

Jack's Klondike Adventure

Jack traveled to the Klondike in search of gold in July 1897, when he was just 21 years old. Jack wrote that: "It was in the Klondike I found myself. There nobody talks. Everybody thinks. You get your true perspective. I got mine."

The Klondike is a region of the Yukon Territory in northwestern Canada.¹ News of gold being discovered in the Klondike hit the front page of the San Francisco papers on July 15, 1897. The day before, the S.S. Excelsior had pulled into port carrying men with gold nuggets from this region and creating a gold-rush fever referred to as "Klondicitis." An estimated 100,000 prospectors (called "Stampeders") converged on the Klondike in search of gold between 1896-1899.² This was "forbidding" territory and the Canadian government required each man to take a year's worth of supplies before being allowed to cross their border.

Stricken with "Klondicitis," Jack initially tried unsuccessfully to get a local paper to sponsor his trip as their reporter. He then called on his friend and poet, Joaquin Miller, who had been hired by the Examiner newspaper to cover the gold rush. Jack hoped to get hired on with Joaquin as his assistant, but Joaquin had already left for the Klondike.

To Jack's surprise, Eliza's husband, Capt. James H. Shepard, offered to grubstake Jack if he would take him along. Jack tried to discourage James from going as James was 60, had had a mild heart attack, and they needed to carry in almost 2,000 pounds of supplies, but James could not be deterred. James contributed money from his law practice and Eliza mortgaged her home to fund their trip and supplies.

On July 25, 1897, Jack and James boarded the S.S. Umatilla³ to Port Townsend, WA, where they transferred to another ship, the City of Topeka, for Juneau, Alaska.

¹ When Jack traveled to the Yukon in 1897, it was still part of Canada's Northwest Territory. The Yukon did not become a separate Canadian territory until after the gold rush increased its population, leading to the need for a separate government structure. The Yukon Act of 1898 split the Yukon Territory off from the Northwest Territory. Canada's three territories then became: the Yukon, the Northwest, and the Nunavut. The Yukon is also the name of a major river, almost 2,000 miles long, running through Alaska and parts of Canada.

² "Cheechakos" were the newly arrived prospectors or stampeders and "Sourdoughs" were the old timers, prospectors who had survived winters in the north. They were called Sourdoughs because they made their bread not with hard-to-get baking powder, but with a sourdough starter they often carried with them.

³ Coincidentally, Jack had worked his way back to SF from Vancouver as a coal stoker on the Umatilla in 1894.

The two most popular routes for the stampeders to reach the gold fields (located near Dawson City) were either over the steep Chilkoot Pass from Dyea, Alaska, or by White Pass Trail from Skagway, Alaska. (White Pass was also known as “Deadhorse Trail” because of the thousands of horses who died falling off the narrow, treacherous trail.)⁴

Jack and James arrived in Juneau on August 2nd to constant rain and the rain continued until they departed Juneau on August 5th. They chose the Chilkoot Pass route, traveling by canoes to Dyea and then over the Chilkoot Pass to the Dawson/Henderson Creek area.

As Jack predicted, and much to the relief of everyone in his group, the trip was too much for James so he left to return home on August 14th. He had made it only a few miles out of Dyea.

Jack and his friends moved into an abandoned cabin on Split-Up island, at the juncture of Stewart River and Henderson Creek, about 70 miles from Dawson City.

Knowing he’d need help with James and easily making friends, Jack had teamed up with Fred Thompson, J. Merritt Sloper, and “Big Jim” Goodman on the Umatilla. “Big Jim” knew hunting and mining; he could also out pack most men. Jim became the model for “Big Bill Wilson” in Jack’s *“Like Argus of the Ancient Times.”*

Sloper, with an estimated weight of barely 100 pounds, was a veteran adventurer, described as “cheerful and brave,” and with an ability to out walk many younger men. Sloper had carpentry and sailing skills which came in handy building their boat, the Yukon Belle.⁵ Sloper featured as “Anson” in Jack’s Argus story as well as under his real name in *“In a Far Country.”* Many decades later when interviewed on his ranch near St. Helena, an 82-year-old Sloper described Jack as “a strong, vital man, full of the joy of living” who devoured every book he could find.⁶

Thompson was organized and a recorder. Thompson kept a diary which gives us a “faithful record” about Jack’s time in the Yukon.⁷ Thompson became

⁴ See link to map of area under “Resources,” *infra*.

⁵ Friends with whom they traveled built a companion boat, the Belle of the Yukon.

⁶ Jack was also a witness at Sloper’s divorce trial in S.F., saying that Sloper came out broke.

⁷ Jack said, “I couldn’t write about the Klondike when I was there.” Consequently, most of what we know about this time comes from Thompson and others. Of course, so many of Jack’s Yukon stories are based on his personal experiences there.

“Charles Crayton” in Jack’s Argus story.⁸ (Jack was the sailor, “Liverpool,” in the story.)

Fred Thompson wrote in his diary that “the boys. . . staked 8 claims” in Henderson. Jack recorded “Claim No. 54” on the left fork of Henderson Creek with Judge E.H. Sullivan and Dr. B.F. Harvey.⁹

Fellow stamper, Bart Hargrave, described Jack as “intrinsicly kind and irrationally generous,” but that generosity caused friction with Jack’s group. He was always sharing their precious grub with strangers. Charmian understood, writing that Jack “would have starved himself rather than be inhospitable.”

Jack survived punishing conditions which he described as like living “in a refrigerator,” with the cabin floor so cold to stand on that the men often stayed in their bunks.¹⁰ He also survived scurvy and after a year had only found a tiny bit of gold (amounting to about \$4.50.). Jack returned home in July 1898, leaving St. Michaels bound for Seattle and then onto S.F.

Jack befriended several others while in the Yukon, including “Old Man” Martin Tarwater, a former mail carrier from Mark West Springs who took James Shepard’s place.¹¹ Martin was good at repairing shoes, cooking, and packing. He appears as Jack’s character, “John Tarwater,” in his Argus tale. Jack also met Emil Jensen along the Stewart River in the Yukon. Jack found Emil to be “noble” and Emil later visited Jack at the Ranch. Emil was likely the model for the “Malamute Kid” in “The Son of the Wolf,” although author Dick North believes Jack’s model was Elam Harnish. Jack got to know Elam Harnish, who was from eastern Oregon and whose nickname was “Burning Daylight,” when he stayed on Split-Up Island. Elam figured in Jack’s book by the same name.¹²

Jack and his friends had their base camp on Split-Up Island but also traveled to Dawson City where Jack and others set up camp next to a cabin owned by Louis and Marshall Bond. These were the Yale-educated sons of

⁸ According to Irving Shepard, Fred Thompson returned to California and resumed his old job as a court reporter in Santa Rosa. He later moved to Sacramento where his brother served as an Associate Justice on the Ca. Supreme Court.

⁹ Jack had given Dr. Harvey a bottle of whiskey he’d been saving so that Harvey could perform an amputation. Later, Dr. Harvey, concerned about Jack’s scurvy, helped Jack tear down a cabin to make the logs into a raft so they could get to Dawson as soon as the ice broke on the frozen Yukon River. In Dawson, Jack got food, potatoes and a can of tomatoes, as well as much-needed medical attention for his scurvy. They sold the raft logs for \$600.00.

¹⁰ Joaquin Miller who also stayed in a freezing cold cabin in Dawson described feeling “caught like a wary old rat in a trap.”

¹¹ Tarwater had slipped into the Yukon without the required provisions and worked in exchange for board and passage.

¹² In a letter Jack refers to him as both “Elam” and “William.”

Judge Hiram Gilbert Bond, a wealthy Santa Clara rancher. The Bond brothers owned a St. Bernard/Scotch shepherd (Collie) mix named “Jack.” “Jack” became the model for “Buck” in *Call of the Wild*.¹³ Marshall Bond said Jack later visited him at his home in Santa Clara and that Marshall’s home is described in the beginning of *Call of the Wild*.

Despite only bringing back a tiny bit of gold dust, Jack wrote that he’d “been managing to pan out a living ever since on the strength of the trip.” Indeed he had, writing close to 80 Yukon-related stories. Besides his well-known Yukon-novels, *Call of the Wild and White Fang*, Jack’s other Yukon-related novels include: *A Daughter of the Snows*, *Burning Daylight*, and *Smoke Bellew*. Several Yukon-related short story collections include: *Faith of Men* (8 stories), *Children of the Frost* (11 stories), *The God of His Fathers* (11 stories), *The Son of the Wolf* (9 stories), *Love of Life* (8 stories), and *Lost Face* (7 stories). To see the comprehensive list of all Jack’s writing related to the Yukon, including articles and a list of each of his short stories in the various collections, see *Jack London’s Klondike Adventure*, *infra*, pp. 143-145.

In December of 1964, author Dick North received information about a trapper named Ivor Norback who had run across London’s abandoned cabin near Henderson Creek in 1936. The trapper reported finding this written on an inside log wall, “Jack London Miner, Author, Jan. 27, 1898.” On April 7, 1969, Russ Kingman led an expedition to this Yukon cabin where they authenticated Jack’s writing.¹⁴ The cabin was dismantled and two replicas were constructed from the original logs. One is located in Dawson City, and the other in Jack London Square, Oakland, CA, not far from Heinhold's First and Last Chance Saloon.

Resources:

Labor, Leitz, Shepard, *The Letters of Jack London: Volumes One through Three*, (1988) Stanford, Stanford University Press, pp. xxxvi-xxxvii, 11, 17-18, 37, 126, 184, 195, 217-218, 319, 992, 1081, 1105, 1407

Hamilton, David Mike, ed., *To the Yukon with Jack London: The Klondike Diary of Fred Thompson*, (1980) Los Angeles, *en passim*

London, Charmian, *The Book of Jack London Vol. 2* (1921) Miami, Hard Press Publishing, pp. 222-276

Kingman, Russ, *A Pictorial Life of Jack London* (1979) NY, Crown Publishers, Inc., pp. 69-82, 214

¹³ Charmian believed that another dog, “Nig,” belonging to fellow stamper and French Canadian Louis Savard, also inspired Jack’s “Buck.”

¹⁴ The expedition included a handwriting expert and actor Eddie Albert, among others.

Kingman, Russ, *Jack London: A Definitive Chronology* (1992) CA, David Rejl/Jack London Research Center, pp. 13-21, 38, 155

Kingman, Russ *How Jack London's Cabin Came to California* (undated)

Labor, Earle, *Jack London: An American Life*, (2013) NY, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, pp. 98-114

Walker, Dale, *Jack London & the Klondike* (1966) San Marino, CA, Huntington Library, *en passim*

North, Dick, *Sailor on Snowshoes* (2006) B.C., Canada, Harbour Publishing Co., *en passim*

North, Dick, *Jack London's Cabin* (1986) Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, Willow Printers, *en passim*

Lourie, Peter, *Jack London and the Klondike Gold Rush* (2017) NY, Henry Holt & Co., *en passim*

Wilson, Mike, *Jack London's Klondike Adventure* (2001) Sonoma County, Woodsworth, *en passim*

Andrew Sinclair, *Jack: A Biography of Jack London* (1977) NY, Harper and Row, pp. 41-51

Reesman, Jeanne Campbell, *London in His Own Time* (2020) Iowa City, Univ. of Iowa Press, pp. 61-67

Jack's article "*Through the Rapids on the Way to the Klondike*," June, 1899
<https://the-big-archive.com/through-the-rapids-on-the-way-to-the-klondike/>

<https://americanliterature.com/author/jack-london/short-story/jack-london-by-himself>

Fred Thompson's diary (Parts 1 and 2):

https://ia803402.us.archive.org/4/items/bcc_qnl_v.050_n.02/bcc_qnl_v.050_n.02.pdf

https://archive.org/details/bcc_qnl_v.050_n.03/page/58/mode/2up

<http://santarosahistory.com/wordpress/category/londonjack/> (includes a photo of Jack, Big Jim Goodman, Martin Tarwater, and Fred Thompson in Yukon)

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/gold-fever-deadly-cold-and-amazing-true-adventures-jack-london-wild-180973316/>

<https://www.thehistoryreader.com/historical-figures/yukon/>

<https://lib.uw.edu/specialcollections/collections/exhibits/klondike/case5/> (has map of trails to Dawson)

<https://coloradosghosttowns.com/trail%20to%20the%20klondike%20gold%20fields.html#:~:text=The%20Seattle%20Post%2DIntelligencer%20published,their%20supplies%20over%20these%20trails>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQiriEze-24> (Jack's Dawson & Oakland cabins)

<https://jacklondonmuseum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Jack-London-Cabin-updated-Dec-5-ks.pdf>

Written by Kate Johnston (abbreviated version in Jack's Facts #3 and #11.)