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LOCAL MAGAZINE UPC



Jack Woodville London

By Russ Chisum

*Jack reading "Groom News" in front of
Parliament Buildings and Big Ben in London.*

I had the good fortune of being on the agenda at Carson County Square House Museum's "Museum Day" activities in Panhandle Texas. The featured speaker was Jack Woodville London, who was born in Groom and had become a noted author. Mr. London was awarded the Military History Writers Author of the Year for 2012. I visited with Mr. London for a bit, as I have always been a history buff, notably on World War II and the Civil War. Mr. London had written "French Letters, Virginia's War" and I bought a copy and Mr. London autographed it. I have read it and found it to be a treasure trove of information on the morals, attitudes, and feelings of a small town during World War II. The book has many different types of characters that a small town person will easily recognize, without being a cliché. I heartily recommend it. I have yet to read the second book, "French Letters, Engaged in War" but it is next on my list.

I emailed Mr. London and told him I wanted to do a story on him for this magazine. He so gratefully sent the following. He expresses things about himself much better than I ever could.

I was born in Groom and graduated high school there in 1965. My father was one of the town's doctors and my mother was a fulltime housewife to the four of us kids. I was blessed to have learned the art of writing and, as a derivative, the love of good sentences and paragraphs, from my high school English teacher, Alberta Bones, and my junior high English/grammar teacher, Berniece Johnson. I entered ready-writing and similar contests in high school. At about age 12 or so I wrote my first book, an awful mess about a small town boy who scraped money together to buy a wrecked sports car and rebuild it with the guidance of a Dutch-uncle mechanic who just happened to know everything about that car and with whom the boy had many adventures in faraway places whose names were all misspelled (such as 'Worez'). My father died during my senior year so the family plot to send me to a religious college was no longer affordable and I went instead to Amarillo College where, again, I stumbled into two very good English lit teachers and a French teacher, all of whom were at least tolerant of my somewhat gleeful ignorance. I went on to West Texas State, double-majored

in history and foreign relations, and discovered in my senior year that all history majors went on to drive cabs. I went to law school.

I also got drafted in the first lottery, during the post-Tet buildup of 1969. I joined ROTC to stay in law school. Law school was the first place where my love of writing met the faculty's love of critically challenging how I wrote. During the next three years I worked hard at learning how to compose clear sentences and to draft cases as stories (albeit legal ones) that were enjoyable to read (judges are readers too). I was elected managing editor of the Texas International Law Journal and, in parallel, wrote a second book, about a small town boy who figured out that southeast Asia was a powder keg that America didn't understand (I actually set fire to that manuscript). I went on active duty, was sent to but did not arrive in Vietnam, thanked my lucky stars, and after discharge, came back to Austin to practice law. During the next forty years I wrote a lot of published legal articles on such page-turners as 'admissibility of previous maintenance records of helicopter tail rotor components' and 'insuring clauses of home-owners policies that should cover foreseeable assaults.' Through it all I said to myself that I would continue trying to write but, first, I had responsibilities to my family and clients.

Influences: My father exposed us to world that is wider than Groom, or even Amarillo. As a boy we went often to the mountains and streams of Colorado and to places all over the US, such as New York, California, and everywhere in between. As a result, I think I grew up with the view that there were many, many places to meet, people who are different, and events that shape the world. My family believed in church and work; my first job was as a dishwasher at the Golden Spread Grill in Groom, age 9, and I went on to drive tractors and grain trucks, work in a gas station on old Route 66, and worked my way through undergraduate school by loading grocery trucks on the evening shift at Affiliated Foods' shipping docks on South Washington in Amarillo, yet somehow stumbled through on the Dean's List with a 4.0 my last two years at WTSU.

I learned to love the nature of communities, people who care about each other, gossip about each other, and go to church while trying to get a better deal. These all surface in "Virginia's War," a novel about a small town in WWII where the daughter of the newspaper editor turns up pregnant just a little too long after her boyfriend is shipped off to the war in Europe for it likely to be his child and in which nearly

everyone in town profits one way or another from the black market in WWII rationed items.

Along the way my language skills came alive. I represented the consulates of Mexico in Texas, improved my Spanish to a pretty high degree, and began to work seriously on my French. I spent extensive time in Mexico and in France. These tools in the kit help me to visualize people, places, and settings to a degree that one radio interviewer asked about the characters in "Engaged in War," how I had met them and what became of them after the war; he had gone to the records office in Normandy, France, and tried to find their graves. He didn't want to believe me when I said they are entirely products of my imagination.

My mother was the only one of ten children to attend college; she re-enrolled after my father died and earned her degree at age 59, a fact of which we all are very proud. She became a school teacher and undertook to write a history of Groom. She worked in the production of "TEXAS" while she was in school and went on to compose a stage play about Old Mobeetie, where she grew up, and to produce it during Old Settlers' Day reunions. Her writing certainly inspired me to try to write, something I do every day.

My mother lived to age 93. My wife, Alice, perceived how I was grieving and how I was also working harder than ever, which also meant that I was putting off things I had set out to do. We had a long talk and she encouraged me to enter the school at St. Céré, in France, and at least begin the process of learning the structure of fiction writing. I did and I came out of the school with (1) a very positive and entirely false view of my ability to write a novel and (2) with some strong friendships with other students. The first was phony; I tried to write a novel based on a terrible Texas supreme court decision that exonerated a convenience store that had disconnected the security alarm without telling the female midnight cashier who was abducted and murdered. The story needs writing but my effort at turning it into a novel was simply not publication worthy. It sits in the attic, in boxes, and I have not ruled out putting a torch to it. The second, my friendships, are happily stronger than ever and we see each other almost yearly in France, Italy, England, Canada, and here in Austin.

"Virginia's War" and its parallel-quel, "Engaged in War," took almost eight years to write. They were based on my perceptions of World War II small town Texas, heroic men and women who had come through the Depression with nothing, then were called upon to become heroes in a world that changed every day. The pregnant heroine reflected

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what was happening in the US where the out-of-marriage birth rate quintupled during the war. Her boyfriend, an army doctor, survived Normandy only to be gravely wounded while his best friend was court martialed for killing a truly dangerous superior officer. They all ended the war changed, restless, accomplished, and adrift, yet picked up their lives and went on with them as best they could. I submitted to professional editors who taught me the maxim that criticism is painful, but not dangerous. In the process I experienced the rule of the tipping point, that before Michael Jordan was the best basketball player in in history and before the Beatles ever had a hit, they had to put in 10,000 hours (about 5 years at 2000 hours a year) practicing, practicing, practicing. Somewhere along the way I learned to value dialogue above nearly anything else; people are wonderful if you'll only listen to what they say and, especially, listen to what they tell themselves. Is there anything more telling than for someone to say about someone else "Bless her heart"?

Working on: I have completed the manuscript of my third full length novel; my literary agent is shopping it as we speak. It is set in 1986, when the children of those people we met in World War II are nearing 40 years of age and living through another set of world changes: personal computers, DNA, AIDS, and credit for everyone. I publish a monthly newsletter by email. It is titled "First Draft" and contains little stories of what I'm up to, such as research for a book or, this month, the announcement of The Second Sometimes Annual Jack London Haiku Contest (open to all). My favorite part of "First Draft" is publishing a serialized novel (a la Charles Dickens) titled "The (very) Brief Wartime Diary of Bart Sullivan, Seaman Second Class." It is the running story of a sailor who tries to get out of combat by counterfeiting some orders to send him home, a plan that is thwarted when he hands them to his chief petty officer, who can't read...

And, I'm researching for a novel that will honor World War I, whose centenary for the US will take place in 2017.

Through it all, I've continued to be a boy from the Panhandle. My boyhood in Groom, education and work in Amarillo and Canyon, and the back and forth experience of living in it, then being away from it to gaze through the glass house, have served me well. Most of my family still lives in Amarillo and I am still blessed with friendships I made in high school and after. I come home several times a year, drive by Amarillo College and eat at the Golden Spread Grill, and wonder what would have happened if I had stayed.

Jack Woodville London

Born Groom, Texas, graduated Groom High School 1965

Attended Amarillo College 1966

Graduated West Texas State University (can't bring myself to say 'A&M') 1969

Graduated University of Texas Law School, 1972

Editor, Texas International Law Journal, 1970-1972

Captain, United States Army, 1971-1973

Attorney, Austin, Texas 1973-present.

Author of approximately 60 legal articles on evidence, engineering, aviation, insurance

Chairman, State Bar of Texas Rules of Evidence Committee

Member, State Bar of Texas Pattern Jury Charge Committee

Literary:

Diplomate, Academy of Fiction, St. Céré, France, 2003; tutor, Peter May

Continuing: Oxford University, Oxford, England, 2014-present; tutor, Professor Jonathan Hale

Publications and Awards:

1. "French Letters, Virginia's War," 2009. Finalist, Best Novel of the South; winner, Romantic Novels with a Twist
2. "French Letters, Engaged in War," 2011. Winner, Book of the Year and Author of the Year, Military Writers Society of America; Finalist, Historical Fiction, London (England) Festival of Books
3. "A Novel Approach," 2014. Winner, e-Lit Non-Fiction. This is a book directed primarily to first-time authors and especially to military, veterans, and their family members who want to write their story or to take on the task of writing a book.

- I am the author of nine published articles on the craft and conventions of writing, including such topics as writing characters, research for fiction, construction of chapters, the art of storytelling, organization of a novel, and the like.
- I am the author of several published articles on World War I, Gold Star Mothers, and American military cemeteries.
- I speak frequently on military holidays, usually about historical events, and teach veterans writing classes. I do not charge for teaching these classes or for speaking at non-profit groups.

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