

## Sabbatical Leave Report

For Fall Semester 2016

Arthur C. Verge, Ph. D.

I would like to open by thanking the Administration of El Camino College, the members of the Sabbatical Leave Committee and Dr. Gloria Miranda (Sabbatical Supervisor), for granting me the Research Sabbatical that I have recently concluded.

My sabbatical involved writing and researching the relationship of Hawaiian lifeguard\surfer George Freeth with renowned California adventure author Jack London. My goal of the sabbatical independent research project is to have a peer reviewed scholarly journal article published based on the research I conducted and my subsequent written work on the subject matter.

The time afforded me by the Research Sabbatical allowed me to work five days a week on it. In that time I was able to go through numerous primary source materials on Hawaiian history as well as several local newspapers here in the South Bay (circa 1896-1919) to trace the life and times of George Freeth who was responsible for founding of what is today the modern L.A. County Lifeguard Service.

In my work, which has now surpassed 60,000 words, is the emphasis on the importance of the role George Freeth played in changing negative racial attitudes and stereotypes towards Pacific Islanders. I began this by detailing the story of Jack London's 1907-1908 sailing adventure to the South Seas. His first stop aboard his sloop "The Snark" was Hawaii. It was there that he met George Freeth in the waves off Waikiki Beach. London, who believed in both the athletic and racial superiority of white mainlanders, found himself struggling aboard a surfboard as he attempted

to learn the sport of surfing. It would be Freeth that would come to his aid. London was so taken with the young Hawaiian's polite demeanor and skills in the surf that the author would go on to write the very first published article on the sport of surfing. In the article, which appeared in a 1907 issue of "Ladies Home Journal," London enthusiastically described the skills of Freeth riding waves in the ocean famously naming him the "Brown Mercury." This, in turn, would make Freeth the world's first recognized surfer. While this is well-known by London scholars and those that study the origins of today's multi-billion dollar surfing industry, what is not known is that George Freeth played the central character in one of London's most moving stories entitled, "Aloha Oe."

My research, which included going through several U.S. Congressional Reports, shows that London's fictional young Hawaiian lifeguard and skilled waterman, "Stephen Knight," was actually George Freeth. The story involves a doomed love affair between the visiting daughter of a U.S. Senator. The Senator who is on a Congressional fact finding mission (which actually did take place) allow his daughter to ride horses, learn to surf, and keep company with the young Hawaiian who was chosen to oversee the safety of all members of the Congressional tour. In the end as members of the American delegation decide to how to best use and divide Hawaii's islands and plantations, the Senator tells his daughter that her love for the polite diplomatic Hawaiian is over because the handsome young man nonetheless has "tropic sunshine streamed into his veins."

London's work in this story gives a remarkably sympathetic portrayal of the Hawaiian Freeth and the island people's as well. London's meeting of Freeth and his

later spending time with him would translated into marking a significant shift in London's writings on native peoples. As important was, unknown till now, was "Aloha Oe" was based on actual events that I notate in the journal article (I have attached the opening of the forthcoming journal article which will be submitted in July).

Having the time to do this research allowed me to reach out to scholars and in the course of doing so, I met several times with award winning author David Davis, whose most recent book is, "'Waterman: The Life and Times of Duke Khanamoku.'" Our conversations led to his encouragement that I expand my work into a full-length book on George Freeth.

My work on Freeth and London has greatly enhanced my work in researching and writing California history. I was able, with the time afforded by the research sabbatical, to expand my knowledge base to include the stories of other Pacific Islanders. Their stories will now be part of my lectures at El Camino College. They include the rise and fall of the Hawaiian Kingdom and the island nation's subsequent emergence as our nation's fiftieth state. In it I will detail the important role Hawaiians have played in shaping California's modern identity which includes the state's modern and very robust coastal economy (including today's Silicon Beach which prior to Freeth's arrival in 1907 was considered too dangerous to live or work by given the risks inherent in being in or near the ocean. His founding of ocean lifesaving services changed that).

I also have included in my lectures my research into the Pacific Islanders who risked their lives to save the life of a young naval officer Jack Kennedy and his

surviving crew from P.T. #109. I have done this to let all students know that the much neglected often forgotten Pacific Islander community has greatly contributed to and shaped American history and identity.

During my sabbatical I also spent time updating my website which can be simply goggled with the words "Arthur Verge." There students can get their syllabus, assignments, helpful hints for writing their essays, etc. I also used my time to convert and produce over 100 DVD's that I carefully use at the end of each class. These include five-minute clips from the PBS television show "American Experience," as well as those from Huell Howser's "California Gold."

The sabbatical also allowed me to move forward a manuscript that will go for review in September. The introduction is being written by former Los Angeles Times writer and "Book of the Year' recipient, Miles Corwin. Due September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 this book length submission has two chapters on George Freeth. Also included is the story of early coastal real estate development in Southern California and the subsequent need for ocean lifeguards. The book then expands out to include, in part a memoir of my 42 years working the beaches of the South Bay as well as Santa Monica and Venice as an L.A. County Lifeguard. I do have a chapter that includes my very happy time here at El Camino College (what my lifeguard friends called going from the "Wooden tower to the Ivory tower").

Again I wish to express my deepest appreciation to the Administration of El Camino College, the Sabbatical Leave Committee and Dr. Gloria Miranda (Sabbatical Supervisor), for supporting my request for a research sabbatical. The time has allowed me to continue my work as an academic scholar and to share those findings

in class lectures with my students. It was and remains my goal to highlight the often forgotten and neglected contributions of Pacific Islanders to the history of the United States.

Respectfully submitted,

Arthur C. Verge, Ph.D.

“George Freeth: Jack London’s Hawaiian Knight ”

“Aloha oe, Aloha oe, e ke onaona no ho ika lipo,  
A fond embrace, ahoi ae au, until we meet again.”

By Arthur C. Verge

On paper it seems an unlikely pairing; a world famous adventure writer at the peak of his fame and a then comparatively unknown Hawaiian ocean lifeguard and surfer. Jack London first met the twenty-four year old George Freeth on the waterman’s front yard - in the waves off Waikiki Beach in June of 1907. It would prove a fortitudinous meeting for both men and subsequently would have ramifications on both literature and the history of Southern California.

It was fellow adventure writer Alexander Hume Ford who initiated the contact between London and Freeth. Ford, who had learned to surf from Freeth, took an excited London out into the deep blue waters off Waikiki. Already suffering sunburn, bumps and bruises from playing on smaller inside waves the day before, London struggled even more amongst “big smoky ones” on the outside. And then it happened.

“Shaking the water from my eyes as I emerged from one wave and peered ahead to see what the next one looked like, I saw him tearing in on the back of it, standing on his board carelessly poised, a young god bronzed with sunburn. We went through the back of the wave on the back of which he rode. Ford called to him. He turned an airspring from his wave, rescued his board from its maw, and paddled

over to us and joined Ford in showing me things.” (Jack London, *Riding the South Surf*, *Women’s Home Companion*, October 1907, p. 10).

At the moment Freeth paddled over, London was struggling not only with his 6-foot, 75-pound surfboard, but his life in general. His meeting with Freeth would prove transformative. In Freeth, London found a fascinating subject. He would become his Hawaiian knight, a young man of honor and courage, and whom he portrayed as best representing the native Hawaiian Aloha spirit. Not only did the author go on to describe Freeth and extraordinary his skills on a surfboard to introduce the sport of surfing to the world, he also made him the subject of one of his most emotionally moving stories based in Hawaii.

Previously unknown until this publication, Freeth was the subject of London’s short story, “Aloha Oe.” In it, a young Hawaiian lifeguard and surfer, by the name of Stephen Knight, falls in love with the young daughter of a United States Senator. Their love would evoke controversy, not due to their age difference, but something more serious to the Senator who opposed their union thereby breaking Knight’s innocent heart; the young man in his eyes was underserving of his daughter’s love given that “tropic sunshine streamed into his veins.” It is a story that went into the heart of the London’s often wavering views of white racial superiority. It also challenged the author’s held belief that the United States should take over the rule of the Hawaiian Islands.

As this article will show, London and Freeth had more in common than not; both were extremely driven, each embraced courage and dangerous adventure, both

would rise to the top of their professions, and each sadly, would die young. Each, however, would leave a legacy of work that remains admired today.

As he prepared to get underway aboard his problem laden ketch, "*The Snark*," Jack London took it on faith that the first leg of his planned two year voyage to the South Seas beginning from San Francisco to Honolulu, Hawaii would somehow all turn out fine. This despite that his five fellow crew members, including his new wife Charmian Kittredge London, were completely inexperienced at sailing. Typical of a true adventure writer, London completely ignored the odds against him and his crew. Setting sail on April 23, 1907, he left behind the "City by the Bay" whose whole-scale destruction just barely a year earlier, with Charmian in tow, he had risked his and her life to report first hand on. For London, it was all in the risk, the excitement and the challenge of doing what so few on the planet were willing or capable of doing.

Although London was at the peak of his writing power and his fame and celebrity continued to mount worldwide, he was in 1907, much like the devastated city he was leaving behind; he was broken. He was struggling financially, his health was suffering, and he was emotionally spent dealing with constant problems involved in building *The Snark*.

As he and his sailing companions sailed out through the Golden Gate, one wonders as to what London was thinking during those very moments. Did he honestly believe he could leave his problems behind? Was Hawaii going to be the paradise that several other visitors wrote it to be? Would this journey be worthy of his time and effort?

