



JOHN STEINBECK: A HOME COMING

By Donald Kohrs

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JOHN STEINBECK

PREFACE

John Steinbeck wrote a letter to his friend George Albee in 1933 in which he presented the idea of what became his vocation. *"I think I would like to write the story of this whole valley, of the little towns and all the farms and ranches in the wilder hills. I can see how I would like to do it so that it would be the valley of the world."*

After the publishing of the *Grapes of Wrath* in 1939 Steinbeck never felt welcome in California again. The author's critical account of the agricultural industry and labor unions resulted in his books being burned and the author feeling uneasy in his native State. He attempted several times to come home to California, to the land he'd loved so deeply, expressed in a literary manner, with his writing of *Cannery Row*, *Sweet Thursday*, *Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*.

Finding a place to call home is an important part of Steinbeck's American Dream, with immigrants in search of a place to live, and the continuous movement West to a land depicted as the new Eden.

The following chapters shed new light on John Steinbeck's sense of home, by exploring the history of Monterey County, his maternal ancestors - the Hamilton's and paternal ancestors the Steinbeck's.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“The story has grown since I started it. From a novel about people, it has become a novel about the world. And you must never tell it. Let it be found out. The new eye is being opened here in the west - the new seeing. It is probable no one will know it for two hundred years. It will be confused, analyzed, analogized, criticized, and none of our fine critics will know what is happening.” — John Steinbeck in a 1932 journal¹

When Steinbeck scribbled the above sentence in his journal, it had been two years since he’d befriended Ed Ricketts, a Midwesterner whose favorite poet throughout his life was Walt Whitman. This recognition of their friendship allows one to consider if Steinbeck wasn’t immersed in Whitman, and thus familiar with his poem, *Facing west, from California's shores*, when he scribbled those sentences in his journal.

*Facing west, from California's shores,
Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,
I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of
maternity, the land of migrations, look afar,
Look off the shores of my Western Sea—the circle
almost circled;
For, starting westward from Hindustan, from the vales
of Kashmere,
From Asia—from the north—from the God, the sage,
and the hero,*

*From the south—from the flowery peninsulas, and the
spice islands;*

*Long having wander'd since—round the earth having
wander'd,*

Now I face home again—very pleas'd and joyous;

(But where is what I started for, so long ago?

And why is it yet unfound?)

One can only wonder if Steinbeck wasn't thinking of Whitman when he wrote those sentences in his journal. And what was Whitman implying with the line "*seeking what is yet unfound?*" Was he suggesting Protestant America's unending search for the Garden of Paradise, the myth presented to New England Puritans who arrived under the pretense of creating a model society, pure of sin, by a chosen people, in a promised land?

RE-VISIONING OF THE PROTESTANT AMERICAN MYTH

John Steinbeck found his vocation in the re-visioning of the Protestant myth; a lore that to this day recognizes a monotheistic God who sanctified a specific part of a continent - America - as a promised land, for a chosen people. Remnants of this myth became an underlying theme that resonates through many of Steinbeck's works. Embodied within this refrain, the author explored the moral and ethical behavior of both the individual and the group. To consider why Steinbeck may have taken up re-visioning the Protestant American myth, it's helpful to understand the myth itself and its origin.

As described by the late Steinbeck scholar Louis Owens: *From the first writings of the colonial founders, America was the New Canaan or New Jerusalem, and the colonists, such as William Bradford's pilgrims of Plymouth, were the chosen people who consciously compared themselves to the Israelites. Their leaders were repeatedly likened to Moses, for they too, had fled from persecution and religious bondage to England and Europe, for the new promise of a place called America...Out of this acutely biblical consciousness arose what has come to be called the American myth, a kind of national consciousness with which Steinbeck was fascinated throughout his life.*³

Hence, within the earliest beginning of this nation's Protestant community, before the Declaration of Independence, there is presented this idea that America was to be a special place, and one element that made it special was that its citizens had a unique relationship with God. There exists this idea amongst the early Puritan colonies of New England, suggested by John Winthrop, first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in his 1630 sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" that, as a people, the citizen's of this

country, the recent Protestant immigrants of Northern Europe, were to be God's chosen, and that God has a unique destiny for America and its people.

At the core of this belief was the idea Winthrop had proposed in his sermon -- that God had chosen America as a Christian *City upon a Hill*, whose role it was to project to the other countries of the world, the proper political and ethical leadership guided through religious "Christian" moral beliefs.

As Harold Bloom wrote: "*Steinbeck's use of and fascination with what has been termed the American myth - the myth of the American continent as the new Eden and the American as the new Adam - appears again and again throughout his fiction.*" ⁴

The following pages present the establishing of Protestant California as it relates to the small townships of the central coast, particularly those of the Salinas Valley and the Monterey Peninsula. These communities were an integral part of Steinbeck's life and likely played an important role in his becoming familiar with the American myth.

Besides the influence of these Protestant communities on Steinbeck, the literary influences of Samuel Hamilton's bluestocking daughters, the Salinas Public Library, and the Salinas Wanderers Study Club are considered.

**PROTESTANT MISSIONARIES EXTENDED
TO CENTRAL CALIFORNIA**

The influence of the Anglo-Protestant religion had on shaping the social and moral fabric of central California during the turn of the nineteenth century has seldom been studied. Conversely, the influence of the Anglo-Protestant religion had on shaping the novelist John Steinbeck has been studied in great detail.⁵ A review of the founding of Protestantism in California, with a primary emphasis on the Monterey County, provides an opportunity to consider the making of John Steinbeck as a novelist.

In the 1850's the ministers of New England's Protestant churches directed to the shores of California large numbers of missionary clergy whose charge was to gather parishioners and build houses of worship. The Protestant clergy identified this effort as their opportunity to establish among the growing population of California, a second "*City upon a Hill*" equivalent to that of the New England colonies.

On December 22, 1852, the anniversary of the landing at Plymouth Rock, Presbyterian minister Timothy Dwight Hunt told San Francisco's New England Society: "*Sons and daughters of New England, you are the representatives of a land which is the model for every other!... Here is our colony. No higher ambition could urge us to noble deeds than, on the basis of the colony of Plymouth, to make California the Massachusetts of the Pacific.*"⁶

The Puritan missionaries to California, filled with aspirations of laying down a Protestant beachhead, worked to organize congregations of various denominations in the recently established communities along the central coast California.

As told by Tony Carnes: *“A turning point in the religious demography of California started in the 1870’s, and accelerated further with the 1880’s boom, as Protestants vastly increased their relative numbers in California. So much so, that the Protestant Christian stewardship idea became part of California culture.”*⁷

EARLY SALINAS VALLEY

Sherlock Bristol, a pioneer preacher described the Salinas Valley he saw during a visit in the winter of 1868:

*Monday morning at break of day we left the [Soledad] Mission, and wending our way through the fog, across the Salinas River, we proceeded down the valley on the north side. As the fog lifted, an immense valley spread out before us, perhaps twenty miles wide and fifty long. It was covered with grass and flowers and occasional trees. Vast herds of semi-wild cattle and horses were gathered in clusters on the plains. Not being accustomed to see men in our costume and with such packs on their backs as we prospective miners carried, they set up a wild looing, and soon they came running toward us till not less than 5,000 horned bullocks and cows, on either side, gathered in solid phalanx and pawed the ground and tore it up with their horns.*⁸

Steinbeck in *East of Eden* provided a similar description of the Valley: *The floor of the Salinas Valley was wide and flat. After a rainy winter, the valley was carpeted with spring flowers of all colors: bright blue and white, burning orange, red, and mustard yellow. In the shade of the oak trees, green plants grew and gave a good smell. In June the grasses on the hills turned gold and yellow and red.*

In a short time, the native grasses, wildflowers and free-ranging herds of Spanish cattle that Reverend Bristol observed, gave way to fields of barley, oats, and wheat. These grains, which did not need irrigation, were the first lucrative crop grown from the nutrient rich soil deposit of the Salinas Valley's ancient riverbed. The burgeoning fields of grain soon attracted the Southern Pacific Railroad and the laying of rail track quickly followed.

LAYING DOWN THE RAILROAD TRACKS

In 1868, the Southern Pacific Railroad began extending tracks south from San Jose. As the rails were laid, more towns became established. By March of 1869, the Railroad was running trains to Gilroy, reaching Pajaro (Watsonville) Junction in November of 1871. The rail tracks next reached Salinas in November 1872, extending as far as Soledad by August 1873.⁹ In January of 1880, the first Southern Pacific passenger train arrived at the depot in Monterey, located just two miles from the Pacific Grove Methodist Camp Retreat.

By 1886, the Railroad had completed the rail lines through South Monterey County. The resulting extension of the rail line from Salinas to Templeton set the train traveling alongside fields of grain and wheat that stretched from Moss Landing far into the Salinas Valley. Rail stops at each of these small towns provided the ability to deliver the valley's grain and wheat products to larger markets.¹⁰

ESTABLISHMENT OF CHURCHES AND CONGREGATIONS

Starting in the late 1860's, congregations of various Protestant denominations (Baptist, Congregationalist, Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Unitarian) sprang up in the small communities of the Salinas Valley. First, the Methodist Episcopal Church South of Salinas was established in 1867. Next, the Salinas United Presbyterian Congregation was founded in December 1869. The Baptist Church of Salinas formed in 1873. During this year, a Methodist Episcopal Church was established just North of Salinas.¹¹

In 1874, Reverend James Shannon McGowan, arrived in Monterey County. As a pioneering clergyman, he organized groups in Salinas River Valley, wherever people could gather.¹² Rev. J. S. McGowan was also responsible for founding St Paul's Episcopal Church in Salinas in 1875 and St. James Episcopal Church in Monterey in 1878.

In 1875, the Union Church building in Castroville was completed for use by all Protestant denominations. As a resident Protestant clergyman was not available for the church, Sunday sermons were conducted by one of three ministers from Salinas. Each Sunday, either Reverend George McCormick, of the Presbyterian Church, Reverend J.S. McGowan, of the Episcopalian church or Reverend A.S. Gibbons, of the Methodist Episcopal church, traveled to Castroville and provided services.¹³

Farther south in the Salinas Valley, McGowan helped to establish St Luke's Episcopal Church of Jolon in 1885, St John's Episcopal Church of San Miguel in 1885, and St. Mark's Episcopal Church of King City in 1887. St Mark's Episcopal Church of

Kings City held its first services in June 1888.¹⁴ The church registry, dated March 10, 1889, notes John Ernst Steinbeck Sr. among the parishioners who donated to the construction of St. Mark's Church.¹⁵ John Ernst Steinbeck's donation to the church was ten dollars, which in today's currency value equates to two hundred and fifty dollars.

In 1883, nineteen miles south of Salinas, the Baptist congregation of Gonzales was organized, with construction of the church completed in 1884.¹⁶ A Danish Lutheran church was completed in 1890 in Chualar, thirteen miles south of Salinas, to serve the Scandinavian population. Besides Lutherans, Methodists of the community could hold services in the building every other week.¹⁷

In 1875, twenty miles southwest of Salinas the Pacific Grove Methodist Camp Retreat was established. For the first six years, the community held services at the outdoor podium sheltered under a grove of pine trees. In 1881, a Chautauqua Hall was built through the support of the Pacific Improvement Company. In 1886, Pacific Grove's Episcopal Church, St. Mary's-by-the-Sea, founded by a handful of Episcopal women, and a small wooden red church constructed in 1887. Pacific Grove's Mayflower Congregational Church was established in late November of 1891, with the church building was completed by June of 1893 and services held.¹⁸ In 1894, construction of Pacific Grove's Methodist Episcopal Church and Assembly Hall was completed.¹⁹

In 1898 over two hundred Japanese immigrants came to Salinas to work the fields for Claus Spreckels' expanding sugar beet operation. Also during that year, above a blacksmith shop on Sausal Street in Salinas, the Japanese Presbyterian Mission was founded by Reverend Kenkichi Inazawa to meet the cultural and social needs of this all male population.

ESTABLISHMENT OF PROTESTANT ETHICS AND VALUES

Having established a Protestant foothold along the shores of California, church parishioners next went about forming benevolent societies, temperance unions, civic organizations and literary circles. These progressive institutions, remaining loyal to the Christian values of the New England Protestants, further shaped the social and civic ethics along California's central coast.²⁰

The Protestant ethics introduced during this period resonated throughout the communities of Monterey County well into the twentieth century. Through his own experiences growing up in these religious communities, Steinbeck came face to face with the American myth and the moral philosophy of Protestant Christianity. One result of Steinbeck's exposure to the ideals of New England Protestantism are the strands of religious morality and ethics were woven into many of his literary works, including *To A God Unknown*, *Pastures of Heaven*, *Of Mice and Men*, *In Dubious Battle*, *Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*. These literary pieces provided Steinbeck a platform on which he could revision the Protestant ideals that had swept the nation and shaped the civic and social ethics of the American Society.

THE HAMILTON FAMILY

In addition to intertwining the American myth, Steinbeck weaved a good portion of the family history of his maternal ancestors - the Hamilton's - into his book *East of Eden*. To prepare for his writing of the book, he studied the newspapers in depth, Steinbeck recalled:

*“I went through old Salinas (Calif.) newspapers. Wonderful things, those papers. Social notes, church notes, births, deaths.... No matter how much checking you do, somebody’s going to squawk about a mistake. And be right, too, likely.”*¹ *“Newspapers accurately recorded the lives of the people in the valley,” he said. “I will obtain additional information by reading the editorials which mirrored their thinking.”*²

The following pages extend our understanding of Steinbeck’s presentation of the Hamilton’s written into *East of Eden*, by connecting bits of the story written by the author with historical accounts and primary references.