

# Just About Anything...

TO DELIGHT THE CURIOUS READER  
a blog by Mona McHaney

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## The Call of the Whiled

**Whiled:** to spend time idly or pleasantly, as in "It was a beautiful day and we whiled away the hours in the garden." This expression is the only surviving use of the verb *while*, meaning "to spend time" [First half of 1600s].

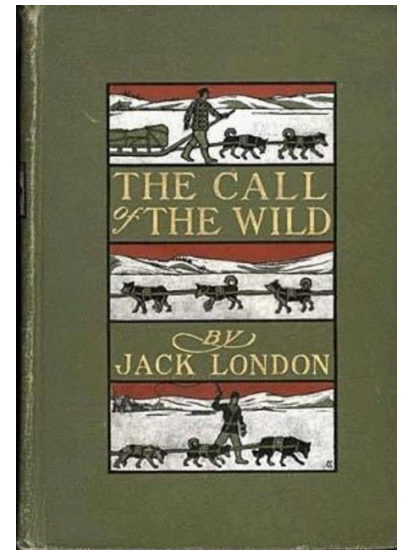
—[www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)

How fun to celebrate a "dinosaur" verb—the last survivor of its species from the early 1600s! After the hectic holidays, please catch your breath and enjoy a leisurely stroll through my word garden.

While visiting our West Coast family last summer, Mark and I *whiled* away a day at the Jack London State Historic Park in California's beautiful Sonoma Valley. We traveled there with our friends Mark and Kim.

My Mark and Kim's Mark—for that is how I distinguish them in conversation—have been best buddies since the second grade. I find this reMARKable! My longest friendship only dates back to Mr. Fleagle's fifth-grade reading class, where Dawn Ann and I debated the merits of teen idol Shaun Cassidy's musical masterpiece "Da Doo Ron Ron."

The two Marks, Kim, and I made our literary pilgrimage to the home of THE most popular and highest-paid American writer of the early 20th century. Jack London was born on January 12, 1876. Monday marked the 150th anniversary of his birth. Before his death on November 21, 1916, the 40-year-old author had written over 50 books!



The cover of the 1903 First Edition of Jack London's masterpiece. (It can be yours for \$400.95 on eBay.)

London is best known for his novel *The Call of the Wild*, which chronicles the struggles of a sled dog named "Buck". I can scarcely believe London persevered with his pen after receiving over 600 rejection letters from editors! The author and Buck showed a similar determination to succeed.

The literary critic Alfred Kazin once remarked, "The greatest story Jack London ever wrote was *the story he lived*." Allow me to cite an eloquent, pithy summary of the author's life from a placard at the park museum:

Born a seeker, adventure defined Jack London's life. A bay-sailing "oyster pirate" by the age of fifteen, he later went on to ride the rails as a "hobo," survive the freezing Klondike in search of gold, work as an international war correspondent, champion the lives of the working poor, and travel the remote South Seas by ship.

Jack took risks to feel alive. His daring explorations provided the fodder for his writing and the fuel for his spirit.



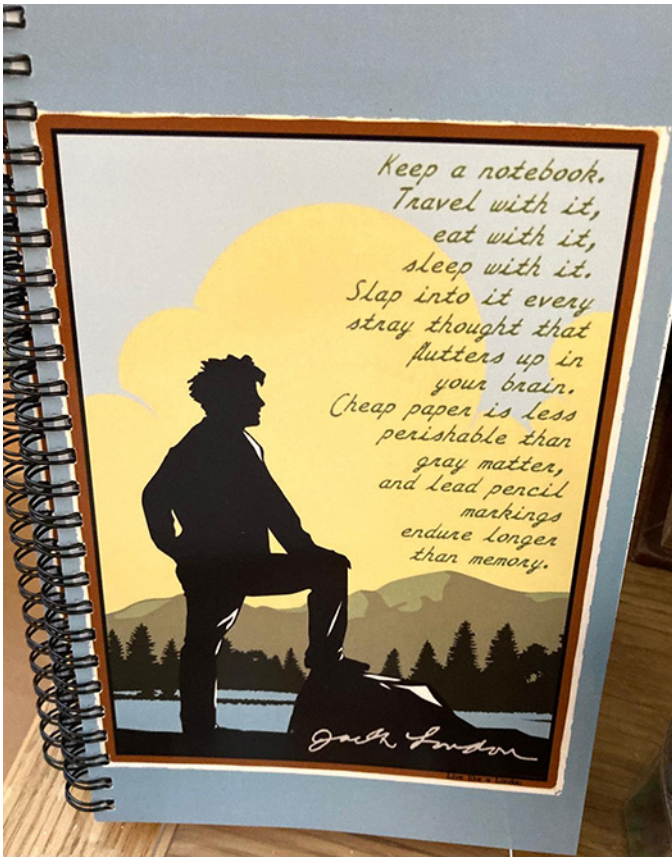
Mark and Mona visited the cottage home of Jack and Charmian London at the Jack London State Historic Park in Glen Ellen, California.



Jack London clearly put a few miles on his typewriter.



Jack was well-matched with his second wife Charmain. Ever the adventurers, they set out in 1907 to spend seven years sailing around the world in a 45-foot schooner named the *Snark*. They traveled to Hawaii—where they both learned how to surf—and then continued on to Tahiti, Bora Bora, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands. Before two years had passed, Jack became very ill and they had to cut the trip short in Australia, returning home to California by steamer. I believe I'd rather read about such an adventure than to actually live through it.



London believed in the value of keeping a notebook.

In short, London "lived voraciously to write vigorously." Today we would have called him an adrenaline junkie.

By contrast, I would describe myself as an *anti*-adrenaline junkie. I don't climb rocks, snow ski, or bungee jump. I am the opposite of London's second wife Charmian (pronounced *charm-me-in*, unlike the brand-name toilet paper). She broke the mold of a proper Victorian lady by riding her horse astride rather than sidesaddle and by regularly boxing her husband, literally, with her fists. I, on the other hand, keep my distance from horses altogether and rarely put up a fight.

Though I couldn't be more different than the Londons, I learned much from visiting their cottage and the farm they called "Beauty Ranch." The work habits of writers both inspire and intimidate me. Jack rose at 5 AM every morning and cranked out his daily goal of 1,000 words. He famously wrote, "Don't loaf and invite inspiration; light out after it with a club."

Jack was born into poverty and left grammar school at the age of 14 to work 12 to 16 hours a day in a factory—not an auspicious beginning for an aspiring author. But happily, for posterity's readers, Jack

discovered the world of books at the Oakland Public Library and was mentored by a librarian named Ina Coolbirth. What an excellent example of the influence one person can have in encouraging another's dreams!

One of the things I admire about London is that he wasn't afraid to fail. On his ranch, he experimented with sustainable agricultural methods way ahead of his time. To increase food production for his cows, London tried growing spineless cacti. Alas, the plants grew too slowly and required too much water to be profitable.

London also spent a fortune on groves of eucalyptus trees to be used and sold for lumber. Unfortunately, the variety he planted made terrible building material.



While sailing in the South Pacific, Jack took this photograph of indigenous people on the Marquesas Islands. And yes, he brought his phonograph ashore for the listening pleasure of his new friends.



Kim and the two Marks pose before the ruins of "Wolf House." At great expense, the Londons built their four-story, 15,000 square foot (1,393 square meter) dream home with 26 rooms and 9 fireplaces. Sadly, it accidentally burned down on August 22, 1913, just days before the couple planned to move in. Only the volcanic rock walls and chimneys remain.

After her husband's death, Charmain built "The House of Happy Walls" in 1919 to memorialize Jack and to eventually serve as a museum. Here's a lovely window view of the nearby Sonoma Mountains.

Nevertheless, a few flops didn't dim his enthusiasm. A line from London's novel *White Fang* captures his own sensibility well: "Fear urged him to go back, but growth drove him on."

During my leisurely day at Beauty Ranch, I discovered a writer who was determined, disciplined, and above all—daring. While Jack London answered the call of the *wild*, I listen for the call of the *whiled*. I enjoy spending time pleasantly, not recklessly. I prefer taking risks vicariously than in person. Yet I trust that one may still lead a remarkable life, even while coloring *inside* the lines. I like verbs that survive.



Have a delightful day! 

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