

Jack's Beauty Ranch "Salvation"¹

Jack came along way from when he wrote his friend, Cloudesley Johns, in 1899 that "city life is the only life after all – there you meet people" and "as a rule you meet vegetables in the country." In the same letter he spoke of becoming "heart-sick" if he mingle[d] too long with our agrarian population." Indeed, when Netta first suggested to Jack that he move to the country for an extended time in 1905, Charmian said "[t]he eyes he raised to her face were as of some creature hunted" and he responded that "the very quiet would drive me crazy."

Earle Labor suggests that Jack's initial dislike of country life had to do with the loneliness he experienced there as a child. Labor notes that Jack's "radical transformation," his spiritual epiphany which drove him to move from the miasmatic city life to a wholesome country one, happened from a confluence of factors. First, Jack began to see living in the city as unnatural, that city life was neither healthy, nor clean, nor nice.² Labor suggests that Jack recognized that with city living he was "doomed – unless he can somehow renew himself through marriage with the vitalizing forces of Nature and Soul-Mate . . ." and that "[t]he formula was simple:

Nature + Woman + Love = Salvation."³

With this "salvation," Jack now took a closer look at those "vegetables" he had earlier disparaged. With his customary laser focus and wild enthusiasm, he set out to become an expert on crops, animal husbandry, and all matters ranching and farming.

Much has been written about Jack's beloved champion shire horses, in particular the "great gentleman" as he was known, Neuadd Hillside.⁴ Jack kept photos of his two great loves, Neuadd and Charmian, at his bedside.

The rest of his livestock were equally impressive. Jack studied livestock at the State Fair and at other ranches before making his purchases. His Jersey dairy cows,⁵ originating from England, produced milk with the highest butterfat and protein content of all dairy breeds; his Hereford cattle were known for easy calving and superior beef; his Durham or Shorthorn cattle had the versatility of being both dairy and beef cattle; his Angora goats produced mohair which allowed dyes in vibrant shades, retained its

¹ The "Beauty Ranch" was also known as "The Ranch of Good Intentions" and less commonly known as the "Land of Dear Delight."

² Labor draws parallels between Jack's choice to leave the city and the protagonist in his short story "Planchette," but unlike the protagonist in *Planchette*, it was not money that was destroying him but the unnatural city life. A discussion of Jack's other *Valley of the Moon* novels/stories can be found in the Nov. Ranch Presentation materials.

³ Interestingly, a New York Times reporter in 1913 came to a similar conclusion while writing about Jack's novel, *Valley of the Moon*. He called it a "pioneer story" and said that London's "man's size idea" was that: "The land is still the ancient Mother, from whom we come, and to whom we go. On her breath is healing and in her lap is peace." He said London's book reminded "us of her, to renew our faith in her, to inspire us to return to her."

⁴ Neuadd was both a 1912 and a 1916 State Fair champion. Jack purchased him for \$2500. Neuadd died from an apparent rupture on October 22, 1916, exactly thirty days prior to Jack dying on November 22, 1916. Jack was writing a story about Neuadd when Jack died. Neuadd sired "Mountain Lad" who was born in June 1915 and whose name was used for the prize stallion in *Little Lady of the Big House*.

⁵ Jack's Jersey cows had registered pedigrees.

shape, shed dirt and imparted a 'sheen' onto finished articles; his White leghorned chickens, originating from Italy, were known for their superb egg productivity; his Duroc swine were known for their hardiness and high value meat. They also had Berkshire pigs, Cochin China chickens, an Angora ram, Shorthorn bulls⁶, pigeons, ducks, geese, turkeys, pheasants and dogs on the ranch as well as a lake stocked with 1500 catfish.⁷

Similarly, with some of his crops, he chose the best. Oaten hay, a particularly good feed for his livestock, is hay made from the oat plant. They also had barley, alfalfa, vetch⁸, corn, potatoes, string beans, tomatoes, cowpeas, and beehives.

Jack envisioned an orchard next to Wolf House and hired Johannes Reimers as their landscaper. Johannes oversaw the planting of fruit trees and vines. The Londons had apple,⁹ crabapple, pear, persimmon, apricot, peach, plumb, fig, carob, avocados, chestnut, walnut, mulberry, cherry, olive, table grapes, among others.¹⁰

Jack may have eaten his own livestock but he was troubled by it. We know he named some of his livestock because he refers to one of his Jersey cows as "Ramona" and another as "Malleable Fox" in correspondence. Jack confessed that while a meat-eater, he would prefer not to eat his own "Hannah, Hilda, and Jose," but would prefer to eat some other man's "Hannah, Hilda and Jose." He added that "that is the trouble – sentiment is always interfering with one's appetite."

As is evident from his writing, Jack's humanitarian beliefs extended to animals. He refused to use barbed wire anywhere on the ranch because of the risk of harm to his animals. His piggery, with each sow having her own apartment and plenty of space for exercise, was routinely mocked.¹¹ Jack was also appalled by the inhumane treatment of performance animals used in circuses and advocated against it. The "Jack London Club," formed after his death, campaigned to stop the use of performing animals.

⁶ Jack's Shorthorn bull, Roselawn Choice, won grand championship at the 1916 State Fair.

⁷ Nakata also remembered a stone-walled/fenced area the size of a bungalow where they kept two foxes and three raccoons.

⁸ Vetch is from the pea family and often grown as a cover crop; it improves soil fertility.

⁹ The Londons shipped boxes of apples to friends. They also dried plumbs for prunes.

¹⁰ It's likely some of the WH orchard trees from Jack's time remain. The 2010 Draft Cultural Landscape Report found that a persimmon, an apricot, an apple, three pear trees, two walnut trees, and a mulberry tree, all located near the Wolf House service road, are from Jack's day. The pomegranate tree near the palm tree at the cottage most likely is a heritage tree (from Jack's time), along with the cottage's elderberry tree near the front of the cottage. (The elderberry by the kitchen is not a heritage tree.) Jack also wrote that he had planted 100,000 eucalyptus trees by 1912, ordered wild lilacs and different types of Broom (Scotch, Siberian, Spanish) for the ranch. For more on trees, see Eric Metz's Heritage Tree Walk notes and the "Resources" listed below.

¹¹ Jack's insistence on humane treatment applied to his workers as well. In building Wolf House, he insisted on comfortable quarters for his servants with no paint or carpets so as to lessen their work load and to allow them some "swim" or "hammock" time daily. Likewise, Eliza, was intolerant of abuse and fired a ranch hand (Summers) after he beat his wife.

Just like with those country vegetables Jack initially disparaged and then embraced, Jack likewise embraced the “quiet” of country living which he initially said would drive him “crazy.” After moving into Wake Robin, Jack posted signs on both his front and back doors. On the front door, the sign read:

No admission except on business; No business conducted here.”

On the back door the sign read:

“Please do not enter without knocking. Please do not knock.”

In *All Gold Canyon*, the miner sings a spiritual song about throwing off sins and turning to “them sweet hills of grace.” Jack came to the Valley of the Moon looking for those ‘sweet hills of grace’ and in doing so, found “a spirit of peace that was not of death, but of smooth-pulsing life . . .” As he told Charmian, “Individuals disappoint me more and more, and more and more I turn to the land.” It was this land, the Beauty Ranch, that “had proven to be the one entity that had not disappointed his spiritual investment.” And as Charmian noted, quoting a farm magazine at the time, his “ ‘ideas on the profession of farming . . . will do the world more good than all the stories he could ever write.’ ” Consistent with his generosity of spirit, the salvation Jack found in the land would be a shared salvation for all of us, as he sought through his writing and farming practices to bring us back to and “renew our faith” in “mother earth.”¹²

Resources:

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¹² It’s also worth mentioning that the Sierra Club, sharing much of Jack’s philosophy, made a pilgrimage to the ranch in 1911. (See, “*Who’s Who in Jack’s World*” on the Volunteer Resources web page for other notable ranch visitors.)

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