

TAPE #47

DOROTHY MC EWEN

Taped: July 1979 with Mary Welch

Reference: Early days in Norway and working for Jack London

(What can you tell us about Jack London?)

I used to work there at the ranch in Sonoma.

(Do you have your scrapbook?)

Yes. I'll go get it.

(How long ago did you work at the London Ranch?)

In the 30's.

(When did London die?)

1916.

(You worked for his family then?)

Yes.

(Were are these pictures given to you by his wife?)

No. The kids around the place were playing with them and throwing them around. So, I picked them up and kept them. Mrs. London asked me to stay with her; I guess she liked me. So I worked there.

(Where were you living when you met the Londons?)

I was living in the mountains up here during the 30's and went to town to get a job. And from an employment office I was sent to the Jack London Ranch. It was general housework. She was a hard woman to work for. She had four kids and they were wild. They climbed through the cubboards and chewed macaroni all over the place!

(What relation were these kids to London?)

I don't know; but the oldest was named Jack.

And this kid was a stinker! He was killed in an auto accident.

(What happened to Jack London, do you know?)

Well, he was sick and had taken some kind of medicine that killed him. And there are stories that he was going back east with other women and things like that.

(How old was he when he died?)

He was 40.

(Is this a photo of the ruins of the Wolf House?)

Yes. It was burned down.

(Who did it?)

Nobody knows. I went through the ruins and took this picture. Probably had to do with politics; he was pretty controversial you know.

(I see a lot of pictures of movie actors here. Did you meet them?)

Yes. Carl Brisson was one. When they had special guests like this she would ask me to come over and serve them. So I had to leave the house I was working in, go over and serve them, and then go back. But I enjoyed it a lot. That was in 1936, 43 years ago.

When I first got to Oakland, I was interested in was ~~XXXXXXXX~~ Heinold.

(What was that?)

Down by the beach there; Jack London Square now. It was a saloon; Mr. Heinold used to help Jack out when he was in trouble. And this is the school in Alameda where he went.

(How close to the Ranch was the Wolf House?)

They were quite a ways apart.

And these are pictures of his two daughters.

Before 1916 he was my idol; he was my pin-up boy! I thought he was so wonderful, and I read everything I could about him.

(When did you come to the United States?)

1904. I was 16 years old then.

(What is your Norwegian name?)

Dagny is my first name; people called me DAG NIE, and I couldn't stand it. It should be pronounced with a soft A. A is AH in Norwegian. Langseth is the last name. I wish I had kept my old name; I think its too late to do anything now.

(I understand~~ing~~ that you're good at gold panning.)

Yes. I like to do it. I found a big piece of gold on the Stanislaw River. I call it my bear, because it looks like one. I had a bigger one than that, and it looked like a chew of gum. Whenever I was broke my boyfriend would loan me ten dollars on it. Once time he went back East to visit his family, and he gave my nugget to his mother. I never saw it again.

(How did you learn to read English?)

By trying to do crossword puzzles.

(What was it like, coming to this country?)

When I was put to work in a hotel in Madison, Wisconsin. Well, I first went to Stotin, Wisconsin. I went there from Ellis Island where I landed.

(That must have been ~~frreightrixingx~~ a scary experience.)

I didn't know enough to be scared.

(What was your home town in Norway?)

A little town way north of the Arctic Circle. It was in a group of little islands. I was born of the longest day of the year; the 21st of June.

During the summer the sun never set; it would just go down to the horizon and then back up again. You could read outside all night.

(Was this hard to adjust to?)

Well, when you're born there that's just the way it is. You don't think about it. You think it is that way everywhere.

(How did you light your houses?)

Kerosene lamps.

(What were schools like?)

You would live at the schools for about six weeks at a time.

It took so long to get around that they did it that way. There were two rooms in the school, one for boys and one for girls. And we had a woman there to keep house for us and to cook our meals. Then we would go home for about two weeks, and then back to school.

(Were the schools tough?)

Well, everyone had to knit, and I could knit better than anyone.

(What was a typical meal?)

Bread and sour milk for breakfast. Clabbered milk, that is.

A lot of fish all the time. Maybe we would have meat on Sunday.

We also had chickens. But the main thing was fish, and I love fish.

And they made a lot of different kinds of cheese.

(Did you sail?)

No, I didn't. I rowed a boat, though. I had to row to go see my girl friend. There were few roads; when you wanted to go somewhere you rowed a boat.

(Did you have horses?)

Yeah, we had one horse.

(When did you see your first car?)

In Liverpool on my way to the states. And I got lost in Liverpool. I was with an older woman, and that was lucky. Finally we found our way back to the White Star Line office.

(How did you get to Wisconsin?)

By train.

(Did they have many trains in Norway?)

Only in the southern part; there were no trains where I lived.

(Did it snow a lot?)

Yes. A lot.

(Did you have skates?)

No. I was a poor kid, and we didn't have anything. I didn't have a set of skates either.

(What did you heat your house with?)

Wood and coal. And we wore a lot of clothes. Knitted stockings up to our knees, and lots of padded clothes to wear outside. This was in place of shoes. We didn't get wet, because it was dry snow.

(When did you learn to sew?)

In school; you had to do these things. And you would have showings of the things that you did. Knit and crochet and sew.

(What were some of the boys tasks?)

They had to learn to sharpen tools. Bale hay. Things like that.

(What was the animal life ?)

There were not many animals on those islands.

Birds; that's all I remember. And there were ermines. They were white in winter and brown in summer. But fishing was the main thing. People even came from Sweden to fish. Now, the old buildings that were once used for fishing are turned into tourish hotels.

(What did you do when you needed a doctor?)

Where I lived there wasn't one. That's why I'm deaf in one ear.

I had a ~~terrible terrible~~ very bad ear ache when I was 13, and this was during the potato harvest. They said it wouldn't hurt any more if I was out picking potatoes than it would if I was laying in the house---so I had to get out there and work, anyway. So I have a broken eardrum. But now I have a hearing aid.

(What vegetables did you have?)

We had rutabagas and cabbage. And we also smoked lots of fish.