

J. London's 'Tales of the Fish Patrol'

By Steve Frangos

Special to The National Herald

It is often said that the Greeks of the 1880-1920 wave of migration brought few of their traditional trades with them to North America. This is yet another spurious stereotype offered as documented fact. So very little research, either in terms of seeking out available public records or just going up to Greeks and asking

them about their past, has ever taken place, it can honestly be said we know almost nothing about the full sweep of the Greek American historical experience.

Complicating this whole problem is the fact that the American imagination also has a long history with things Greek which does not always coincide with the personal experience of being a Hellene. As a case in point, we can look to Greeks as fishermen in the New

World.

In 1855, the New York Times issued a special report on the Greeks in New Orleans. Among other things, this journalistic report spoke of the Greek fishermen working all along the mouth of the Mississippi River. In his 1913 historical account of Greeks in America, Bishop Thomas Burgess mentions, but regrettably only in pass-

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Tales of the Fish Patrol: Jack London

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ing, the Greek lobstermen along the coast of New England.

Of the fabled spongers of Tarpon Springs, much has been written, yet even before the Greek sponge divers of Tarpon Springs were the subjects of newspaper accounts, American fiction or cinema, Greek immigrants were immortalized as small craft fishermen along the northern coast of California.

THE PACIFIC COAST

Sometime in the very early 1900's, a young Californian by the name of Jack London (1876-1916) was arrested for poaching oysters. The young man was given a choice: Go to jail, or work for the California state fish patrol. London, always the survivor, worked for the San Francisco Bay Fish Patrol, searching out other poachers. For all of you who were sleeping that day in high school English class, Jack London is the internationally recognized writer of such novels as "The Call of the Wild," "White Fang" and many other beloved classics of American literature.

It is not surprising then to learn that London turned his experiences with the fish patrol into a collection of short stories. In 1905, seven stories were all first published in *The Youth's Companion* magazine. This series of stories proved so immediately popular, they were gathered into a single volume, "Tales of the Fish Patrol," and issued that very same year by the Macmillan Company of New York City. George Varian provided the illustrations for the book. What will come as a surprise to many Greek Americans are the depictions of Greek immigrant fishermen in this collection.

Aside from the first appearance of Greek Americans in California fiction, London's "Tales of the Fish Patrol" is also one of the first works of fiction dealing with the fishing industry in California. This long-lost gem by Jack London was recently reissued in a new and inexpensive paperback edition in the California Legacy series of Hey Day Books a noted California pub-



A fisherman tending to his nets on the harbor side of a Greek island.



usner
www.heydaybooks.com).

"Biologist/writer Jerry George... the first Land Steward for the Nature Conservancy... has written the introduction to this new edition of 'Tales of the Fish Patrol'... For 150 years, this bay (San Francisco) has been the life source of the communities around it, yet in history books and literature, we see only images of streetcars and bridges, politicians and artists. It is through Jack London that we see the nascent immigrant communities of Greeks and Chinese in their shrimp boats and sloops, and the early appearance of fishing laws to protect an already dwindling resource. Through his storytelling, sharp as ever, London gives us a portrait of the bay like you've never seen it - from the water, and full of high adventure."

These literary depictions of Greek immigrant fishermen are not always complimentary.

As Richard G. Powers notes, "(in 'Tales of the Fish Patrol'), racist attitudes against Greeks... are particularly blatant. However, much of London's work was written strictly to pay the bills, and he wrote exactly what he thought the public of the day wanted. Those racist attitudes were the norm of the day: Anglo-Saxon superiority was a basic assumption not just of the popular audience. Some of the most sophisticated thinkers in America identified American cultural traits with the racial characteristics of Anglo-Saxons (www.explorenorth.com)."

Two of the seven short stories found in "Tales of the Fish Patrol" deal exclusively with Greeks.

BIG ALEC

"The King of the Greeks" was first published in the March 2, 1905 edition of The Youth's Companion. In this tale, we hear of the formidable and bold Big Alec.

"Big Alec had never been captured by the fish patrol. It was his boast that no man could take him alive, and it was his history that, of the many men who had tried to take him dead, none had succeeded. It was also history that at least two patrolmen who had tried to take him dead had died themselves. Further, no man violated the fish laws more systematically and deliberately than Big Alec. He was called 'Big Alec' because of his gigantic stature. His height was six feet, three inches, and he was correspondingly broad-shouldered

Jack London (1876-1916). The photo above depicts the great American author while he was in his twenties.

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αν δε δεις το τέλος.

Better an egg today,
than a chicken tomorrow.

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London's Account of Greek Fishermen

and deep-chested. He was splendidly muscled and hard as steel, and there were innumerable stories in circulation among the fisher-folk concerning his prodigious strength. He was as bold and dominant of spirit as he was strong of body, and because of this, he was widely known by another name, that of "The King of the Greeks." The fishing population was largely composed of Greeks, and they looked up to him and obeyed him as their chief. And as their chief, he fought their fights for them; saw that they were protected; saved them from the law when they fell into its clutches; and made them stand by one another and himself in time of trouble. In the old days, the fish patrol had attempted his capture many disastrous times, and had finally given it over, so that when the word was out that he was coming to Benicia, I was most anxious to see him. But I did not have to hunt him up. In his usual bold way, the first thing he did upon arriving was to hunt us up. Charley Le Grant and I, at the time, were under a patrolman named Carmintel, and the three of us were on the Reindeer, preparing for a trip, when Big Alec stepped aboard. Carmintel evidently knew him, for they shook hands in recognition. Big Alec took no notice of Charley or me."

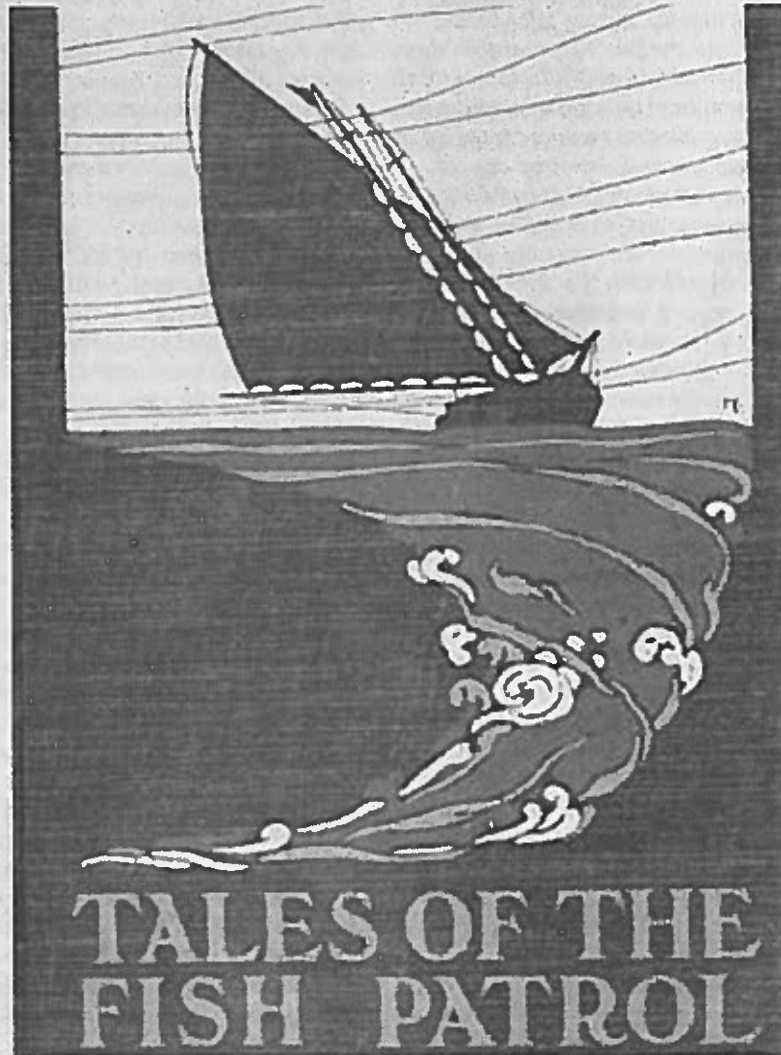
But London's personal knowledge of the Greek fishermen was not all negative, as the opening of "Demetrios Contos" clearly demonstrates:

"It must not be thought, from what I have been told of the Greek fishermen, that they were altogether bad. Far from it. But they were rough men, gathered together in isolated communities and fighting with the elements for a livelihood. They lived far away from the law and its workings; did not understand it; and thought it tyranny. The fish laws, especially, did seem tyrannical. And because of this, they looked upon the men of the fish patrol as their natural enemies. We menaced their lives, or their living, which is the same thing, in many ways. We confiscated illegal traps and nets, the mate-

which required weeks of labor. We prevented them from catching fish at many times and seasons, which was equivalent to preventing them from making as good a living as they might have made had we not been in existence. And when we captured them, they were brought into the courts of law, where heavy

Springs. And I am not aware of any writer who has offered anything concerning the New England Greek immigrant fishermen.

It is said that, even to this day, the descendants of the New Smyrna Colony still cry out "mulletts on the beach." This ringing call automatically brings people running to



Cover to Jack London's book, a series of short stories which, among other things, details the lives and lifestyle of Greek American fishermen.

cash fines were collected from them. As a result, they hated us vindictively. As a dog is the natural enemy of the cat, the snake of man, so were we of the fish patrol the natural enemies of the fishermen. But it is to show that they could act generously, as well as hate bitterly, that this story of Demetrios Contos is told."

the shore. Once there, they cast their nets out into the ocean's waters, collecting what they can from the harvest of the seas. These hand-held nets are only found in two spots anywhere on Earth: Crete and among the locals of the northern coast of Florida.

So much of Greek American history remains unrecorded, who

enemies. We menaced their lives, or their living, which is the same thing, in many ways. We confiscated illegal traps and nets, the materials of which had cost them considerable sums, and the making of

men. But it is to show that they could act generously, as well as hate bitterly, that this story of Demetrios Contos is told."

London's stories predate any stories written about Tarpon

two spots anywhere on Earth: Crete and among the locals of the northern coast of Florida.

So much of Greek American history remains unrecorded, who knows what will yet be recovered from our collective experience?