with Victorian upbringing and a Bohemian soul and at an early age exposed me to jazz and the adventure stories of Jack London. I romanticized the life of the adventurer/writer and in 1961, in the first grade, I wrote more than 60 short short-stories in the course of a year as part of class writing competition.

In the mid-sixties spent three summers at Cloverleaf Ranch summer camp in Santa Rosa where one of my counselors who had huge forearms and played Kingston Trio songs on the twelve string guitar and led hikes and native American ceremonies became one of the leading archeologists and specialists in native American archeology in the Sonoma County area and California, Mike Moratto. After a half a century, I just made contact with him again. Another counselor there, Bob Wickham, who taught us boxing, may have been related to L Wickham, the Sherriff who filed the police report in the Santa Rosa Press Democrat back in 1913 on the famous Wolf House fire that destroyed Jack's home.

I used to visit Russ and Winnie Kingman's Jack London bookstore in Glen Ellen and purchased and was very influenced by Jack London's *The Road*. I traveled around the United States twice in my teens, the first time at the age of 13 on a Greyhound bus with 30 eighth graders on a junior high history program to forty states. Four years later, at age 17, I was an assistant with a film crew that shot on location around the United

States making an ethnic cooking documentary sponsor by Kikkoman Soy Sauce Company in Japan.

At nineteen I traveled alone to twenty countries overseas including all of the countries in western Europe, the Greek islands, was chased by be-knived thugs in the great market/Bazaar in Istanbul, traveled to Israel where our youth hostel in East Jerusalem was by raided Israeli special forces commandos where they dragged out two suspected terrorists in the bunks next to me, and later became lost in the market in the old city and wound up in an ancient opium den.

I spent Christmas of 1975 in a town of 250 people above the polar circle in the northernmost town in Sweden and went snowmobiling on a frozen riverbed near the Finnish border under a diamond-studded sky in 30 below zero. Later I managed to get a visa to the Soviet Union at the Danish embassy in Copenhagen and traveled with a group of female Spanish Marxist journalists from Barcelona to Moscow, Kiev and Leningrad for three weeks at the height of the Cold War. This was all before I turned 21.

I got three degrees, wrote a doctoral dissertation on the physics of karate, and spent faculty years at Humboldt State University, started a classics book club based on the University of Chicago Great Books series and also began classics literature radio show which is in its twentieth year on KHSU 90.5 FM. For a time I commuted two hours a day when I lived on Hunter Creek in Yurok country in Klamath while making the drive to the university Arcata along the coast. I listened to many of the American classics on recorded books (Melville, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, Twain) and of course, and once again enjoyed London's short stories and novels that I'd read as a young boy in the Berkeley Hills growing up.

Two years ago I read that the park was offering docent training. It seemed intended for 50 years that I be a part of it all. And so here I am.

*2. What are your areas of expertise?*

I'm a generalist, and I enjoy telling park visitors about the multitude of interests and experiences in Jack's life; the courage, contrasts and contradictions that make him a fascinating character, as well as the many different literary genres that Jack London tackled. One of the less paid attention to but nonetheless fascinating areas is Jack London's influence sports writing and sport fiction where he, according to scholars, established many of the metaphors and tropes still used in sports media today and gave the genre a greater respectability and acceptance more than a 100 years ago.

For the past three years I've written, narrated and co-produced 65 shows on sport and popular culture for the ESPN sports radio affiliate 1340 AM. I featured London's influence in two separate shows. I hosted the *Sport Literature Association* Conference at Humboldt State University in 2005, served as the Association President in 2007 and published four sport fiction stories of my own and an eco-sport mystery novella.

*3. What experiences have you had that "wowed" guests when they participated on your tours?*

I usually stress the sheer versatility of Jack's writing and interests – guests usually have no idea. I pick out contrasts (ie. That he was a consistent 1000 word a day writer, but also a voracious reader, that he drank and ate raw duck, but that he had a penchant for chocolates, that he was a brawling adventurer but had his “feminine” side, too, that he believed in socialism and social justice but that he was also an entrepreneurial individualist capitalist, too)...my tours are really jazz “call and response” adaptations to whomever is there at the time. I try to find out where they're from, what they know of Jack and then try to “surprise them,” make ‘em feel like they know him when they're done – but that he was also very human, flawed, like all of us.

I also speak about his wife, Charmian as one of the great American feminist icons that many people have never heard of – of what a remarkable, talented, magnanimous and courageous woman she was in her own right and how she shared and contributed immeasurably to Jack's life both during and after he died. Visitors are always seem interested in her, too.

I also mention Jack's highly entertaining public tiff with Teddy Roosevelt about “nature faking” as a great historical “Ali-Frazier” fight involving science, biology and literature – and between two of the most adventurous and dynamic Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century no less.

*4. Any anecdotes or stories you might share that we can use for promotional purposes?*

My favorite story so far was about a gruff, husky Russian who wanted to be left alone at the gravesite after I concluded my docent-led portion of the walk with dramatic reading from *Call of the Wild*. Tears welled up in his eyes. “The gravesite - so simple, so simple,” he said as I left him there. He caught up with me on the way back and proceeded to tell me in a heavy Russian accent that as a small boy growing up in the

then Soviet Union, he had read EVERYTHING Jack London had ever written. He then said, “Doc, I learn nothing from you!” I was crestfallen, had the inclination to remind him that we’d won Cold War but maintained my discretion. Before he got into his car, he turned to me and said, “But I tell you something, Doc,” he said. I NOT know about Jack London learning surfing. I do learn that from you.” Then told me his favorite London stories were his boxing stories. He smiled broadly, shook my hand, said goodbye. I knew I’d found a kindred spirit.

Another favorite and personally rewarding story involved a group of four generations of Chinese women whom I took to the Wolf House. The grandmother, who survived the Chinese revolution in 1947 and later the many subsequent societal upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was age 89, and still whipsaw smart. She seemed to really enjoy each new anecdote about Jack’s life. Later she said, “He was very good looking - like John Kennedy. And fascinating man. But I think he was an opportunist with women!” At the end of the tour, she turned to me and said. “And you, Doc,” she said. “You are here for a reason - because you channel Jack’s spirit and passion.”

Doc Stull, 2013