4-14-1966

Jack London: Master Craftsman of the Short Story

King Hendricks
Utah State University

JACK LONDON:

THIRTY-THIRD FACULTY HONOR LECTURE

Jack London:
Master Craftsman of the Short Story

by

KING HENDRICKS

Head, Department of English and Journalism

THE FACULTY ASSOCIATION
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

LOGAN, UTAH
APRIL 1966

Jack London: Master Craftsman of the Short Story

IN NOVEMBER of 1898 Jack London, aged 22, sold his first short story, "To the Man on Trail," to *Overland Monthly* for the sum of $5. Three months later *The Black Cat* magazine paid him $40 for "A Thousand Deaths." This was the beginning of a writing career that in 17 years was to produce 149 short stories, not including his tramping experiences which he published under the title of *The Road*, 19 novels, and a number of essays. If all were accumulated and published, they would fill 50 volumes. Besides this, he wrote a number of newspaper articles (war correspondence, sports accounts, and sociological and socialistic essays), and thousands of letters.

He received national attention in January, 1900 when *The Atlantic Monthly* published his short story, "An Odyssey of the North," and he found international acclaim when Macmillan published *The Call of the Wild* in July 1903.

Between November 1898 and July 1903 he wrote feverishly: short stories, essays, jokes, short poems, two novels (*A Daughter of the Snows* and *The Call of the Wild*), one juvenile book (*The Cruise of the Dazzler*), a sociological treatise (*The People of the Abyss*), and, with Anna Strunsky, the *Kempton-Wace Letters*. He made it a practice to send his materials to editors of newspapers, magazines and publishing companies, one after another until someone accepted them.

During his life he kept record books of his magazine sales in which he listed the title of the story or essay, the magazines to which he submitted and the dates, if and when it was accepted, and the fee he received for it. Some stories were accepted by the

first editor to whom they were sent; some went to several, and one, "The Story of Keesh," was rejected 24 times before *Holiday Magazine* published it in 1904.

The first two record books cover the period from November 1898, to May 1903. They include about 140 entries which garnered more than 650 rejection slips. (Most of these rejection slips are now on file in the Huntington Library.) Many are simply

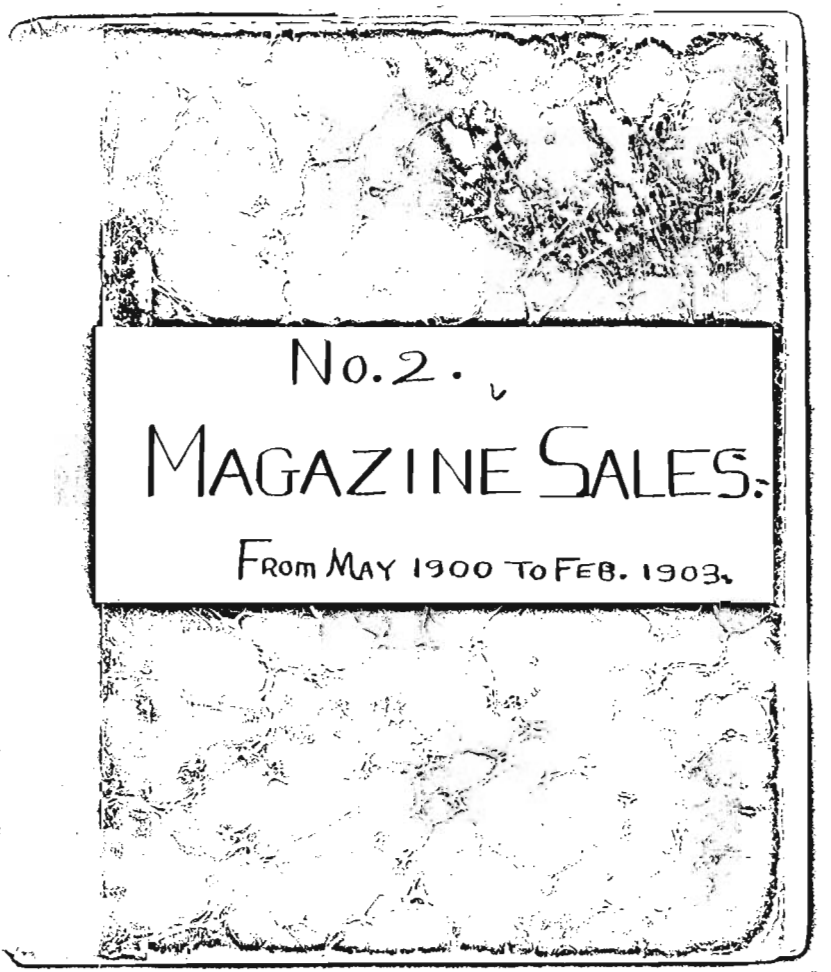
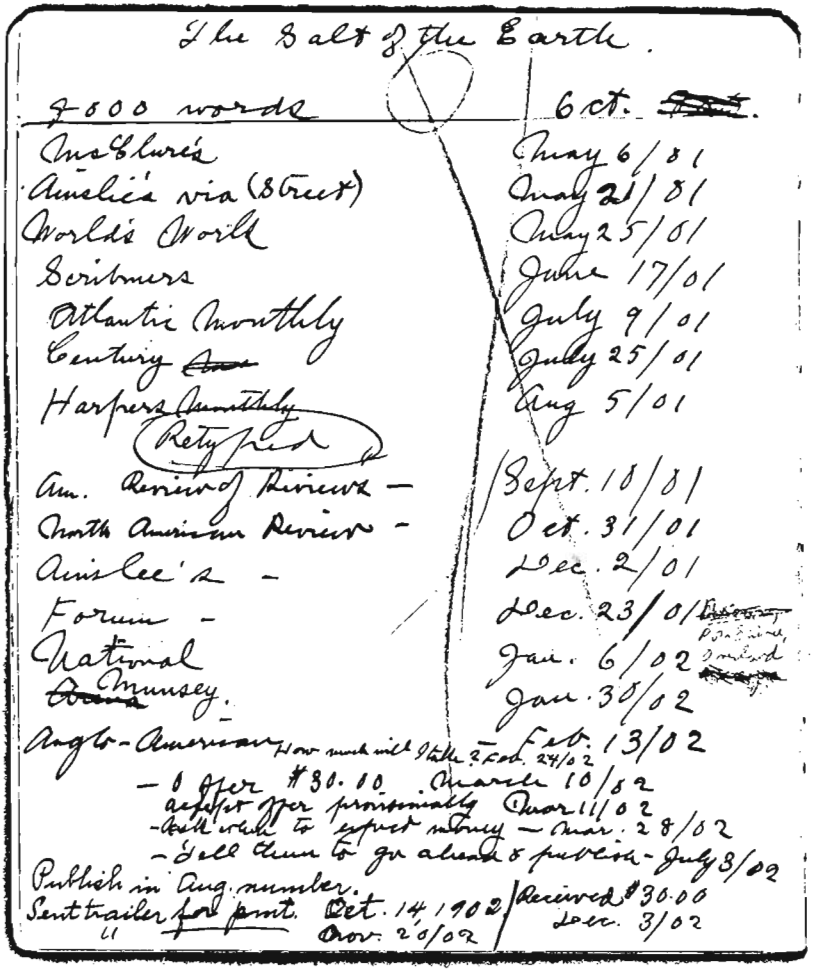


Figure 1. Jack London kept a record of each article that he submitted for publication. After each title he listed number of words, price per word, the magazine to which it was sent, the date sent, where, when, and for how much sold and when published.

formal notes from editors saying that the story in question is not suitable for their purposes or that they do not have the space available. Some editors make interesting comments, and some reveal the type of material that magazines were looking for at the turn of the century. For instance, one, unidentified, written in longhand on a piece of brown paper, reads: "This type of story is absolutely impossible for us. Try *Vanity Fair* or *Town Topics*. It is in their line. We want clean, happy stories of love or incident."



The Salt of the Earth.

7000 words	6 ct.
McClure's	May 6/01
Amelia's via (Street)	May 21/01
World's Work	May 25/01
Scribners	June 17/01
Atlantic Monthly	July 9/01
Century	July 25/01
Harpers Monthly	Aug 5/01
Retyped	
Am. Review of Reviews –	Sept. 10/01
North American Review –	Oct. 31/01
Ainslee's –	Dec. 2/01
Forum –	Dec. 23/01
National	Jan. 6/02
Munsey	Jan. 30/02
Anglo-American	Feb. 13/02

How much will you take? Feb. 24/02

– I offer $30.00 March 10/02

accept offer provisionally Mar 11/02

– will wait to expect money – Mar. 28/02

– Tell them to go ahead & publish – July 3/02

Publish in Aug. number.

Sent trailer for print. Oct. 14, 1902 | Received $30.00

" Nov. 20/02 | Dec. 3/02

Figure 2. This entry in No. 2, Magazine Sales, from May 1900 to February 1903 is written in Jack London's own handwriting.

Another one came from the Frank Leslie Publishing House. It does not identify the story nor the time, and simply says across a form note: "Well written. Too risque for our use." Another slip, again with no date nor any identification of the story, came from the *American Agriculturist*, and reads: "Much too long for what it tells. Same story and ideas could be expressed in fewer

Well written. Too risque for our use. We do not publish the Weekly it is in the "Judge" Building. We would be glad to consider a short story if you wish to submit one in the Fall.

Frank Leslie Publishing House,

Founded 1855.

141-143 FIFTH AVENUE,

MRS. FRANK LESLIE, President.
FREDERIC L. COLVER, Sec. & Treas.

New York.

X _____

We regret that the inclosed MS. is not just suitable for our purposes. It is accordingly returned to you, with the thanks of

THE EDITORS.

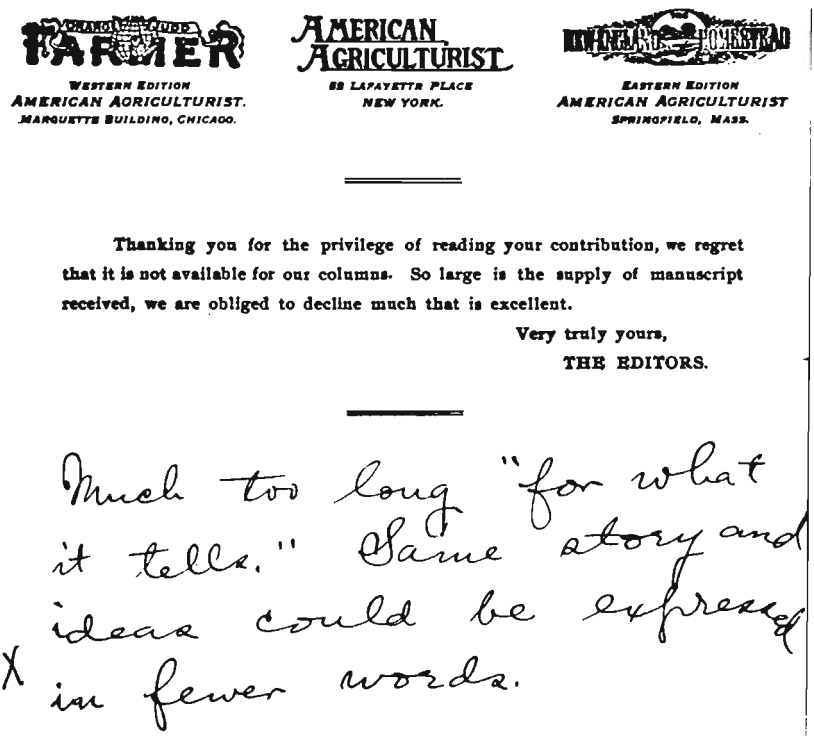
While the Editors cannot hold themselves responsible for Manuscripts received by them, they will endeavor to return those they do not find available, if stamped and addressed envelopes are inclosed for that purpose.

Figure 3. Rejection slips were nothing unusual to Jack London. According to his record books, about 140 entries brought in more than 650 rejections.

words." The editor of *Vogue,* on a form card which they used for rejection purposes, without date and without title of the story wrote in longhand: "Too tragic. We're open to little love stories of 1,600 words."

Perhaps his most interesting rejection slip came as a result of his first letter to an editor. He wrote it September 17, 1898 to the editor of the *Bulletin* (San Francisco) and it reads:

> Dear Sir, I have returned from a year's residence in the Klondike, entering the country by way of Dyea and Chilcoot Pass. I left by way of St. Michaels, thus making all together a journey of twenty-five thousand miles on the Yukon in a small boat. I have sailed and traveled quite extensively in other parts of the world and learned to seize upon that which is interesting and to grasp



FARMER
WESTERN EDITION
AMERICAN AGRICULTURIST.
MARQUETTE BUILDING, CHICAGO.

AMERICAN AGRICULTURIST
52 LAFAYETTE PLACE
NEW YORK.

EASTERN EDITION
AMERICAN AGRICULTURIST
SPRINGFIELD, MASS.

Thanking you for the privilege of reading your contribution, we regret that it is not available for our columns. So large is the supply of manuscript received, we are obliged to decline much that is excellent.

Very truly yours,
THE EDITORS.

Much too long "for what it tells." Same story and ideas could be expressed in fewer words.

Figure 4. Another of the myriad rejection slips which Jack London garnered during his writing career.

> the true romance of things, and to understand the people I may be thrown amongst. I have just completed an article of four thousand words describing the trip from Dawson to St. Michaels in a rowboat. Kindly let me know if there would be any demand in your columns for it. Of course, thoroughly understanding that the acceptance of the manuscript is to depend upon its literary and intrinsic value. Yours very respectfully, Jack London.

The editor wrote in longhand the following note on the bottom of London's letter and returned it to him. "Interest in Alaska has subsided in an amazing degree. Then again, so much has been written that I do not think it would pay us to buy your story." The story in question was called "From Dawson to the Sea." After his letter from the (San Francisco) *Bulletin,* he submitted it to the editor of *Outing,* who rejected it, to the editor of *The Examiner,* apparently the *San Francisco Examiner,* who rejected it, to the editor of *Western Press,* who rejected it, and to the editor of *Buffalo Express,* who published it on June 5, 1899 and agreed to pay him $10. There is a note in his record book that he had to dun them on July 18, 1899 to get the money.

But in spite of the many rejections, the situation during these 3 years was not as dire as it would at first seem. He published 106 items in newspapers and magazines throughout the United States. Many of the newspapers and magazines are to us today unfamiliar but some still exist, such as the *San Francisco Examiner* and *The Boston Transcript.* He published in such prominent magazines as *The Atlantic Monthly, The Youth's Companion, The Review of Reviews, McClures Magazine, Outing Magazine, Woman's Home Companion, Harper's Bazaar, The Bookman, Ainslees, Colliers, St. Nicholas,* and *Cosmopolitan,* some of which are familiar to today's readers.

It is interesting that many of these early stories are among his best. Some of his best Northland stories were written during this period. Stories such as "Batard," one of the most brutal and yet one of his most human stories; "An Odyssey of the North"; "The Law of Life," one of his best and one that I shall discuss tonight; the first version of "To Build a Fire" which I shall later discuss;

"Li-Wan the Fair"; "In the Forests of the North"; "The Master of Mystery"; "The Sickness of Lone Chief"; and "The League of Old Men" were all created. For most of these he received only a pittance: $5, $10, or at most $40. There was one exception however. The *Atlantic Monthly* paid him $200 for "An Odyssey of the North."

By 1903 he was beginning to command higher prices that ranged from $40 to $120 per story. Nine years later, in 1912, Jack London signed a contract with *Cosmopolitan Magazine.* He was to furnish the magazine one short story a month for 5 years and he was to receive $1,000 for each short story. The contract also provided he furnish one novel each year for serialization, for which he would receive $12,000.

His 1912 contract with *Cosmopolitan* carried a stipend of $24,000 a year for material which he had not yet written, and yet only 10 years before editors were reluctant to print his stories, and when they did print them he was given as low as $5 per story.

But the main purpose of my paper tonight is to deal with Jack London as a master craftsman of the short story; to explore the reasons why he has been the most widely read of any American author to date; why his stories have been translated into more than 40 different languages; why he is the best known American writer in Russia, in the Scandinavian countries, in Germany and in England; why he is so popular in the Near East; why he is generally regarded as one of the greats of all time in Australia and New Zealand; and why he has sold so widely in America.

The Call of the Wild alone has sold over 2 million copies and yet London is generally ignored by students of American literature, and by English teachers throughout the country. I have been told on more than one occasion by a freshman student that his high school teacher refused to allow him to review or to report on a book or a story by Jack London. I cannot account

for this attitude on the part of the English teachers of America. I can only say that most of them who find nothing in Jack London do so because they have read nothing of Jack London. The people who have read such stories as "The Love of Life" and "The Law of Life" and "The Chinago" realize that they are among the great short stories of all time.

There are several things about Jack London's better stories which make them great. He said in his first letter that he had:

> learned to seize upon that which is interesting, to grasp the true romance of things and to understand the people I may be thrown amongst.

That may be the key to his success.

A short story should have a good narrative. It should read well. It should be written in lucid and graphic style. It should deal with singular incidents and only a few characters. Too many people, too many places and too many things take it out of the realm of the short story into the realm of longer fiction. Most short stories should contain a strong element of irony. As a matter of fact, most of the great short stories of the world do have a strong ironic twist. Stories like de Maupassant's "The Necklace" or "A Piece of String" or Hardy's "The Three Strangers" live almost entirely upon ironical situations. And yet in none of these stories is there stronger irony than in some of London's stories.

A short story, when it includes description, must have strong and vivid description. London had the ability to create a strong narrative, to create marvelous story atmosphere, to infuse into it graphic descriptions that pertain to the characters or the events. But most of all, he could develop an ironical situation that, upon analysis, touches each of our lives.

For the purpose of this paper I'm going to deal with four stories of the 149. There will be many who will disagree with my choice. Many would prefer such stories as "An Odyssey of the

North," some undoubtedly would prefer "Batard." Some would perhaps choose "The League of Old Men." I was tempted myself to include "A Night's Lodging," because of the irony involved. Some would prefer the South Sea stories of David Grief where there is, perhaps, more adventure. Others would prefer the stories with local color such as the "South of the Slot." But the stories I have selected will illustrate the major characteristics that I wish to point out in London's writing:

First, his tremendous ability to create a narrative, to write narration, to carry the reader from page to page through the development of the story.

Second, his ability to create an atmosphere in which the character moves and lives and which, many times, affects the outcome of the story.

Third, his masterful ability to use irony. I have mentioned the irony of de Maupassant and Hardy, and yet the irony in the stories I deal with tonight is, in many ways, as great as any.

For this purpose I have selected "To Build a Fire," "The Love of Life," and "The Law of Life," three of his Northland stories, and one from the South Seas, "The Chinago." Three of these stories were written, at least in the first version, before 1902. The other, "The Chinago," was written in 1908.

I will take the liberty to quote quite liberally from London's stories because only by that means can I illustrate what might be called his ability to graphically portray both narration and description.

To many scholars and teachers, "To Build a Fire" is Jack London's short story masterpiece. It is a masterpiece because of the depth of its irony, and its understanding of human nature, the graphic style of the writing, and the contrast between man's intelligence and the intuition of the animal.

Actually London wrote two versions of this story. Under

date of December 22, 1908, London wrote to R. W. Gilder, editor of the *Century Magazine*, as follows:

> . . . Somewhere in that mountain of letters is a bunch of correspendence relating to "To Build a Fire." I cannot find it, and shall have to go on memory.
>
> A long, long time ago I wrote a story for boys which I sold to the *Youth's Companion*. It was purely juvenile in treatment; its motif was not only very strong, but very true. Man after man

Jack London,
962 East 16th.st.,
Oakland, Calif.

Sonnet.

A trumpet call, a bursting of the sod,
And lo! I flung aside the clinging clay,
Lifted my flight along the star-strewn way
Among the white-robed saints that fled to God.

And he that held the gate, with holy nod,
Did bid me enter that my feet might stray
Amid the flowers with those that God obey;
The just, the good, and pure on earth there trod.

Dear heart: I questioned him if thou wert there,
One of that bright-browed throng whose voices led
The heavenly hymn of praise, the wondrous strain
That kissed in ecstasy the trembling air?
But he that held the gate did shake his head,
Thou wast not there; I turned away again.

Figue 5. Jack London turned his hand to writing all literary forms. This sonnet is shown as it was typewritten.

> in the Klondike has died alone after getting his feet wet, through failure to build a fire. As years went by, I was worried about the inadequate treatment I had given that motif, and by the fact that I had treated it for boys merely. At last I came to the resolve to take the same motif and handle it for men. I had no access to the boys' version of it, and I wrote it just as though I had never used the motif before. I do not remember anything about the way I handled it for juveniles, but I do know, I am absolutely confident, that beyond the motif itself, there is no similarity of treatment whatever.
>
> I can only say that it never entered my head that there was anything ethically wrong in handling the same motif over again in the way I did, and I can only add that I am of the same opinion now, upon carefully considering the question. Please let me know how you feel about the matter.

The situation was that he had written "To Build a Fire" and published it on May 29, 1902, in the *Youth's Companion.* It is a very brief story and has little resemblance to the story that he published in the *Century Magazine* in 1908. He wrote the first version while he was in California. He wrote the second version while he was on the cruise of the *Snark.* And, therefore, did not have access to his former notes.

In the first version he has a man by the name of Tom Vincent set out alone on a trip in the Klondike. Vincent had heard the warning "never travel alone," but he paid no attention. He laughed at it because he was proud of his own strength. It was a bleak, dreary day; 60 degrees below zero. He had 30 miles of lonely trail to cover when he left Calumet Camp on the Yukon with a light pack to go up Ball Creek to the divide between it and Cherry Creek where his party was prospecting and hunting moose. As he walked he tried to avoid stepping into springs or getting his feet wet, but inadvertently he did. When he tried to build a fire, he noticed that his hands quickly chilled when he took off the mittens and he could not handle the matches. He tried to build a fire under a tree,

> but at the moment he was adding the first twigs to the fire a grievous thing happened: the pine boughs above his head were burdened with 4 months of snowfall and so finely adjusted were the burdens that his slight movement in collecting the twigs had been sufficient to disturb the balance.

After he had started the fire, the snow was dislodged from the boughs and fell on Tom Vincent's head and shoulders and blotted out the fire.

He attempted to build another fire, but this time away from the trees so that it could not be douted by the falling snow. But he found his fingers and hands too cold to gather the twigs and to light the match. He became desperate and felt that he must move on. He started to hurry up the trail, but he could not run with wet feet at 60 below zero. He came to a sharp turn in the creek where he could look ahead for a mile, and realized that there was no sign of help in the white silence beyond.

Then his eyes chanced upon a high water lodgement of twigs and leaves and branches. If he could strike a match he could build a fire. He sat down awkwardly, began to plan his course by carefully lighting the matches against his trousers.

Time and again, thus holding both his hands, he scratched a bunch on his pant leg, and finally ignited it. But the flame burned into the flesh of his hands, and he involuntarily relaxed his hold and the bunch fell into the snow. While he tried vainly to pick it up it sizzled and went out. But he kept on trying. Then he remembered that somewhere, not far away, there was a moose hunter's cabin. If he could get to that he could be saved. So he started out again. He came upon it but found it deserted, and began to despair.

> He sank down, sobbing. All was over. In an hour at best, in that terrific temperature, he would be an icy corpse. But the love of life was strong in him, and he sprang again to his feet. He was thinking quickly. What if the matches did burn his hands? Burned hands were better than dead hands. No hands at all were better than death.

He continued to flounder along the trail and soon came upon another high water lodgement. There were twigs and branches and leaves and grasses, all dry and waiting for fire. And these he succeeded in setting aflame. Then he took off his pack, got out

dry socks, dried his feet in front of the fire, and spent the night before the fire getting warm.

The next day he limped pitifully into the camp at the Cherry Creek divide, and in a month's time he was about on his feet and so lived.

There are several interesting features about this story. It was written very early in London's career, sometime before December of 1901. According to his Journal record, he submitted it for publication in December 1901. Consequently, it was written during London's period of financial depression, when he was frequently in the depths of despair. In many of London's Northland stories he does not name his characters as such, particularly into the second version of "To Build a Fire." But perhaps the most interesting element was the theme of "Love of Life." It is a theme that occurs again and again in London's writings. Tom Vincent was saved by his determination to live. It is perhaps this element that interested the editors of *Youth's Companion.* This is one of the few stories that was sold the first time it was submitted.

The second version of "To Build a Fire" was written aboard the *Snark* in the South Seas in 1908. It is curious that aboard a small boat and in the heat and turmoil of the South Seas London would turn back to the North and write so vivid a story of a Northland tragedy and Northland irony. In this version the man is unnamed.

He was a newcomer, and consequently the white silence of the Yukon made no impression upon him.

> The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature and upon man's frailty in general, able only to live within certain limits of heat and cold, and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and men's place in the universe.

He was prepared for the cold with his mittens and his moccasins, and with ear flaps and with a heavy coat and though he speculated upon the cold and found that as he spat upon the ground the spittle crackled in the air, he was unconcerned. Along with this man, and this is a difference from the first story, there trotted a big native husky wolf dog.

> The animal was depressed by the tremendous cold. It knew that it was no time for travelling. Its instinct told it a truer tale than was told to the man by the man's judgment. In reality, it was not merely colder than fifty below zero; it was colder than sixty below, than seventy below. It was seventy-five below zero. Since the freezing-point is thirty-two above zero, it meant that one hundred and seven degrees of frost obtained.

The dog knew nothing about thermometers and possibly in its brain could not make a sharp distinction between 107 degrees below freezing and 101. But the dog had learned to burrow under the snow and cuddle in the warmth of it away from the air. It also had learned to appreciate fire.

As the man walked along the trail he contemplated the time of his arrival at the camp. He knew that if he maintained a certain speed he would be at Henderson Creek by 6 o'clock and would be with the boys.

He was careful as he walked on the trail not to step on certain places where the ice had barely frozen over, where he could break through and wet his feet. He knew that wetting his feet could be very dangerous. He avoided the hidden pools by noting a certain false appearance to the snow. Once he forced the dog to act as a trail breaker for him and found that the dog broke through. And after the dog had broken through by instinct it licked its legs and toes so that the ice could not form.

At mid-day the man built a fire, ate a lunch that he had carried under his coat, next to his body, and took time by the warmth of the fire to fill his pipe and have a comfortable smoke. And then he turned back to the trail. The dog was disappointed; he wanted to stay by the fire.

> This man did not know cold. Possibly all the generations of his ancestry had been ignorant of cold, of real cold, of cold one hundred and seven degrees below freezing point. But the dog knew; all its ancestry knew, and it had inherited the knowledge. And it knew that it was not good to walk abroad in such fearful cold.

During the afternoon the man inadvertently stepped on thin ice and found himself floundering in water, with his feet wet up to his knees. He knew the danger and knew that he must stop, build a fire and dry his feet and put on dry socks. He was able to start it with small twigs. He fed it very carefully.

> Gradually, as the flame grew stronger, he increased the size of the twigs with which he fed it. He squatted in the snow, pulling the twigs out from their entanglement in the brush and feeding directly to the flame. He knew there must be no failure.

Finally he felt that he was safe. The fire had been a success. The old timer had been serious in his statement that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after 50 below. Well, here he was. He had the accident, he was alone, he had kindled a fire and would save himself.

And then the unexpected happened. He had built the fire under a spruce tree which was weighted down with snow for many months, and when he pulled the twigs from the base of the tree he began an agitation, an imperceptable agitation, but enough to disturb the snow balance and bring about disaster. The snow fell from the tree upon the man and the fire, and the fire was blotted out.

With the fire gone, the man attempted to move along the trail but realized that he could not travel and attempted to build another fire. He was unsuccessful. He remembered the tale of a man caught in a blizzard who killed a steer and crawled inside the carcass and was so saved. He thought that he might kill the dog and thereby save his life. But when he spoke to the dog there was a strange note in his voice, and the dog was frightened and

kept away from him. Then he tried to take to the trail again, but became weary and sat down.

Then the man drowsed off into what seemed to him the most comfortable and satisfying sleep he had ever known. The dog sat facing him and waiting. The brief day drew to a close in a long slow twilight. There were no signs of a fire to be made. Never in the dog's experience had it known a man to sit like that in the snow and make no fire. As the twilight drew on, its eager yearning for the fire mastered it, and with great shifting and lifting of its forefeet it whined softly then flattened its ears down in anicipation of being chidden by the man, but the man remained silent. Later the dog whined loudly and still later it crept close to the man and caught the scent of death. This made the animal bristle and back away. A little longer it delayed, howling under the stars that leaped and danced and shone brightly in the sky. Then it turned and trotted up the trail in the direction of the camp. It knew where to find other providers of food and fire.

It is the basic irony of life that man, with his knowledge, with his ability to clothe himself, to build a fire, to create warmth or to provide cold, could not survive in the Artic weather of 75 degrees below zero while the dog, living only on his instinct, without mittens, without ear flaps, without a coat, without lunch, and without a fire, saved himself.

In this story, as in the first version of the story and also in the story of "Love of Life," and again as reflected in "The Chinago," there is the permanent theme of man's desire to live. In the "Love of Life" it is the driving force that saves the man, but in "To Build a Fire," even with all the driving force it has, man cannot overcome the elements. The irony is that with all of his knowledge he is still a helpless victim to natural powers and natural forces.

Jack London loved life and he lived it as fully and as completely as any man. He admired men who cling or have clung to life in times of adversity. The love of life is a theme that runs through many of his novels and short stories. It is the theme of

man enduring unbelievable suffering and hardship but tenaciously clinging to life.

Two of his best short stories were built around this theme; "To Build a Fire" and "Love of Life." In these stories men, alone in the vastness of the Northland, struggle against freezing cold, sometimes 75 degrees below zero, and endure unbelievable misery because of their will to live. In the first story the man fails and freezes to death. In the second story he succeeds and survives.

London wrote "Love of Life" early in 1903. He submitted it to the editor of *Cosmopolitan* who rejected it; to the editor of *Outing* who rejected it; and to the editor of *McClures* who accepted it and paid him $400. It was published in December 1905.

London, by this time, had established an international reputation. According to his records book it was sold again to *Blackwoods* Magazine that same month for 20 pounds or approximately $100. He also sold the French translation rights to *L'illustration* for $29.60 plus a 2 years' subscription to that magazine.

In "Love of Life," two men started out cross-country to the sea in hopes to catch a boat for the States. They each carried packs with their necessary food and clothing. Each had a moosehide sack containing gold bullion. Shortly after they had begun their journey in the extremely cold weather, one of them slipped and sprained his ankle. He called to the other, "I say Bill, I've sprained my ankle." Bill paid no attention. He staggered on through the cold leaving his companion behind, despite the pleas of the crippled man. After a short struggle the man was able to bind up his ankle and hobble painfully on. A few days later he attempted to shoot a young caribou only to find that his rifle had no ammunition.

In his wandering he lost his gun and his knife, so was weaponless. He struggled on, day after day, with his damaged ankle and without food, becoming weaker and weaker. Once, to lighten his

load, he poured out part of the gold from the moose-hide sack; later he poured out the remainder.

Now and again the wolves, in packs of two and three, crossed his path. But they steered clear of him. They were not in sufficient numbers. Besides, they were hunting the caribou which did not battle, while this strange creature that walked erect might scratch and bite.

> One late afternoon he came upon scattered bones where the wolves had made a kill. The debris had been a caribou calf an hour before, squawking and running and very much alive. He contemplated the bones, clean-picked and polished, pink with the cell-life in them which had not yet died. Could it possibly be that he might be that ere the day was done! Such was life, eh? A vain and fleeting thing. It was only life that pained. There was no hurt in death. To die was to sleep. It meant cessation, rest. Then why was he not content to die?
>
> Came frightful days of snow and rain. He did not know when he made camp, when he broke camp. He travelled in the night as much as in the day. He rested wherever he fell, crawled on whenever the dying life in him flickered up and burned less dimly. He, as a man, no longer strove. It was the life in him, unwilling to die, that drove him on. He did not suffer. His nerves had become blunted, numb, while his mind was filled with wierd visions and delicious dreams.

One afternoon the man came upon a trail of another man, one who did not walk but crawled on all fours. He followed the trail of the other man who dragged himself along, and soon came to the end of it – a few fresh-picked bones upon a soggy mass marked by the foot-pads of many wolves.

> He saw a squat moose-hide sack, mate to his own, which had been torn by sharp teeth. He picked it up, though its weight was almost too much for his feeble fingers. Bill had carried it to the last. Ha! Ha! He would have the laugh on Bill. He would survive and carry it to the ship in the shining sea. His mirth was hoarse and ghastly, like a raven's croak, and a sick wolf joined him, howling lugubriously. The man ceased suddenly. How could he have the laugh on Bill if that were Bill; if those bones, so pinky-white and clean, were Bill?
>
> He turned away. Well, Bill had deserted him; but he would not take the gold, nor would he suck Bill's bones. Bill would have, though, had it been the other way around, he mused as he staggered on.

Here is real irony, a case of poetic justice, where retribution come to "Bill," and his bones are found by the injured man he had deserted.

A day or two before he found Bill's bones he had come into view of the sea and had sighted a ship, he thought a whaler, lying at anchor. The hope of reaching it gave him renewed courage. But his strength was almost gone and he knew that he was being followed by the sick wolf.

> The patience of the wolf was terrible. The man's patience was no less terrible. For half a day he lay motionless, fighting off unconsciousness and waiting for the thing that was to feed upon him and upon which he wished to feed.
>
> Sometimes the languid sea rose over him and he dreamed long dreams; but ever through it all, waking and dreaming, he waited for the wheezing breath and the harsh caress of the tongue.
>
> He did not hear the breath, and he slipped slowly from some dream to the feel of the tongue along his hand. He waited, the fangs pressed softly; the pressure increased; the wolf was exerting its last strength in an effort to sink teeth in the food for which it had waited so long. But the man had waited long, and the lacerated hand closed on the jaw. Slowly, while the wolf struggled feebly and the hand clutched feebly, the other hand crept across to a grip. Five minutes later the whole weight of the man's body was on top of the wolf. The hands had not sufficient strength to choke the wolf, but the face of the man was pressed close to the throat of the wolf and the mouth of the man was full of hair. At the end of half an hour the man was aware of a warm trickle in his throat. It was not pleasant. It was like molten lead being forced into his stomach, and it was forced by his will alone. Later the man rolled over on his back and slept.

It had been a contest between a dying man and a dying animal. Whichever first reached helpless exhaustion would be the other's victim. But the love of life was strong in the man and he won.

On board the whaler in the bay were some members of a scientific expedition. One day they noticed a strange object on the beach. They went ashore to investigate.

> They saw something that was alive but which would hardly be called a man. It was blind, unconscious. It squirmed along the ground like some monstrous worm. Most of its efforts were ineffectual, but it was persistent, and it writhed and twisted and went ahead perhaps a score of feet an hour.

The scientists took him aboard and nursed him back to health. Now comes the final touch of irony – he became obsessed with the fear that the food would not last and ate to the point of obesity. The fear of hunger drove him to obtain food by any means he could devise and when the scientist realized that his health was endangered by his overweight, they searched his bunk and found it lined with hardtack; the mattress was stuffed with hardtack; every nook and cranny was filled with hardtack. Yet he was sane. He was simply taking precautions against another famine.

So, ironically, the man whose love of life carried him through cold, exhaustion and starvation would have destroyed himself with food and inactivity had not the scientists interfered.

One of Jack London's most poetic stories is "The Law of Life." It is almost a picture poem, and yet it is a story in which he reveals, as much as in any other story, the depth of human tragedy. It was written early in 1900, and first submitted to the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* who rejected it. He then submitted it to the editor of *McClures Magazine*, who accepted it and paid him $55; two cents a word. Later London frequently made 15 cents, 20 cents, and sometimes 25 cents a word.

"The Law of Life" is a story of an old Indian, apparently once a chief. His name was Koskoosh. The story opens;

> Old Koskoosh listened greedily. Though his sight had long since faded, his hearing was still acute, and the slightest sound penetrated to the glimmering intelligence which yet abode behind the withered forehead, but which no longer gazed forth upon the things of the world. Ah! that was Sit-cum-to-ha, shrilly anathematizing the dogs as she cuffed and beat them into the harnesses. Sit-cum-to-ha was his daughter's daughter, but she was too busy to waste a thought upon her broken grandfather, sitting alone there in the snow, forlorn and helpless. Camp must be broken. The long trail waited while the short day refused to linger. Life called her, and the duties of life, not death. And he was very close to death now.

Old Koskoosh sat by a small fire, living pretty much in the memories of his past. He remembered when he and a companion

followed the trail of wolves which had separated an old moose from the herd and baited him and tormented him until they were able to kill and devour him.

The memories of this scene were very vivid in his mind, because now he was sitting by the fire and in a little while, at best a few short hours, his tribe would move away and leave him there to freeze to death or to be devoured by the wolves. But the tribe could not take him with them. It was necessary for them to find new hunting grounds, to find food and a warmer winter climate. They were loaded with the necessary tents, clothing and what food they had.

Even though he was the father of the chief of the tribe, he could not be taken, he must be discarded. So it was arranged that Sit-cum-to-ha would put wood beside him so that he could keep the fire going at least for a few short hours and thus keep the wolves away.

He could hear them moving camp and knew that in a little while he would be left to die, but that was nature.

> But one task did Nature set the individual. Did he not perform it, he died. Did he perform it, it was all the same, he died. Nature did not care; there were plenty who were obedient, and it was only the obedience in this matter, not the obedient, which lived and lived always. The tribe of Koskoosh was very old. The old men he had known when a boy, had known old men before them. Therefore it was true that the tribe lived, that it stood for the obedience of all its members, way down into the forgotten past, whose very restingplaces were unremembered. They did not count; they were episodes. They had passed away like clouds from a summer sky. He also was an episode, and would pass away. Nature did not care.

And as he mused, the tribe got ready to go, but before it left his son came and placed his hand upon his shoulder and bade him good-by. This touched the old man. His son was very kind to take a moment to say good-by to him before they left. Then they were gone.

He could see around the fringe of the fire the gathering of

the wolves. He knew that as soon as the fire failed the wolves would close in and devour him. He felt a cold muzzle thrust against his cheek, and he rebelled against it. He took a burning fagot from the fire and pushed it toward the beast. The brute withdrew but the other wolves around howled and panted and snarled at him.

> Now one wormed his chest forward, dragging his haunches after, now a second, now a third; but never a one drew back. Why should he cling to life? he asked, and dropped the blazing stick into the snow. It sizzled and went out. The circle grunted uneasily, but held its own. Again he saw the last stand of the old bull moose, and Koskoosh dropped his head wearily upon his knees. What did it matter after all? Was it not the law of life?

London was well aware of this "law" operating in his own time, when industry and professions alike discarded men who were no longer productive. In the days before Social Security and pension plans, men who became too old or decrepit to work were a burden to the family or the tribe, and the tribe or family often discarded them. Perhaps the bitterest irony of all is that such should be "The Law of Life."

I said earlier that most critics consider "To Build a Fire" as London's greatest. My choice, however, is "The Chinago." I believe, from the point of view of the building of an atmosphere, the telling of a narrative, and the development of irony, that "The Chinago" is the greatest story of London's career and one of the great stories of all time.

It was written while he was on the cruise of the *Snark* in the South Seas in 1909. He submitted it to the following magazines – *Colliers Weekly, Everybody's, Success, Cosmopolitan, American Magazine, Women's Home Companion, McClures, Century, Outing, Saturday Evening Post* – all of which rejected it. It was accepted by *Harpers* and published in July, 1909 and in an English magazine in September, 1909. *Harpers* paid him $500 and he received approximately $100 from the English publication.

"Chinago" was a term applied by the Tahitians to the Chinese coolies who were indentured and brought to the islands as laborers for the plantations, but who were, in reality, slaves. By the terms of the indenture the coolie was signed to a period of servitude, usually 5 years. He was paid 50 cents per day. There were men in the Chinese villages who worked for $10, $5, or even $4 a year. So the Chinago considered himself lucky to have the opportunity to work for 50 cents a day – and for 5 years.

Ah Cho was one of these Chinagos. He worked on a plantation for an English company in Tahiti along with 500 other Chinagos. One night one Chinago, Ah San, murdered another Chinago, Chung Ga. Five Chinagos witnessed the killing and were found by the overseer, Schemmer, in the room with the body of Chung Ga, but Ah San had escaped. All 498 Chinagos knew that Ah San was the killer, but they had secretly agreed never to betray another Chinago. The French court tried the five men who were taken by Schemmer at the time of the murder.

Ah Cho listened to the trial. He was complacent because he believed that justice would be done and that a man innocent of the crime would not be convicted. He did not understand the courtroom arguments, which were held in French, and he could not understand why the Frenchmen were so stupid as to not be able to find out who killed Chung Ga.

> So it was that Ah Cho reasoned, when he, along with his four companions, had lied and blocked and obfuscated in their statements to the court concerning what had taken place. They had heard the sounds of the killing, and, like Schemmer, they had run to the spot. They had got there before Schemmer – that was all. True, Schemmer had testified that, attracted by the sounds of the quarreling as he chanced to pass by, he had stood for at least five minutes outside; and then, when he entered, he found the prisoners already inside; and that they had not entered just before, because he had been standing by the only door to the barracks. But what of that? Ah Cho and his four fellow-prisoners had testified that Schemmer was mistaken. In the end they would be let go. They were all confident of that. Five men could not have their heads cut off for two stab wounds. Besides, no foreign devil had seen the killing. But these Frenchmen were so stupid.

In China, as Ah Cho well knew, the magistrate would order all of them to the torture and learn the truth. The truth was very easy to learn under torture. But these Frenchmen did not torture, bigger fools they! Therefore they would never find out who killed Chung Ga.

It was evident that the one thing the court must do was to find one man guilty and execute him. It must also establish degrees of guilt among the other four for various degrees of punishment. This must be done for exemplary reasons.

When the court handed down the decision, Ah Chow was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death; Ah Cho, second in guilt was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment at Caledonia.

Ah Cho all during the trial had dreamed of completing his indenture and returning to China where, with his savings, he could buy him a small home, rear a family, and live out his life in comfort. He had already served 3 years of the indenture, had 2 more to go, and was 22 years old. Even as he heard the sentence he was not too disturbed because he could wait another 20 years and he would still have time to return to his native land and live in his beloved garden.

The five Chinagos were taken back to jail. They were not shocked nor grieved. The sentences being unexpected was quite what they were accustomed to in their dealings with the white devils. From them a Chinago rarely expected more than the unexpected. The heavy punishment for a crime they had not committed was no stranger than the countless strange things that white devils did. In the weeks that followed, Ah Cho often contemplated Ah Chow with mild curiosity. His head was to be cut off by the guillotine that was being erected on the plantation. For him there would be no declining years, no gardens of tranquility. Ah Cho philosophized and speculated about life and death. As for himself, he was not perturbed. Twenty years were merely twenty years. By that much was his garden removed from him – that was all. He was young, and the patience of Asia was in his bones. He could wait those twenty years, and by that time the heats of his blood would be assuaged and he would be better fitted for that garden of calm delight. He thought of a name for it; he would call it The Garden of the Morning Calm. He was made happy all day by the thought, and he was inspired to devise a moral maxim on the virtue of patience.

And then one morning Cruchot, a gendarme, went to the chief justice to pick up the order commanding the jailer to give up the person of Ah Chow for execution.

> Now, it happened that the Chief Justice had given a dinner the night before to the captain and officers of the French man-of-war. His hand was shaking when he wrote out the order, and his eyes were aching so dreadfully that he did not read over the order. It was only a Chinago's life he was signing away, anyway. So he did not notice that he had omitted the final letter in Ah Chow's name. The order read "Ah Cho," and, when Cruchot presented the order, the jailer turned over to him the person of Ah Cho.

Cruchot took Ah Cho in the wagon beside him behind two mules and drove away. Ah Cho thought that he was going back to the plantation and he beamed at the gendarme. Finally the gendarme said to him, "You are funny," and Ah Cho beamed more ardently.

> "I am glad to get out of the jail."
> "Is that all?" The gendarme shrugged his shoulder.
> "Is it not enough?" was the retort.
> "Then you are glad to have your head cut off?"
> Ah Cho looked at him in abrupt perplexity and said: – "Why I am going back to Atimaono to work on the plantation for Schemmer. Are you not taking me to Atimaono?"

Ah Cho was alarmed but still had faith that justice would prevail and that before they guillotined him they would rectify the mistake in the spelling of his name. But the gendarme, after 20 years of experience, knew all too well not to question the order of a superior and he would deliver Ah Cho to the executioner even though he was aware of the error.

> So the time passed nicely until Atimaono was reached and the mules trotted up to the foot of the scaffold, in the shade of which stood the impatient sergeant. Ah Cho was hurried up the ladder of the scaffold. Beneath him on one side he saw assembled all the coolies of the plantation. Schemmer had decided that the event would be a good object lesson, and so had called in the coolies from the fields and compelled them to be present. As they caught sight of Ah Cho they gabbled among themselves

> in low voices. They saw the mistake; but they kept it to themselves. The inexplicable white devils had doubtlessly changed their minds. Instead of taking the life of one innocent man, they were taking the life of another innocent man. Ah Chow or or Ah Cho – what did it matter which?

Schemmer was the executioner. He had built the guillotine himself. When Ah Cho was turned over to Schemmer he explained that there had been an error. Schemmer was surprised. He swore tersely for a few seconds, and looked regretfully across at the thing he had made with his own hands. He was eager to see it work.

> "Look here," he said finally, "we can't postpone this affair. I've lost three hours' work already out of those five hundred Chinagos. I can't afford to lose it all over again for the right man. Let's put the performance through just the same. It is only a Chinago."

And so, Ah Cho, who had no guilt, learned in a few brief moments that all of his dreams and hopes would be destroyed by a spelling mistake made by a drunken judge, to whom it did not matter. He learned that justice is a convenience to be used by some men for mastery over other men; that human life is but a pawn to be created and destroyed according to the whims of fate. Such was the diabolical irony in the case of Ah Cho, "just another Chinago."

These are but four examples selected from approximately 150 stories. All of the 150 are not masterpieces but many are, and those that are will live and find a place in the permanent literature of the world. They testify to the genius of Jack London, master of irony and master craftsman of the short story.

Thirty-third Honor Lecture Delivered at the University

April 8, 1966

A basic objective of the Faculty Association of the Utah State University, in the words of its constitution, is:

> To encourage intellectual growth and development of its members by sponsoring and arranging for the publication of two annual faculty lectures in the fields of (a) the biological and exact sciences, including engineering, called the Annual Faculty Honor Lecture in the Natural Sciences, and (b) the humanities and social sciences, including education and business administration, called the Annual Faculty Honor Lecture in the Humanities.

The administration of the University is sympathetic with these aims and shares the cost of publishing and distributing these lectures.

Lecturers are chosen by a standing committee of the Faculty Association. Among the factors considered by the committee in choosing lecturers are, in the words of the constitution:

> (1) creative activity in the field of the proposed lecture; (2) publication of research through recognized channels in the field of the proposed lecture; (3) outstanding teaching over an extended period of years; (4) personal influence in developing the character of students.

Dr. Hendricks was selected by the committee to deliver the Faculty Honor Lecture in the Humanities. On behalf of the members of the Association we are happy to present this paper:

JACK LONDON: MASTER OF THE SHORT STORY

COMMITTEE ON FACULTY HONOR LECTURE

Other Lectures in the Series

THE SCIENTIST'S CONCEPT OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD
by Willard Gardner

IRRIGATION SCIENCE: THE FOUNDATION OF PERMANENT AGRICULTURE IN ARID REGIONS
by Orson W. Israelson

NUTRITIONAL STATUS OF SOME UTAH POPULATION GROUPS
by Almeda Perry Brown

RANGE LAND OF AMERICA AND SOME RESEARCH ON ITS MANAGEMENT
by Laurence A. Stoddart

MIRID-BUG INJURY AS A FACTOR IN DECLINING ALFALFA-SEED YIELDS
by Charles J. Sorenson

THE FUTURE OF UTAH'S AGRICULTURE
by W. Preston Thomas

GEOLOGICAL STUDIES IN UTAH
by J. Stewart Williams

INSTITUTION BUILDING IN UTAH
by Joseph A. Geddes

THE BUNT PROBLEM IN RELATION TO WINTER WHEAT BREEDING
by Delmar C. Tingey

THE DESERT SHALL BLOSSOM AS THE ROSE
by D. Wynne Thorne

THE TEACHING OF SCIENCE
by Sherwin Maeser

THE BEGINNINGS OF SETTLEMENT IN CACHE VALLEY
by Joel Edward Ricks

GENETICS OF CANCER AND OTHER ABNORMAL GROWTHS
by Eldon J. Gardner

OBLIGATIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO THE SOCIAL ORDER
by Ernest A. Jacobsen

SOME EFFECTS OF FLUORIDES ON PLANTS, ANIMALS, AND MAN
by Delbert A. Greenwood

THE POLITICAL PROCESS
by M. R. Merrill

RANGE LIVESTOCK NUTRITION AND ITS IMPORTANCE IN THE INTERMOUNTAIN REGION
by C. Wayne Cook

SOME ECONOMIC FALLACIES AND THE CITIZEN
by Evan B. Murray

UTAH'S FUTURE WATER PROBLEMS
by Wayne D. Criddle

MOTIVATION IN LEARNING
by Arden N. Frandsen
(not published in this series)

GOOD NUTRITION FOR THE FAMILY
by Ethelyn B. Wilcox

ZION IN PARADISE – EARLY MORMONS IN THE SOUTH SEAS
by S. George Ellsworth

STUDIES IN EXPERIMENTAL EVOLUTION
by William Sidney Boyle

WATER FOR MAN
by Sterling A. Taylor

THE SEMANTICS OF STRESS AND PITCH IN ENGLISH
by George A. Meyer

THE PRICE OF PREJUDICE
by Leonard J. Arrington

BEAR LAKE AND ITS FUTURE
by William F. Sigler

THE RESPONSIBLE EXERCISE OF CREATIVE POWER
by Carlton Culmsee

THE SECRETS OF VIRAL REPRODUCTION
by George W. Cochran

THE SEARCH FOR CONSENSUS
by M. Judd Harmon

COCCIDIOSIS OF CATTLE – SOME UNSOLVED PROBLEMS
by Datus M. Hammond

COMMITMENTS IN MARRIAGE
by Don C. Carter

MAN AND HIS WATER RESOURCE
by Dean F. Peterson