

Oct. 13, 2002-----

SALINAS, Calif.--A dusk that could settle a gypsy's soul descended on the National Steinbeck Center in downtown Salinas, the farming community where author John Steinbeck was born 100 years ago.

Steinbeck was reared just two blocks from the center, which opened in June, 1998. The center is a harvest of Steinbeck's ideas and themes, more than a museum. A montage of stage sets, films, scents and sounds draw from Steinbeck's works. Throughout the center, visitors hear and read Steinbeck's words describing key experiences and places.

Only a couple of people were in the center at the end of a long sunny Friday in the Salinas Valley. An older man scurried around while clutching a dime store notepad. He seemed in a hurry. He wore baggy plaid pants and an untucked blue work shirt.

He caught my eye because he looked like Steinbeck, circa 1962. This was like walking into the Baseball Hall of Fame and seeing Cy Young.

The white-bearded John Plasko is a retired art teacher who was heading back to Seattle after dropping his sister-in-law off in Tijuana, Mexico. Plasko and his wife, Ruth, were driving a 1991 blue and gray Ford Van with a refrigerator, stove and sleeping quarters in the rear. They stopped in Salinas on a whim.

I caught up with Plasko near Rocinante (named in honor of Don Quixote's noble steed), the actual 1960 evergreen and white pickup camper Steinbeck used for his 1962 book *Travels With Charley: In Search of America*. Steinbeck's wife, Elaine, donated the camper to the center. It is one of my favorite parts of the center, and one of the few "museum" type pieces.

"This is just like mine," Plasko said as he pointed to Rocinante. "Only difference is that this is a customized pickup truck with a camper on it. I was going to do that. I stopped here because Steinbeck was a socially conscious person. I have a list of all his books, and I'm trying to catch up. I've seen most of the Steinbeck movies."

Plasko was short, but he stood tall near snippets of Steinbeck writing from *Travels With Charley*: "No one was for anything and nearly everyone was against many things."

Plasko once taught art at Ashland University, outside of Cleveland, Ohio. This was only the second time in his 78 years he had been interviewed for a newspaper. The other time was when he had a piece of art in a Detroit museum, and the reporter misspelled his name John Plasco. "I made a frog out of a piece of limestone," Plasko said. "Between the hind legs and the head, the museum interpreted it as a woman's torso. Very strange. But I let it go."

Steinbeck would have liked that.

The winner of both the Pulitzer and Nobel prize for literature, Steinbeck had a sense of irreverence that is celebrated in the center. The center is a people place in Steinbeck's spirit. Sitting areas are available in every gallery. Are there any other centers or museums in America where visitors can smell sardines, the scent of blossom and sage (The Pearl) and even the smell of a horse stall (The Red Pony)?

The \$11 million center was 20 years in the works. Steinbeck Center CEO Kim Greer explained, "We first thought we were going to be a single subject Steinbeck museum. The 36-person board of directors brought on new trustees and they thought we could be more of a community center. We want to be a museum for the masses." Board members include Steinbeck's son Tom who lives in Southern California and Steinbeck's New York based literary agent Gene Winick.

So it's OK for visitors to lean over and touch Rocinante. A black 1917 Model T truck invites guests to crank up the engine, following instructions taken directly from East of Eden. Besides Plasko, other notable visitors to the center include singer-songwriter Jackson Browne, who was the recipient of this year's John Steinbeck Award.

Sometimes the ride was rough for Steinbeck, and the center reveals these warts. Plasko was taking notes on the occasion when Richard Rodgers composed the music and Oscar Hammerstein wrote the book for "Pipe Dream," an original Steinbeck play. Steinbeck was enthusiastic about the show during rehearsals. But Rodgers and Hammerstein turned Steinbeck's raucous stories into family entertainment with predictable results. The failure of "Pipe Dream" ended Steinbeck's efforts to write for the stage.

On a more conventional course, a re-creation of Steinbeck's childhood bedroom in Salinas offers a glimpse of the books he read at the time (Huckleberry Finn, Treasure Island, Call of the Wild) and a copy of El Gabilan, the Salinas High School Yearbook.

\* \* \*

John Steinbeck wasn't popular in his hometown.

His depictions of the mistreatment of farmworkers and his vivid portrayal of the city's power structure incurred wrath among the locals. His writings were publicly burned in Salinas on two occasions, near the location of the Steinbeck center.

Steinbeck was firm in his conviction about not writing about the past. In 1954, Holiday magazine asked Steinbeck to contribute an essay about his hometown. According to the comprehensive 1984 Jackson Benson biography The True Adventures of John Steinbeck,

Writer, Steinbeck wrote in part, "I don't know whether I was influenced by the town except in so far as everyone is influenced by everything but that I do know there was always a sense of dark and violent drama there to influence me if I were influencable."

Here, we have Steinbeck sounding like Bob Dylan.

So Steinbeck might get a chuckle out of a museum resource room reserved for exploration of his life and themes. Visitors can access Steinbeck's books from CD-ROM equipped computer stations, watch videotapes and write stories. A separate academic research library and climate-controlled archive of Steinbeck's first editions, notebooks, photographs and audiotapes is available to scholars by appointment.

"Its ironic," said Greer, who has lived in Salinas since 1984. "Many of the people funding us were often the sons and daughters of those people who burned his books. Today, people are more open to what the truth is."

It's easy for Steinbeck's friends to walk around Salinas (pop. 145,000) in the author's footsteps. Steinbeck pretty much lived in Salinas from his birth until 1930, when he moved to the Monterey Peninsula with his first wife, Carol. Steinbeck lived in New York from 1925-27 where he was a newspaper reporter and a bricklayer on the building of the original Madison Square Garden. He returned to Salinas in 1927.

Steinbeck's childhood home still stands at 132 Central Avenue (831-424-2735). Luncheons are served from 11:30 a.m. until 2 p.m. Monday through Saturdays in the 104-year-old house, peppered with turrets and gables. Steinbeck is said to have written *The Red Pony* in the upstairs bedroom. He lived in the Victorian home from his birth in 1902 until 1918, when he left to attend Stanford University in Palo Alto, about 130 miles north of Salinas.

Steinbeck eventually dropped out of college. Between periods of sporadic attendance at Stanford, he worked as a chemist's helper at the Spreckels Sugar Plant on Highway 68 between Salinas and Monterey. Steinbeck ran basic tests on the sugar content of sugar beets during harvest. He heard stories from fellow laborers that inspired "Tortilla Flat."

Between 1933 and 1940 about 3,500 Dust Bowl migrants settled east of Salinas in Alisal (which has now merged with Salinas). Two farmers subdivided their properties, offering 50-by-100 foot lots for \$200 a piece. Many migrants found work in the burgeoning lettuce and vegetable industry, which protected Salinas from the worst effects of the depression. Today, agriculture in Steinbeck's Monterey County is a \$2 billion industry, producing more fresh vegetables than any other county in the United States.

Steinbeck's ashes are interred with his mother, father, sister and uncle in *The Garden of Memories*, 768 Abbott Street, not far from

downtown Salinas (831-422-6417). I found the basic marker under an old oak tree in Hamilton Plot 1, Block 60, Lot 5.

Steinbeck's bronze plate was lined with smooth pebbles and gold pennies left by spiritual pilgrims. His Hamilton relatives were major characters in "East of Eden." They are buried in nearby Hamilton Plot 2, which was used by Universal Studios for a funeral scene in the television movie "The Harness."

By the time I visited the cemetery, I had lost track of Plasko. I didn't see him or his blue and gray van, but that doesn't mean he wasn't nearby. In John Steinbeck's world, you have the freedom to be anywhere.

#### IF YOU GO

The National Steinbeck Center is about a 105-mile drive south of San Francisco down Highway 101. Exit at Salinas Main Street. Continue on North Main to the third light. The Steinbeck Center is at One Main St. in Salinas.