

Burning Down the House:

Jack London, the Fire of 1913, and a 100-year-old Cold Case That's Suddenly Hot Again

By Jonah Raskin

Walking to Wolf House with Greg Hayes — a twenty-five-year veteran of the Jack London State Historic Park — can feel like an epic journey into the past. At the ruins themselves, Hayes takes a key from his pocket and unlocks the gate. Step into the hollowed-out heart of the house with him and stand on the ground floor, blue-sky overhead, and you feel that you've entered a sacred space. Hayes has been here before — about 7,500 times by his reckoning.

"I don't have a definite answer about the fire that ravaged this place a hundred years ago," he says. He's in the kitchen, where the fire supposedly started, whether accidentally or on purpose no one knows for sure. Hayes adds, "When I led tours here over two-and-a-half-decades, I told people 'draw your own conclusions.' I still don't think anyone yet has said the last word on the subject."

Ever since the night of August 22, 1913, when the house burned — days before Jack and his "Mate," Charmian, were to move in — an air of mystery has enveloped the property that London called "Beauty Ranch." The State of California bought it after Charmian died and, in 1960, turned it into Jack London State Historic Park. Even as a park run by real rangers wearing uniforms and badges, mysteries lingered and ghosts hovered. There was enough intrigue to attract gonzo journalist, Hunter S. Thompson, who settled for a time in Glen Ellen to connect with London's literary ghost; the Wolf House ruins had called him from afar. To this day they spook tourists from around the world. Even descendants of London, such as his great granddaughter, Tarnel Abbott, also talk about ghosts and the mysteries that shrouded London's life. Born in 1876, Jack never knew the identity of his own father, and, when he died forty years later, it was perhaps by his own hand. Docents at the park usually don't mention that possibility, but it refuses to go away.

Most visitors who trek to Wolf House have read *The Call of the Wild* and *The Sea-Wolf*. Many have also read the short stories that earned London big advances and hefty royalties, especially "To Build a Fire." In one version of that story, the protagonist starts a fire and lives; in the other, he fails to start a fire and dies. The two versions suggest Jack London's own divided nature: doom and gloom writer and happy, smiling celebrity; lone wolf and pack animal; capitalist and socialist.

There's no reason to doubt that Wolf House was built primarily for the "Wolf," as he called himself. Mr. and Mrs. London, the blueprints show, were to have separate bedrooms: "sleeping quarters" for Charmian and a "den" for Jack (as befitting the Wolf.) Granted, there was an alcove for Charmian's piano, but Jack claimed far more space: a room for his manuscripts, another for his trophies, and a tower on the top floor from which he could survey the estate. With the money he earned from his best-selling books, he bought property and building materials and hired laborers to do the work. He also bought prize horses like Neuadd Hillside and pigs that lived in the Pig Palace. He bought his very own

fire truck – which helped him not an iota during the fire — and telephones, Dictaphones and a telegraph machine, too; all equally useless when calamity struck.

In 1913, tiny Glen Ellen had no fire department; there was no countywide fire-fighting agency, either. Up until 1923, when the Glen Ellen Fire Department was born, there were no seasoned professionals to fight fires. One was forced to rely upon one's friends and neighbors and London's neighbors weren't especially neighborly. In 1913, and for decades afterward, people assumed that the Wolf House fire was set by an arsonist, probably by one of London's enemies, though which one was hard to say. He had a great many.

Pat Eliot, who lives with her husband on Sonoma Mountain, remembers the tales she heard about the fire when she was a young girl. "One story that circulated was that local farmers believed Jack was a socialist and that they burned Wolf House in spite," she says. Neighbors with fewer resources and far less fame than he were understandably envious and even resentful; the fire was a kind of poetic revenge. These days, Jim Shere, the Executive Director of the Glen Ellen Historical Society, thinks of London as a kind of "megalomaniac." When we met to talk about the house that Jack built and fire destroyed, Shere recited lines from, "Ozymandias," Percy Shelley's romantic poem about an audacious, arrogant "King of Kings" whose works turn to "lone and level sands" in the desert.

Jack himself believed that either the "hand of man" or "the hand of fate" started the Wolf House fire and so did Charmian. Oddly, the Londons didn't demand an investigation. There were too many fringe characters living at Beauty Ranch and too many strange occurrences to invite investigators to rummage in the ruins. They would ask questions of the house servants and the convicts leased from San Quentin who labored in the fields; they would query the relatives, including James Shepherd, husband of London's stepsister, Eliza, who ran the ranch and kept the books. Not long before the fire, Jack tossed James off the ranch after he waved a gun and threatened to shoot Eliza. James promptly filed assault charges against Jack, and, while they were dropped, no one, least of all Jack, wanted more bad press.

In 1913, no one from the East Coast office of the National Union Fire Insurance Company came to Glen Ellen to visit the scene of the fire and yet the company paid in full on a policy that was just weeks old. Why did London wait until the proverbial last minute to buy insurance? He didn't say, though he thanked the National Union profusely for the check that arrived in the mail. Conspiracy nuts might have called the fire an inside job. The policy required that the company only pay \$6,000, which — on a house that cost \$75,000 — made no sense. As one fire expert put it, "It was the smartest \$6,000 that company ever paid out." In return for the cash, National Union had the right to use London's name in advertisements.

When it came to the conflagration, no one was immune from suspicion, not even Charmian. According to Santa Rosa historian and newspaper columnist Gaye LeBaron, Charmian reportedly told her husband before the fire, "You'll never live here." LeBaron heard that tidbit from William Forni, the grandson of Natale Forni, an Italian immigrant who was the chief contractor on the project and who inspected the site every night before bed — every night, that is, except the night of the fire. The Forni family has told its tales for decades; fathers and

sons passed stories down from generation to generation, along with the promise Natale Forni elicited from the Fornis never to repeat Charmian's ominous words to Jack.

William Forni had no problem retelling the story. "In August 1913, at Wolf House, where he was playing one afternoon, my father, who was eleven years old, accidentally shot his older brother, George, with a BB gun," William said. "He thought that my grandfather was going to spank him, so he hid in a closet in the house. While he was there, he overheard an argument between Jack and Charmian that ended with her telling him, 'You'll never live in this house.'"

The night of the fire, Jack said something no less strange. "I'd rather be the man whose house burned down than the man who burned down the house." He seemed to have a specific man in mind. In fact, for years, he was dogged by a "Double," as he called him, who forged checks in the name of Jack London, proposed marriage to women using the name Jack London, and appeared at public events claiming to be none other than Jack London.

Jack never mentioned the Double as a suspect, but it's hard to believe he didn't consider him the arsonist. Indeed, police were already looking for him in several states for passing back checks and forgery. London was at once eager for his Double to be apprehended and strangely fascinated by him at the same time, curious to see what he'd do next. He even wanted to write a whole book about him. The Double disappeared forever about the same time that London died.

On the night of the fire, Forni watched and wept. According to Charmian, who kept a diary all through the summer of 1913, the blaze broke his heart. "My child! My child," he cried out. In her diary, she added, "He's almost crazy." Less than a week after the fire, Forni found a candle in an airshaft at the ruins and brought it to Charmian, though that piece of evidence vanished. Still, neither Charmian's alleged comment — "You'll never live here" — or the candle, or Forni's failure to inspect the site, seem as telling as Jack London's own promise to torch the place. "It will be a happy house — or else I'll burn it down," he wrote in his 1906 essay, "The House Beautiful." He added, "It will be a house of air and sunshine and laughter," not once imagining that it would be a house of smoke, darkness and tears. Docents at the park say that London didn't mean what he said, and yet it's too tantalizing a remark to dismiss out of hand.

In 1995, a team of forensic experts led by Robert Anderson, a serious student of fires, spent a week at Wolf House and concluded that linseed-soaked rags ignited spontaneously and caused the blaze. Mystery solved, or so it seemed. Anderson is a genial fellow and a real professional. He and his team did what ought to have been done in 1913. Anderson and nine other fire savvy men and women went into the ruins, gathered clues like good detectives, sifted through the evidence, and did tests to determine where, when, and how the blaze started. Anderson did not conduct "carbon dating" to ascertain the age of the burned redwood at the ruins, but he insists that it wasn't necessary. He has, however, thought about almost all of the angles.

"If someone were to show me a letter that said, 'I did it and I'm glad,' we'd have to reopen the investigation," Anderson says. "Without that letter or the proverbial smoking gun, I stand by our conclusions, though I'm not unaware of London's own threat to burn the house down if he wasn't happy with it. Today, a district attorney would put him on the witness stand and grill him. The facts themselves are powerful. It was one hundred degrees that night, which

helped the fire. No windows had been installed, which meant that the fire had plenty of air. Flames made their way upstairs quickly. The walls of stone kept the heat inside and turned the house into a furnace. It was the perfect fire."

Anderson continues, "If the fire were to happen today and if London were alive, he'd sue the contractor and the crew and probably win in court. He had a good case. The work that the crew did — specifically not removing the rags — was below acceptable standards."

Bill Murray, 84, Glen Ellen's fire chief from 1996 to 2009, read Anderson's report as soon as it was published and visited Wolf House to see for himself. "Over the course of many years, I was in the ruins dozens of times, though I never noticed the spalling until I went back to investigate on my own after Anderson's report came out," he says. "The spalling cinched it for me." Murray explains that "Spalling is the phenomenon that occurs when a fire is so hot that it melts the concrete and it peels off like layers of skin." Of course, spalling can occur if a fire is the work of a pyromaniac or an accident.

For Iris Jamal Dunkle, 39, a lyrical poet and an English professor, it doesn't really matter who, where, or why the fire started. Robert Anderson's account is just another story, neither more nor less true. She sees the Wolf House saga as a poetic drama with a cast of fiery characters. "The fire must have turned Jack and Charmian to dust," she says. "Jack must have lost the flame of passion as the cinders in the ruins cooled. Still, when we visit today, I think we're reignited with the flames of his imagination."

In the days and weeks immediately after the fire, life at Beauty Ranch went on as before, though Charmian noted of her husband, "Mate breaks down completely." She had rarely seen him so crushed. To Charmian, Jack couldn't help but show flickers of his innermost self. To the world at large he wore a mask of optimism even when he was depressed and threatened to take his own life. By 1913, he had worn a mask for so long that it had become his face. He couldn't stop smiling for photographers even when he was in emotional and physical pain, as he was after the fire.

Alone together at their cottage, Charmian and Jack played pinochle, as always, and as always she typed Jack's manuscripts, this time for one of his most embarrassing novels, *The Mutiny of the Elsinore* about a couple very much like the Londons. Outdoors, Jack attended to the tall silos they were building and that rose up majestically toward the sky. One day, he complained about chest pains; Charmian, playing the role of the good wife, suggested that he see a doctor. Jack, thinking he was a kind of California superman, didn't stop smoking, drinking, and eating half-cooked duck. Charmian thought he had a "suicidal" life style. "Suicidal" was her word. She also wrote that she was on the "verge of a nerve-collapse." Life with Jack couldn't have been easy.

In September 1913, about a month after the fire, the Londons went to Sacramento on a trip that Charmian described as a "honeymoon." One day, she boasted, "Love is the order of the day and in some ways we never were happier." On another day, she complained that she had "the blues." Like Jack, she was up and she was down. When bright green grass began to grow on a patch of blackened earth behind the ruins, she was ecstatic. "This is joyful," she wrote. "My garden shall bloom yet."

Three years later, on November 22, 1916, Jack London died at 40, leaving behind him about 50 books. Charmian, who was born in Los Angeles in 1871,

died at House of Happy Walls, now a museum, on January 14, 1955. She never remarried.

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