

Local Color

Charmian Kittredge London

Ralph W. Stanley



*Jack and Charmian London,
Beauty Ranch, 1913*

Charmian Kittredge was the daughter of Willard Kittredge, son of Benjamin and Lydia (Whitaker) Kittredge. Willard was the grandson of Dr. Kendall Kittredge and his wife, Sally Whiting. Dr. Kittredge was the first and for nearly 60 years the only physician on Mount Desert Island.

In 1850 at the age of 20, after following the sea for a few years, Willard went to California during the gold rush. In California, he married his wife, Daisy, and spent the rest of his life there, first serving in the military and then managing a hotel. Charmian, I believe, was his only child.

She was born November 27, 1871, and grew up to be an independent, liberated woman, a real swinger for her time. She was a good stenographer and a sportswoman. Charmian came to Maine in the fall of 1900 to visit her relatives in Bangor, Ellsworth, Mount Desert Island and Searsport. She stayed until the winter of 1901 and while here she was highly entertained. Being from far away California, she was regarded by her relatives as somewhat of a celebrity.¹ *The Ellsworth American* had this to say of her visit, "Miss Charmian Kittredge of Berkeley, California, who is spending a year in New England, is still

the guest of her cousin, Mrs. Ralph Hamor. Miss Kittredge is soon to visit the large eastern cities."²

After her return to California, she met and became the mistress of Jack London. Jack was married with two children but he was of a restless nature. He met Charmian just after a prominent San Francisco socialite had broken off an affair with him.³ She convinced him to divorce his wife, marry her and settle down on a little ranch near Glen Ellen, California. They were married in Chicago on November 20, 1905 while Jack was on a lecture tour. Their tour took them to Bowdoin College and then in mid-December they spent a week in Ellsworth where they visited her relatives. Jack proclaimed them to be "the salt of the earth," and they were much taken with his charm. They drove all over Mount Desert Island with a pair of spirited black horses harnessed to a cutter, a kind of sleigh.⁴

Jack London died November 22, 1916 and Charmian died in 1955. Her obituary in *The Ellsworth American* states that she always kept in touch with her relatives here and frequently visited them.⁵

Jack London was born out of wedlock on January 12, 1876 in San Francisco. His mother married John London, a Civil War veteran and widower, to give the boy a name. Jack's father had deserted, leaving them to their own devices. His father was William Henry Cheney, born in Chesterville, Maine on January 13, 1821, son of William and Betsy (Linscott) Cheney.⁶ Betsy was a relative of my wife, Marion (Linscott) Stanley.

William Henry Cheney had married Mary Jordan in Ellsworth in 1854 and they had three children, two boys and a girl. The girl died in Gardiner, Maine in May of 1859. While in Ellsworth, Cheney was the editor of the *Ellsworth Herald* and a backer of the anti-Catholic Know-Nothing movement. He frequently attacked the Catholic priest John Bapst in his newspaper and his actions eventually led to the tarring and feathering of the priest. Cheney left Ellsworth in 1860 and his wife never heard from him again. She was granted a divorce in

1864. Cheney went to New Bedford, Massachusetts, New York City and then to California. There he took up with Flora Wellman, who became Jack London's mother. Cheney, however, denied being Jack London's father.⁷

John Bapst, who was born in Switzerland, went on to be prominent in the Catholic Church. John Bapst High School in Bangor is named for him.

It is interesting to note that a number of women – among them Charmian Kittredge – held shares in Ellsworth vessels at a time when it was not proper for women to be active in business affairs. I am certain that, with a few exceptions, the shareholders were related to each other in some way, either by blood or by marriage.

In studying the ownership of vessels, I have noticed that women often held shares. Some were widows who had inherited their husbands' shares, while others were women whose husbands could not be trusted to manage their affairs. Mostly, though, these women had bought shares of their own accord.

Charmian Kittredge is listed as a shareholder in six schooners that I know of: the *Emily*; the *J. M. Kennedy*; the *Minneola*; the *Agricola*; the *Westerloo*; and the *Catherine*, which was abandoned in Somes Harbor when she was more than 90 years old.⁸

Boatbuilder, sailor, and historian, Ralph W. Stanley lives and works in Southwest Harbor, Maine. He and Craig Milner co-authored the book Ralph Stanley – Tales of a Maine Boatbuilder, published in 2004, and are now working on another collection of stories about the downeast islands.



ENDNOTES

¹Herbert T. Silsby II. "Looking Backward: The Jack London Downeast Connection." Parts One and Two, *The Ellsworth American*. February 24 and March 2, 2000.

²*The Ellsworth American*. 1901.

³Andrew Sinclair. "Jack London," *American Heritage*. Volume 28, No. 5. August, 1977. This volume can be found in the Penobscot Marine Museum, Searsport, Maine.

⁴Silsby.

⁵*The Ellsworth American*. January 26, 1955.

⁶Silsby.

⁷Silsby.

⁸Information on the *Catherine* can be found in Robert Appleby's Customs Records, Frenchman's Bay District, in the Peabody-Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts. The bills of sale for the other vessels are in the author's possession.

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Photo of Charmian and Jack London at Beauty Ranch, London's experimental farm, is used by permission of Jack London's Ranch Album (www.jacklondon.net).