

# *From Champagne to California (1850)*

Glen Ellen, California... Although the name of this small American town isn't widely known, Jack London<sup>1</sup> readers may be familiar with it. This was indeed where the renowned writer spent the last years of his short life, in the Sonoma valley, also called Valley of the Moon.

Upon arriving in Glen Ellen – and once accommodation has been secured – the diligent tourist may first visit the *White Fang* author's ranch in the Jack London Historic Park, located a little over a mile away from the town center. In addition to the various buildings, the writer's tomb is to be found there: a large stone set in the middle of a meadow. However, as it can get (very) warm in Glen Ellen in the summer, the great man's grave may prove to be difficult to reach. Since the path leading to it is bathed in sunlight, the potential of a heat stroke looms menacingly. Difficult, then, not to be tempted by an iced Anchor Steam<sup>2</sup> sipped indoors instead!



*The Chauvet Saloon, Glen Ellen*

To do this, one must go back in town. Taverns are legion, and one of them attracts the eye. It is a simple, almost rudimentary single story brick construction: therein lies its charm, reminding us of “saloons” or, at least, of the French tourist's idea of a saloon. The swinging doors are the only things missing! Beneath the ledge, we notice a plaque bearing the words “CHAUVET 1905”. A few yards away, another building, more sophisticated yet also made of brick, sports the words “1906 HOTEL CHAUVET”. “Chauvet? How curious...” the French visitor thinks, as he gets ready to drink his beer.

Inside the saloon, he tries to question the regular patrons, but no one offers an explanation, including the rather unfriendly waitress.

Fortunately, elsewhere in town, some people know about this name. The manager of the art gallery next to the hotel Chauvet is one of them. A member of the local Historical Society<sup>3</sup>, he is well versed in his town's history and, given his congenial personality, doesn't shy away from

talking.

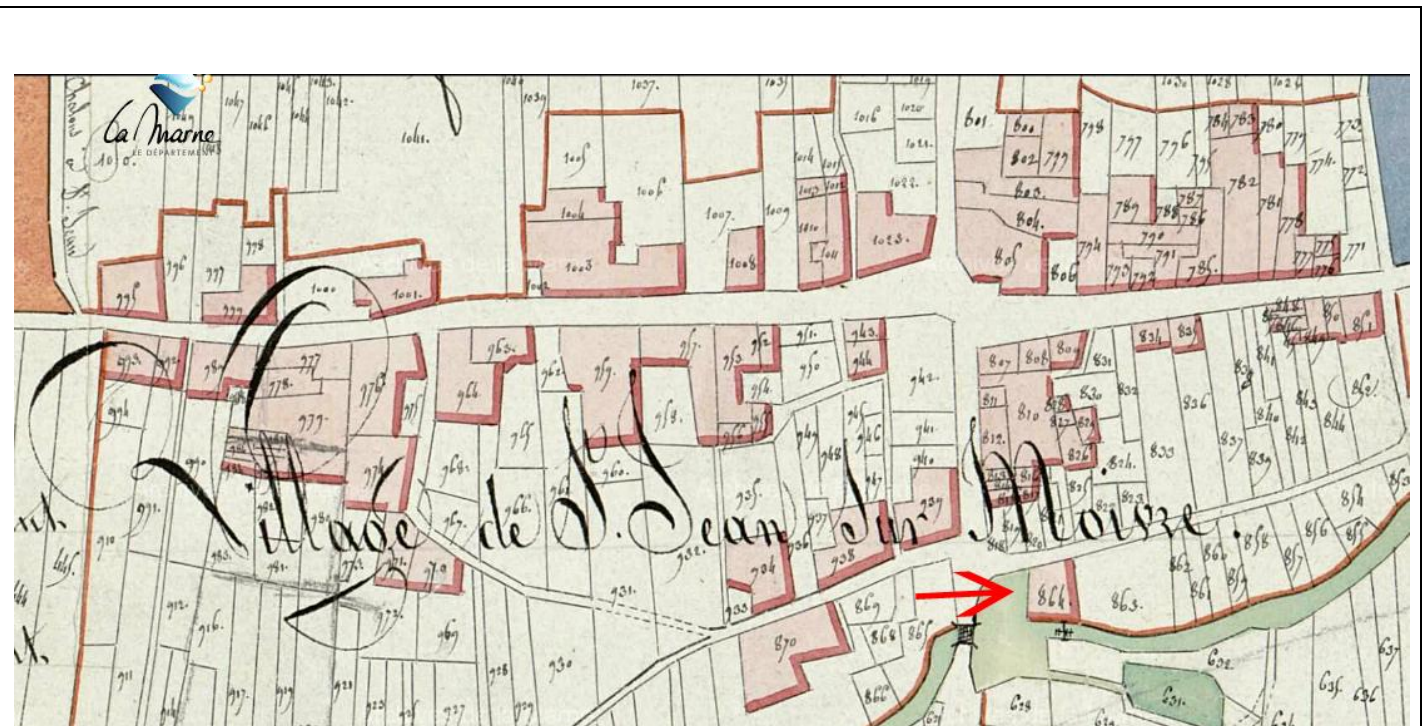
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<sup>1</sup> Jack London (1876-1916), American writer, author of *The Call of the Wild*, *White Fang*, *Martin Eden*...

<sup>2</sup> An excellent local beer, flagship product of the Anchor Brewery Company (founded in 1896 in San Francisco).

<sup>3</sup> Archie Horton, a painter and member of the local Historical Society. He was instrumental in the writing of this article. I wish to thank him and the Glen Ellen Historical Society.

“Chauvet”, he explains, is a surname which is, as one expected, of French origin. Joshua Chauvet, the person behind the name, was an old fashioned self-made man with an uncommon destiny. He was the son of a miller in the Marne region in France. But in 1850, at the age of 27<sup>4</sup>, he left his village for... California! For the purposes of his trip, he carried a passport, a certificate of moral standing signed by his mayor<sup>5</sup> and a boarding pass, which had most probably been financed by his family. This happened during the Gold Rush. Thousands of migrants from the entire world were flocking to San Francisco. In France, an advertising campaign had been launched to encourage French citizens to join the swell of gold diggers, and up to 30 000 of them tried their luck. This was the “Californian miracle” (which, for many gold seekers, became the “Californian mirage”). Companies with varying degrees of reliability were established. They chartered boats and claimed to facilitate the installation of migrants locally for the approximate sum of 1 000 francs per passenger. In December of 1850, a lottery was even organized by the French government to assist in departures! The goal of the candidates was simple: to make a fortune as quickly as possible – collecting gold seemed to be as easy as bending down – then come back home, pay off debts and lead the life of an annuitant.



*Saint-Jean-sur-Moivre and the Chauvet mill in 1811 (Marne Departmental Archives, 3 P 1214/6)*

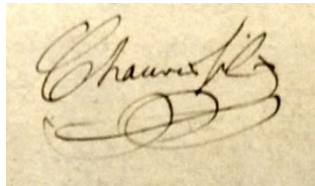
This was probably Joshua Chauvet’s plan. Besides, what was there to lose? Since his mother’s death<sup>6</sup>, things had gone from bad to worse. While his father, François Chauvet, had rebuilt the dilapidated village mill, the mayor and some residents were not pleased with such

<sup>4</sup> Joshua Chauvet was born on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July, 1822, in Saint-Jean-sur-Moivre, a small village in Marne, France. He was the son of François Chauvet, the miller of the village. The latter declared, upon the birth of his son, “wanting to name him Josué”.

<sup>5</sup> “Citizen Chauvet... is of good conduct and character; he has continuously been acclaimed for his good conduct and has never led anyone to issue any form of complaint; we are pleased to pay tribute to his morality and good character.” (from the Marne departmental archives, file number 60 M 28, translated from the French by Anne Losq)

<sup>6</sup> Françoise Simon, mother of Joshua Chauvet, died in childbirth on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April, 1838, in Saint-Jean-sur-Moivre (51).

change. Procedures and administrative hassles accumulated; business went down. The miller had to let go of two servants and the mill keeper. Did the Chauvet family try to get a fresh start by helping the eldest son go to California? It did, in part, succeed in that endeavor since Joshua Chauvet's father<sup>7</sup> joined his son three years later, leaving the mill in Saint-Jean-sur-Moivre to his younger son.

A handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored, slightly textured paper. The signature is cursive and appears to read 'Chauvet J.' followed by a large, stylized flourish.

*Joshua Chauvet's  
signature (1850)*

*Le Grétry*, a boat chartered by the company *La Californienne*, was ready to sail in Le Havre on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February, 1850. Among the hundreds of passengers, one of them was relatively tall (5ft7), with brown hair, a beard, grey eyes and hair thinning at the temples: it was Charles Auguste Josué Chauvet, a.k.a Joshua Chauvet. Seven months and 15 000 miles later, after having successfully crossed Cape Horn, Joshua Chauvet arrived in San Francisco on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 1850. He had a grand total of 13 coins in his pocket: 13 copper coins... But what he lacked in resources, he compensated with plenty of courage and energy. He demonstrated an uncommon

ability to work and knew how to take advantage of his skills as a carpenter and a miller. As soon as he disembarked, he connected with compatriots living further inland on Mokelumne Hill<sup>8</sup>. The place was known to be conducive to canvassing; several hundreds of Frenchmen had settled there, often triggering mockery<sup>9</sup> or even hostility. But his beginnings as a gold digger didn't seem to produce the desired result. Never mind! Instead, he opened a bakery, then another one, and built a flour mill by importing the mechanism from France. This is probably when his father, François Chauvet, joined him in California. Ties with the home country weren't severed, however: when the younger son, who remained in France, married in 1855, he was given a written authorization by his father, who was, at that time, a carpenter-mechanic in Oakland, Alta California<sup>10</sup>.

In 1856, after a few years of trial and error, Joshua Chauvet settled in Glen Ellen with his father. The purchase of 500 acres of land prompted the move. A saw mill was already in place and Joshua converted it into a flour mill (which operated until 1881). The rest of the property was planted with grapevines<sup>11</sup>. Throughout the years, he created a distillery, which he imported from France, built a brickyard<sup>12</sup>, and set up a water conveyance system for the town. In 1864, he married an Irish woman with whom he had two sons. The family was therefore lastingly settled in Glen Ellen. Just like his father, Joshua Chauvet lived in the Californian town until his death (1908)<sup>13</sup> for more than half a century.

In the final years of his life, Chauvet and his eldest son oversaw the construction of several buildings in Glen Ellen, such as a handsome house (now a law practice), the saloon, which

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<sup>7</sup> François Chauvet was born in Rilly-la-Montagne (51) on the 25<sup>th</sup> of November, 1796. He seemed to have died in Glen Ellen in 1881.

<sup>8</sup> His trace was found in Mokelumne Hill, Jackson, Sandy Bar and Calaveras County...

<sup>9</sup> They were nicknamed the Keskydees (due to the sentence they often pronounced: "Qu'est-ce qu'il dit?").

<sup>10</sup> Civil register of Saint-Jean-sur-Moivre (51).

<sup>11</sup> In 1880, Joshua Chauvet produced 125 000 gallons of wine. He was one of the main producers in the region.

<sup>12</sup> This brickyard supplied the Chauvet men with bricks for the construction of their various buildings. It is said that some of these bricks were branded with a "C".

<sup>13</sup> Joshua Chauvet's tomb is located in Mountain Cemetery in Sonoma, California.



we talked about earlier, and – notably – Hotel Chauvet (1906)<sup>14</sup>. This hotel appears today as being the elder man's crown achievement.



*The Hotel Chauvet in 1921 (© Glen Ellen Historical Society)*

At the beginning of the twentieth century, two railway lines ran in Glen Ellen. Trains brought in hundreds of visitors during the weekends. These were mainly San Francisco residents who wanted to get away from the summer fog. At that time, Glen Ellen was equipped with no less than eight saloons and five hotels<sup>15</sup>! Out of all the inns, Hotel Chauvet is the last one standing, a witness to a forgotten past. It is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places and has, understandably, become a great source of pride among the town's residents.

In 1918, Hotel Chauvet was the most beautiful hotel in town. Its brick façade attracted everyone's eye. On the ground floor, there was a bar and restaurant – where Jack London may well have appeared. On the first floor, there were guest rooms, and on the second floor lied a 1 500 square foot dance floor made of maple wood. The entrance was embellished by a porch, and a balcony adorned the first floor of the building. The business must have been

<sup>14</sup> It must be mentioned that all of these buildings were erected at the time of the San Francisco earthquake (18th of April, 1906)... « In Santa Rosa [a town neighboring Glen Ellen], 10 000 people are homeless; not a single building in the business quarter is said to be intact." (*Le Figaro*, 20<sup>th</sup> of April, 1906, translation by Anne Losq).

<sup>15</sup> Hotels Glen Ellen, Riverside, Mervyn, Roma, Chauvet...



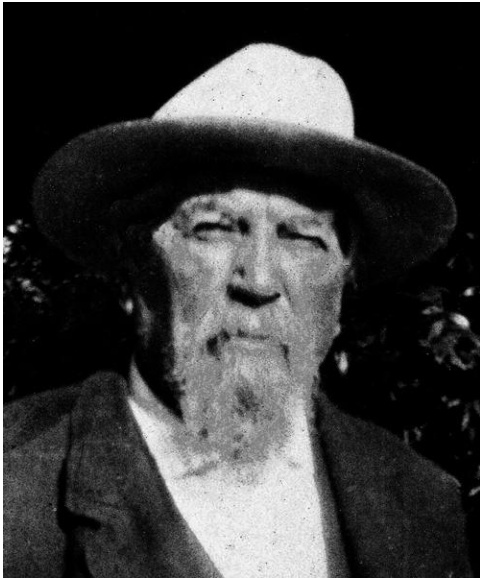
prosperous for several years. But, with prohibition and the decline of railroad tourism, the success story came to an end.



*The Hotel Chauvet in 2010 (© National Register of Historic Places)*

The hotel fell into disrepair, was abandoned and on the verge of being demolished. In 1996, it was bought by its current owners and was transformed into a luxury residence. The former restaurant, bar, rooms and ballroom were broken up into condominiums. For Glen Ellen residents, this acquisition came as a relief. The hotel was back to its former glory, albeit without the hustle and bustle that had been previously associated with it. It is now possible to spend the whole day in front of the building without seeing the door open. Where have the whist players, the diners and the dancers of yesteryear gone?

Joshua Chauvet, master of the house, died on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May, 1908; Jack London passed away in 1916. Both, in their own fashion, influenced the town's history. Did they know each other? Jack London, who was a known alcoholic, can easily be imagined sitting at the hotel bar. Did both men appreciate each other? That remains to be seen. We don't know much about their ties, apart from a conflict over the distribution of water in Glen Ellen (the Chauvet family detained a monopoly). The case was even brought to justice.



*Joshua Chauvet (© GEHS)*

The difference in age between the two men was of 53 years, Jack London being the youngest. It is likely that they had different mindsets, especially in politics – Jack London was often dubbed the “rebel child of the Californian dream”. And yet, they weren’t opposed on everything: they shared commonalities such as having lived in poverty, having spent time at sea, having partaken in the gold digging fever. They were both endowed with uncommon courage and a strong work ethic. And, last but not least, they both shared an obsession with money. Is it, in the end, really absurd to think that Jack London may have seen in Joshua Chauvet a character worthy of appearing in one of his short stories<sup>16</sup>?

Today, in Glen Ellen, we can sense the past presence of these two men with each step. Jack London has mainly become a commercial argument. But, from an

architectural perspective, Joshua Chauvet prevails, his pawns placed in various parts of the town. And yet, he is not the master here. As proof, one must only look at the façade of the Chauvet saloon. It is now called... the Jack London Saloon!

Philippe Cendron

Translated by Anne Losq

13/01/2017

### Sources

- Archives départementales de la Marne, Châlons-en-Champagne (51)
- Glen Ellen Historical Society (GEHS), California
- National Register of Historic Places, Washington
- *Villes fantômes de l'Ouest américain : leur vie, leur mort, leur survie*, Marijke Roux-Westers, Université de Saint-Étienne, 2006

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<sup>16</sup> In *Flush of Gold*, Jack London mentions a certain Victor Chauvet: “...an old Frenchman – born in the south of France. He came to California in the days of gold”.





*Hotel Chauvet (detail)*



*Hotel Chauvet, by Archie L. Horton*