

JACK LONDON'S DAYS AS AN

OYSTER PIRATE AND FISH PATROLMAN

WHAT WAS FACT?

WHAT WAS FICTION?

I WAS BARELY TURNED FIFTEEN, AND WORKING LONG HOURS IN A CANNERY.... I WANTED TO BE WHERE THE WINDS OF ADVENTURE BLEW. AND THE WINDS OF ADVENTURE BLEW OVER THE OYSTER PIRATE SLOOPS UP AND DOWN SAN FRANCISCO BAY, FROM RAIDED OYSTER BEDS AND FIGHTS AT NIGHT ON SHOAL AND FLAT, TO MARKETS IN THE MORNING AGAINST CITY WHARFS, WHERE PEDDLERS AND SALOONKEEPERS CAME DOWN TO BUY.



by CLARICE STASZ

So begins a major section of Jack London's book *John Barleycorn, or Alcoholic Memoirs* (1913). London also described his Bay adventures in letters to friends and editors, and in two other books, *The Cruise of the Dazzler* (1902) and *Tales of the Fish Patrol* (1905). Biographers from his wife Charmian to the present day have repeated his accounts as fact.

London mined his life for story ideas. He was so effective in doing so, it is often difficult to separate fact from fiction. Given that threads of his life run through many of his stories, readers and biographers are tempted to treat them as accurate autobiography. London shaped a mythology about himself that would appeal to a particular audience—whether readers, socialists, editors, or business-

men. He was very good with hyperbole, at taking an incident based in reality and stretching it beyond the truth. Such is probably the case with his oyster pirate and fish patrol accounts, which were written as adventure stories for youthful readers.

It would not be unusual for a young man of London's background to take to the Bay in the late 1800s. He grew up in west Oakland within blocks of the wharves and waterfront businesses. Hanging around the docks, he observed maritime activities at close hand and listened to the stories of men off the boats and ships. His stepfather, John London, was a night watchman who recounted the exploits of the thieves and gangs that prowled the docks at night. With his stepfather and friends, Jack hunted

coots and ducks, fished for rock cod, and rowed the estuary. One landlubber chum, Frank Atherton, noted how Jack was a natural born sailor, able to handle the oars with ease and move around a boat with grace. He recalled how Jack could spend hours sitting in a boat, studying the tides and currents.

The boys capabilities were tested one day when Jack planned a fishing expedition to Goat Island (now known as Yerba Buena), Alcatraz, and Angel Island. Passing steamers made the skiff bob like a cork in a washtub, but Jack rowed easily through the wakes. When a furious storm came up, he refused to quit the adventure, but headed into the waves, an action Atherton eventually realized was safer than riding in the trough, which he would have done. Despite the

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tempestuous weather, they fished around Angel Island, but ended up having to take shelter back on Goat Island before returning home, Atherton bailing much of the time.¹ It was an audacious trip, one that would be repeated large when the adult London decided to sail around the world on his ketch, the *Snark*.

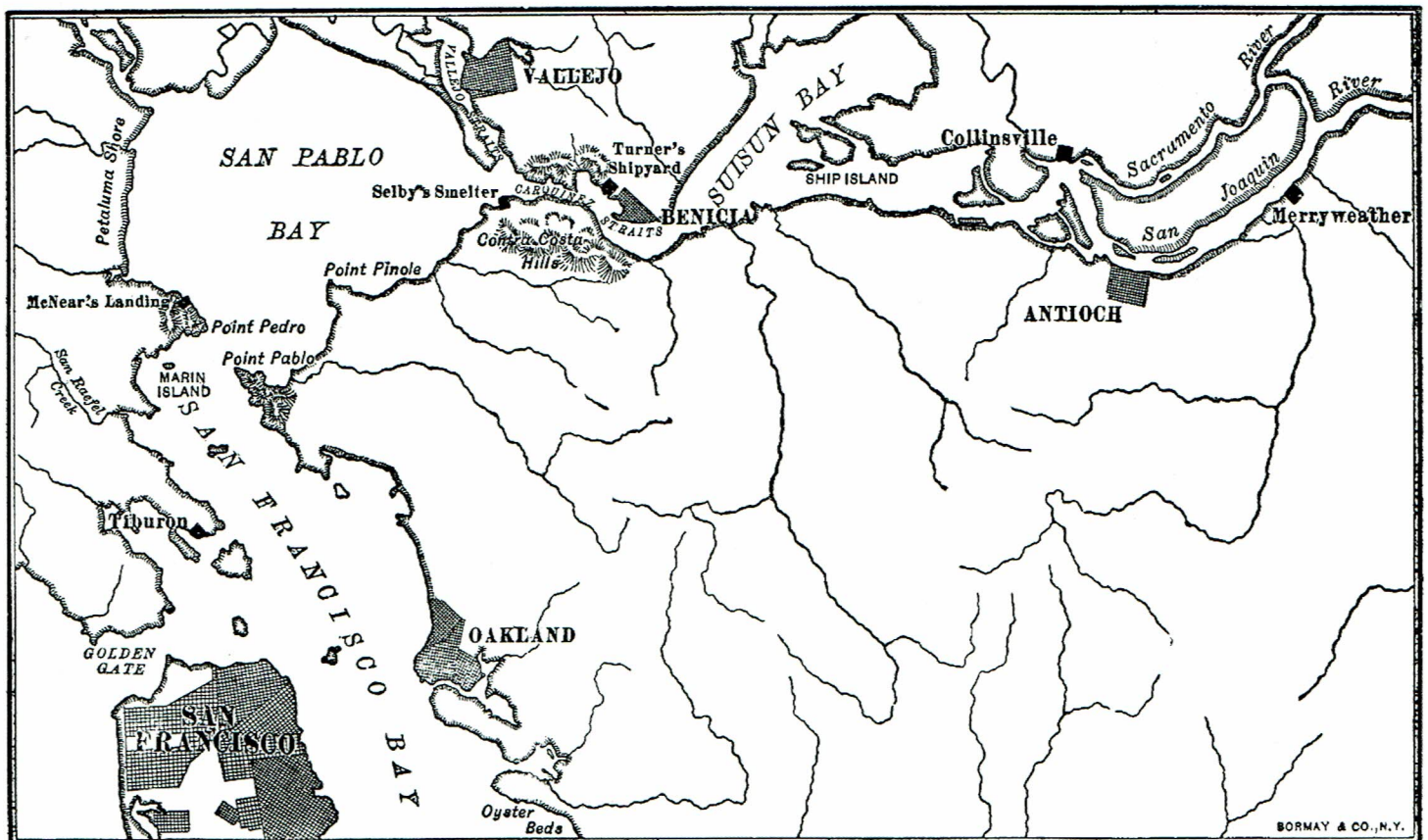
Like most young men of the late 1890s, London left school after eighth grade to head for the work of a laborer. It was the day of brawny masculinity, when to be a man meant physical hardiness. Work in itself was not his quarrel with factory life; rather, he fretted that it left him little energy to read or attend lectures to stimulate his mind. When much younger, he had discovered the treasures of the Oakland Public Library, and hid from others the sensitive perceptions of a poet that would eventually emerge in his best writing. After he bought his sloop, the *Razzle Dazzle*, he could earn more by poaching oysters and still have time to seclude himself in his cabin to read history, philosophy, and

fiction. It was as a result of his reading that he was already familiar with the lore and ways of life on the sea.

The first fictional version of London's sailing experiences appeared in *The Cruise of the Dazzler*, published in 1902. Young Joe Bronson, son of a successful San Francisco businessman, flees the tedium of schoolwork and rules by running away to the Oakland waterfront. He befriends the 'Frisco Kid, who works for the villainous French Pete on the *Dazzler*. Joining the crew, Joe readily replaces his book learning ("forecastle" to "fo'c'sle") with first-hand experience. The challenges the crew faces are both manmade (rival gangs and rifle-bearing factory guards) and natural (wicked storms). It does not take Joe long to wish to return home, for however much he admires the 'Frisco Kid, he questions the criminal activity and deplores the cruelty of French Pete. Joe concludes that the gritty life of adventure must defer to the comfort of his affectionate

family and the wisdom of his capitalist father. It is difficult to imagine how this admonitory story was written by one of the leading socialists of the day, but London understood the juvenile market, as well as his middle-class editors, and shaped his plot accordingly.

Details in *The Cruise of the Dazzler* hint at London's familiarity with both actual waterways and oyster pirating. In the story "Among the Oyster-Beds," he describes the size, shape, and operation of a custom-made dredge used to rake the bottom of the Bay. He tells how the crew sorted through the mud and slime to keep only the large oysters, giving credence to his claim that he had been on the oyster beds. As with other of his semi-autobiographical works of fiction, London incorporates the particulars of tools, technology, and practice that would be difficult to learn from a reference work. Such facts increase the verisimilitude of the story and counter the outlandish features of the plot.



(Above) Frontispiece map in *Tales of the Fish Patrol* (1905) showing the geography of Bay waters. Source: The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. RB 12763r.

(Opposite page) A catboat under sail in the Oakland Estuary, circa 1900. These boats were locally known as "plungers" and were associated with the oyster business. Source: San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park. B11.19,278.

According to *John Barleycorn*, published in 1913, London borrowed money in 1891 from his childhood foster mother, an African American by the name of Virginia Prentiss. With the money, London was able to purchase a sloop, the *Razzle Dazzle*. There followed months of poaching in the southern San Francisco Bay oyster beds, fighting rival gangs, and carousing in such bars as Heinold's First and Last Chance Saloon. In *John Barleycorn*, London writes less of oyster pirate activities than of the social life of the pirate gangs, their sexual competition, their bravado, and most of all, their drinking. Here is where the audacious claims of being the best and most successful appear. London claimed to have been called the "Prince of the Oyster Pirates," the youngest of any of the thieves, with an anonymous Queen (once the paramour of rival French Pete) at his side. He asserts that he made more money in a week than he had previously made in a full year and that he brought back bigger loads of oysters than any two-man craft. A near-drowning in the Carquinez Straits leads the narrator of *John Barleycorn* to quit that life, for it was accompanied by too much alcohol consumption. A compelling book, but not completely accurate in light of historical facts.

Careful reading of these accounts, as well as knowledge of Bay area history, cast doubt on the particulars.² London's hyperbole is clear once the reader sees beyond his beguiling prose. For example, in *John Barleycorn*, London claims to have spent \$180 on drinks in a 12-hour period. Given the going price at the time, he would have bought 1,800 whiskeys or 3,600 beers for his friends that night!

There may also be some doubt as to whether or not oyster pirating was still a major source of violence and illegal activity on the Oakland waterfront in the 1890s, as London has described.³ Oysters were a major food source for Native Americans, but the great gold mining debris floods of 1862 destroyed the major beds along the Marin and Alameda shorelines. Sometime in the 1870s, the larger east coast oyster was brought in and planted along the southern shorelines of San Francisco Bay. Oystering was soon, in terms of both tonnage and market value, the leading product of California's commercial fishing industry.

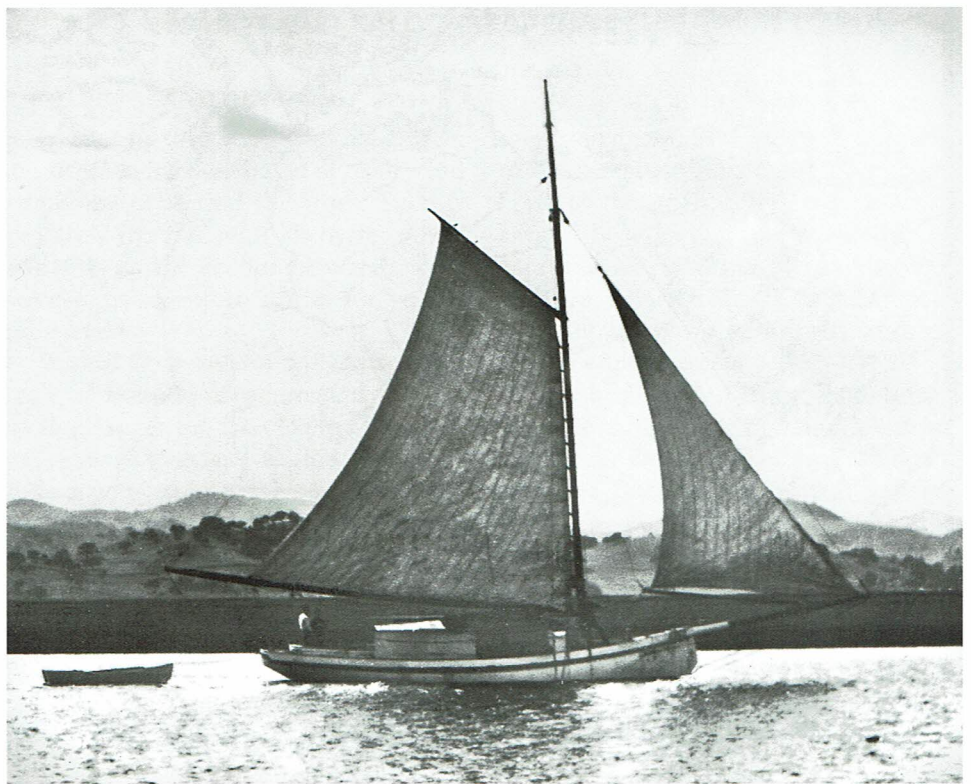
By 1890, some of the beds were beginning to be abandoned, though others were still patrolled by armed company guards. Canneries packing produce from south bay farms sent their effluent into the water, and the resulting algae blooms dissolved oxygen needed by the oysters. In 1891, the *Oakland Tribune* wrote of the thousands of people who regularly picked oysters from the deserted Morgan Oyster Company beds, which could be reached by land and, more easily, by boat. That London took oysters is very possible, but perhaps not exactly in the context he describes in his fiction. Like many talented authors before him, he took a kernel of truth and transformed it into a rousing tale of adolescent rebellion—when oysters may have been free and readily available to anyone with a boat by the time London probably went "pirating."

Tales of the Fish Patrol, also written for a youth readership, transfers Wild West style chases and gunfights to the water. Fellow Fish Patrolman Charley le Grant accompanies the narrator of the *Tales*, and their territory extends to San Pablo and Suisun Bays, and the Sacramento River and delta areas. In *Tales*, London focuses on techniques for con-

trolling a sailboat through bad weather and dangerous pursuits. He asked that the frontispiece to the book be a map so that readers from other parts of the country could see that the many locations mentioned within were real.

Interestingly, in the story "A Raid on the Oyster Pirates," London (as narrator) claims to know nothing about the activity when he is hired by an oyster farmer to catch thieves. London and Charley le Grant rent "a big, flat-bottomed, square-sterned craft, sloop-rigged, with a sprung mast, slack rigging, dilapidated sails, and rotten running-gear" to fool the pirates. After befriending the gangs, London and his friend trap them on the oyster beds through an obvious feint. While the gangs are collecting their booty, the Fish Patrolmen use their knowledge of the tides to shove the gangs' empty boats off into the Bay.

Frank Atherton once commented that Jack's stories of the Fish Patrol read "like a dime novel," yet he did not want to doubt his friend. The editor of *Youth's Companion* apparently concluded the same, for London wrote him a long letter saying that some of the stories were based on truth, in several cases on his own expe-



A commercial sloop on the Petaluma River, 1890s. This sloop is like the *Reindeer* in *Tales of the Fish Patrol* and the *Dazzler* in *The Cruise of the Dazzler*. Source: *San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park*. B11.2068n.



Two Italian fishermen in a sailing gillnet boat on the lower Sacramento River. This is the type of boat that both Jack and the Greek sailed in "Demetrios Contos" in *Tales of the Fish Patrol*. Source: San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park. C7.30,815n.

rience on the Fish Patrol. Unfortunately, London was as good at exaggeration in his letters as he was in his fiction, so one cannot take this as proof of his actual exploits. The California Fish Patrol, which kept very detailed records of its activities, has no record of London. His name does not appear on any lists, either as a regular Patrol member or as a volunteer who would receive a cut of fines collected. Nor is there evidence of the Patrol purchasing any boat similar to the *Reindeer*.

The Cruise of the Dazzler, *Tales of the Fish Patrol*, and *John Barleycorn* all show other signs of London's inventiveness. The specific triumphs he describes over various boats are too melodramatic not to have received broad publicity in local newspapers, and there is no evidence of this. His account of nearly drowning in the Carquinez Straits and spending four drunken hours in the water is simply unbelievable in light of tides, water temperature, and other realities. Surely hypothermia would have quickly killed him.

The exploits of Jack London's Fish Patrol better reflect a period before the 1890s. Up to that decade, ethnic coalitions of fishermen organized in mutual support societies to dominate one or another aspect of fishing. Unwritten rules, strenuous defense of territory, and legal victories helped Chinese, Italians, and Greeks modify the free market forces

that would have resulted in outright depletion. By 1890, the ethnic associations were breaking down. When London wrote his anti-ethnic screeds in the early 1900s (there was enormous anti-Asian sentiment in California at that time), readers would be wrong to think such ethnic monopolies were still prevalent and had hurt the fishing industry. Very likely the "facts" underlying these stories came from newspapers and accounts of men in Benicia and other waterfront areas in earlier decades.

We must grant Jack London the author's stock-in-trade of using his observational skills and, more, his imagination, in inventing alternate selves, in using his own experiences as the basis for his fictional works, and of creating narrators (as in *John Barleycorn*) who are not necessarily identical with his own point of view. As Huck Finn says of his creator, Mark Twain, in the opening paragraph of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, "He told some stretchers, but he told the truth, mainly."

In real life, London's seamanship proved itself in a big way a few days into his famous *Snark* voyage, when he discovered that his navigator was incompetent and could not place their location in the Pacific Ocean. At once, London set himself to the task of learning ocean navigation, and announced that on a certain

hour of a certain day at a certain point on the horizon, they would see the top of a Hawaiian volcano—and he was right! No wonder his dramatic tales of youthful adventure on San Francisco Bay have been accepted at face value!

Jack London's knowledge of boat handling is indisputable. If his tales of oyster pirating and his Fish Patrol days are exaggerated in light of both waterfront history and what is known of his life, his seamanship and his love of being on the water are evident in his writing. London's imagination and powerful prose may have fooled or misled readers and biographers over the years, but his prowess and expertise in small boats, first learned on San Francisco Bay waters, cannot be questioned. □

ENDNOTES

1. Frank Irving Atherton, *Jack London in Boyhood Adventures*, *Jack London Journal*. Vol. 4:16-172, 1997.
 2. Sam Baskett, "Jack London on the Oakland Waterfront," *American Literature*. Vol. 27, no. 3: 363-371, 1955.
 3. For more details, see Arthur F. McEvoy, *The Fisherman's Problem: Ecology and Law in the California Fisheries, 1850-1980*. Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Full text versions of all London books mentioned are available at <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/London>.