John Steinbeck and Salinas: The Okies of the “The Grapes of Wrath”

Author’s Note: This article “John Steinbeck and Salinas: The Okies of the The Grapes of Wrath” is a stand-alone article on my website. Parallel articles on the Salinas/Monterey region are chapters in my two main travel guidebooks/ebooks on California. They are Northern California History Travel Adventures: 35 Suggested Trips and Northern California Travel: The Best Options. All my travel guidebooks/ebooks on California can be seen on my Amazon Author Page.

By Lee Foster

In Brief

Seventeen miles inland from Monterey lies Salinas. The farming community is the birthplace of celebrated author John Steinbeck. In his novel, The Grapes of Wrath,
Steinbeck made the town famous, depicting the plight of “Okies.” These were Oklahomans, who headed west to escape the Dust Bowl during the Great Depression. They landed in California. There they worked in the fields harvesting crops.

Today, Salinas is the site of the National Steinbeck Center. The Center honors the author with displays celebrating his classic novels. Moreover, the center serves as a cultural venue for the region.

The agricultural base around Salinas evokes memories of Steinbeck’s great novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. A short drive west from the city is Monterey. That setting recalls his other prominent book, *Cannery Row*. (See my article *Cannery Row*: John Steinbeck’s Novel about Monterey, California.)

The Salinas Valley is the place to witness the amazing “salad bowl” aspect of California agriculture. This area feeds the nation with its abundance of lettuce and other vegetables and fruits. Look at a colorful mural on the side of a building at 431 Front Street in Soledad, 29 miles south of Salinas. The mural title is, “The Valley that Feeds the Nation.” In short, the mural summarizes a dramatic agricultural story.

**The Historic Okies Story Used By Steinbeck**

The Dust Bowl Depression era witnessed migration of people from Oklahoma and elsewhere, disparagingly called “Okies.” Their journey to California was one of the uglier stories of opportunity in the Golden State. For instance, California stationed police officers at the state line to turn back the migrants. It was clearly an unlawful act. Most importantly, the Okies were American citizens. They simply wanted to move freely within their country.

Police denied the people entry, mainly at Needles, based on a law. That was where Highway 66 crossed into California. Authorities denied entrance because of appearance and presumed financial status. This was one of the few cases in U.S. history where American citizens could not freely travel within their own country. The U.S. Supreme Court struck down the law in the case of Edwards vs California.
Okies of the Dust Bowl

Everyone agrees that the Okies had it tough. Just how tough is hard to imagine.

However, Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* provides a glimpse. Okies were escaping the Dust Bowl. That area covered approximately 150,000 square miles. It included the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles. In addition, the droughted region reached parts of Colorado, New Mexico, and Kansas. The area had light soil, low rainfall, and high winds. Much of the land focused on grazing. Farmers plowed up the soil to plant winter wheat.

A drought between 1934 and 1937 impacted the region. Eventually high winds kicked up huge dust storms. Winds denuded vulnerable land, exposed without its grass anchor. Dust storms suffocated people and buried buildings. More than half the population moved out. Most headed west to California. These migrants were called the Okies.

Steinbeck became the great chronicler of the Okies. His characters are the Joads. They were a family that lost their farm through foreclosure. The Joads decided to leave the Oklahoma Dust Bowl for California. There they hoped to find work. The eldest generation had the solace of religion. The middle generation had a dogged determination. But the youngest had little to hope for. A reader sees decent people at the utter end of their resources. Angered by brutal exploitation of migrant workers, Tom Joad became a labor organizer.

Pulitzer Prize Novel

From 1919 to 1925 Steinbeck studied intermittently at Stanford University. Nevertheless, he didn’t get a degree.

The novel publication date was 1939. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1940. Not
surprisingly, the story became a popular movie. John Ford directed the film and Henry Fonda starred. *The Grapes of Wrath* book received the label “vulgar” by the Kern County Board of Supervisors. In addition, the Supervisors banned the book during 1939-1941. Moreover, a farm owner group, Associated Farmers, denounced Steinbeck.

Salinas saw itself, warts and all, in Steinbeck’s works. There were even book burnings of Steinbeck’s literary efforts.

However, Eleanor Roosevelt supported Steinbeck.

The author vividly depicted the lot of migrant workers. Naturally, the capitalists owner class expressed outrage. On the other hand, radicals thought they had an ally. However, Steinbeck was not an ideologue. He learned from practical observation. Steinbeck traveled the San Joaquin Valley in 1938 with photographer Harry Bristol. He saw first-hand the hardships endured.

It took Salinas a long time to come to terms with native though-not-favorite son John Steinbeck (1902-1968). He rests buried in the town’s Garden of Memories Memorial Park.
Steinbeck focused sympathy on the poor, the eccentric, and the dispossessed. This angered many at the apex of the power structure. Today some older members of the community still resent Steinbeck’s portrayal of Salinas. Others realize that Steinbeck tourism is more than a cottage industry here.

Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize in 1962.

**Getting There**

Salinas is 106 miles south from San Francisco on Highway 101. Take the Main Street Exit to reach the Steinbeck Center.

**Be Sure to See in John Steinbeck’s Salinas**

In Salinas, visit Steinbeck’s birthplace at 132 Central Avenue. The restored Victorian
now houses a restaurant. There is open-seating for lunch Tuesday-Saturday. To make an assured reservation, call in advance 831-424-3735. Details: www.steinbeckhouse.com.

On the first floor you can wander from room to room. Pause at the photos on the walls. Don’t miss a cherubic picture of Steinbeck at age 4. Visit the gift shop in the basement. The store name is Best Cellar, a pun on “best seller.” It stocks copies of many of his works.

After the house, visit the National Steinbeck Center (www.steinbeck.org), just two blocks away, at One Main Street. Interactive exhibits re-create the author’s life and works. At the Cannery Row exhibit you can imagine the sardine fish and the seagulls. The East of Eden display acquaints you with the world of the lettuce workers.

One special gem at the Steinbeck Center is “Rocinante.” That’s the name for his custom camper. Steinbeck drove 10,000 miles around America while writing Travels with Charley. A bookstore at the Steinbeck Center offers many of Steinbeck’s books. You will also find commentary books, such as Susan Shillinglaw’s insightful A Journey into Steinbeck’s California. After the Steinbeck Center, take some time to walk the old downtown of Salinas. The downtown is an open-air museum celebrating an earlier era.

**Best Time of Year**

The National Steinbeck Center sponsors a multi-faceted, annual Steinbeck Festival in May. The festival features speakers and offers tours. You can see movies and theatrical presentations of Steinbeck’s works. Each year a new theme is chosen. Spring is also an ideal time to visit the area. That’s when the hills are green after the winter rains.

If you have time, head south along Highway 101 toward Soledad. There you will find a geological and hiking treasure, known as the Pinnacles. The mountainous area has been elevated to National Park status (www.nps.gov/pinn/). You may find a nature visit there to be a pleasant complement to the Steinbeck immersion.
Hiking at Pinnacles National Park near Salinas, CA

**Lodging**

Monterey/Carmel is only a short drive away. Consider one of the classic small inns of Carmel, such as Hofsas House.

**Dining**

Have lunch at the Steinbeck House, 132 Central in Salinas. Above all, call ahead and make a reservation at 831/424-3735.

For dinner, try Wills Fargo Restaurant (16 W. Carmel Valley Road, www.wfrestaurant.com, 831-659-2774). You might enjoy a Monterey Bay calamari appetizer. Follow that perhaps by quail or steak. The adjacent Holman and Jarman wine tasting rooms could whet your appetite with local wines before dinner.

**More Resources about John Steinbeck**

A California Welcome Center at 1213 North Davis in Salinas provides ample local information. See details at https://www.visitcalifornia.com/attraction/california-welcome-center-salinas.

Local author David Laws assists a traveler in exploring the territory with his book *Steinbeck Country: Exploring the Settings for the Stories*. 