

Oct. 13, 2002---

SALINAS, Calif.----A special exhibition of selected letters from the National Steinbeck Center is on display at the museum in conjunction with the centennial of Steinbeck's birth. Steinbeck often used letters as a warm-up exercise, writing several letters a day before beginning a manuscript. He once wrote, "What an extension of self is this pen. Once it is in my hand like a wand, I stop being the confused, ugly and gross person. I am no longer the me I know."

There are eight original letters in the exhibition, which was curated by Trish Kirchoff, a graduate student at John F. Kennedy University in Orinda, Calif.

My favorite letter was sent to Steinbeck on Dec. 20, 1957, when he lived at 206 E. 72nd St. in New York City. It was written by a newspaper reporter in his hometown:

Dear Mr. Steinbeck:

A new high school soon will be built in North Salinas. Before it two things are needed--more money and a name. High school trustees will probably let voters decide the first, but the second is up to them.

At first, trustees asked students to suggest names. The four most popular were North Salinas, John Steinbeck, El Camino and Elias Howe in that order. At the subsequent meeting of the board, nine persons said they favored the name of Steinbeck. That started a mild, but interesting, controversy. The board then deferred action and asked for suggestions from the Monterey County Historical Society.

Regardless of what it is named, I think your views on the subject would be interesting if you care to express them for publication. What do you think about having a high school named for you?

The board is supposed to reach a decision by early January. If you find time to reply by then, I shall do my best to see that you are rewarded for your efforts, although I cannot promise an honorary police chief badge such as the one I understand you received from the Monterey force.

Sincerely,

(Mrs.) Donnie Radcliffe

County Editor/Salinas Californian

Two days later (I wish I was that fast), Steinbeck responded:

Dear Mrs. Radcliffe:

The blinding flash and mushroom cloud of the suggestion that a Salinas school be given my name is shattering as a compliment, and I love compliments as well as the next man--maybe better. A heartwarming honor it

is, even as a suggestion.

So far only my first name has been given to an institution--a necessary sanitary institution. But after the first intoxication we take from flattery, there comes the black and secret midnight fallout. For example, when I was made an honorary chief of police of Monterey with a gold badge, I was as pleased as a child--a nondelinquent one. It was only later that I realized how many of my friends view all cops, even honorary ones, with a certain coolness.

Perhaps it is well to inspect honors in the light of cool reason and lest the footprint in the concrete disclose a bunion. Think of the millions to whom the name Horace Mann is a dirty word. If I were dead it would be all right because there is no harm in thinking ill of the dead. But I wonder if, living, I could stand the subtle poisonous thoughts of thousands of undergraduates.

But the danger of the situation is not only aimed at me. Consider if you will, the disastrous result if some innocent and talented student should look into my own scholastic record, seeking perhaps for inspiration. Why his whole ambition might crash in flames.

In view of these sober after thoughts and being still shaken by the compliment implied, I hope the Board of Trustees will think very carefully before taking this irrevocable step.

If the city of my birth should wish to perpetuate my name, clearly but harmlessly, let it name a bowling alley after me or a dog track or even a medium price low church brothel. But a school! The results might be disastrous not only to me but to the future generations of young people of the City of Salinas.

In humble appreciation,

John Steinbeck

AFTERWORD: Many years after Steinbeck's death an elementary school in Salinas was named in honor of the author. Perhaps also Steinbeck was influenced by Donnie Radcliffe's report that the naming decision was not unanimously supported and caused a small stir at the school board's meeting, confirming his still mixed acceptance.