

JOHN STEINBECK

Unlikely Voice of the American Struggle

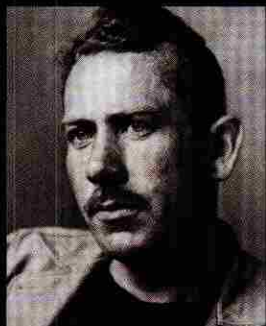
"I just don't know about John. He'll either be a genius or amount to nothing."

OLIVE STEINBECK

No matter where he lived, he always kept a garden. He always had a dog. He always worked with his hands. John Steinbeck, one of the few American authors ever to win both the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize in literature, eventually came to travel in exalted circles (he was a friend of the Kennedys, a frequent guest at the Johnson White House, and a key player in the postwar New York literary set). Yet he remained, until the end of his days, a boy from a small farming town. A boy who had worked as a ranch hand and a fruit picker, who remembered the names of trees and flowers. A boy in love with the sound and smell of the nearby sea. A boy who was painfully shy, argumentative, and had difficulty forming many lasting relationships. And a boy who, like his mother before him, was never quite sure that he'd amount to much of anything at all.

BY MELISSA BURDICK HARMON

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1939



1948



1966

GROWING UP EAST OF EDEN

Salinas, California, the heart of America's lettuce- and tomato-growing region, had a population of only 3,000 people when the fiercely determined former schoolteacher Olive Steinbeck gave birth to a son there on February 27, 1902. The boy, named John Ernst after his accountant father, was the third child in the family, and the only son. Olive raised all four of her children by the same strict rules, giving firm lessons in housecleaning, dishwashing, laundry, and etiquette to son and daughters alike. John Steinbeck would always remain handy around the house.

And he would always remain a dreamer. As a young boy he read and reread the stories of King Arthur. Almost 70 years later, as he neared his death, he was still working on a manuscript based on Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the story of King Arthur and Guinevere. "John always had to write things," remembered one of his sisters. That compulsion lasted a lifetime. As an almost-elderly man, he was still pounding out manuscripts, even though his reputation had faded and his health had failed. "I can never remember a time when I didn't write," he said.

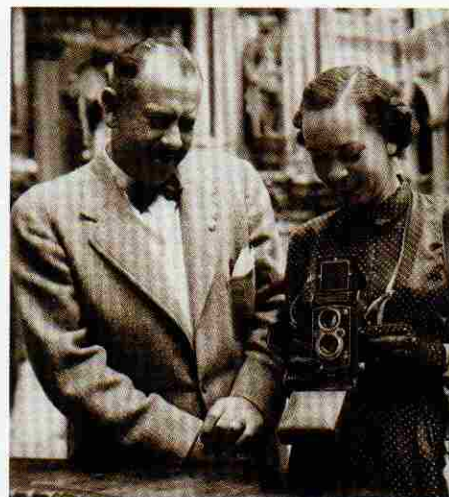
John Steinbeck made a formal decision to become a writer at the age of 14. But it looked to many—including Olive Steinbeck—that "writer" was just another word for dreamer. Everyone in Salinas chuckled about the frequent sightings of young Steinbeck—sitting by his bedroom window staring into space. He was not popular in town, and in fact, decades later few of his classmates even claimed to remember him. He didn't participate in classroom discussion, and though a member of his high-school track and basketball teams, he wasn't very good—or even very well-coordinated. He couldn't get a date to save his life. But he could dream, and that he did, sometimes turning his dreams into stories that he longed to publish. His greatest dream of all was to become a novelist/adventurer in the mold of Jack London.

OF TORTILLAS AND PONIES AND MEN

Steinbeck graduated from Salinas High School in 1919 and headed off to Stanford University. He began as an English major and joined the ROTC Cavalry, not out of any overwhelming sense of patriotism but because he had loved to ride horses ever since he'd been given his own pony as a young boy. He also signed up for the polo team and apparently never played in a single game, but became known for sporting



Steinbeck with Charley, his faithful French poodle and the companion featured in *Travels with Charley*



With his third wife, Elaine. He called their marriage "the first peace I have had with a woman"



Steinbeck on a trip to Vietnam, where he served as a correspondent for *Newsweek* from 1966 to 1967

Growing up, Steinbeck was not popular in town, didn't participate in classroom discussions, and couldn't get a date to save his life. Decades later few of his classmates even remembered him.

his polo uniform wherever he went on campus.

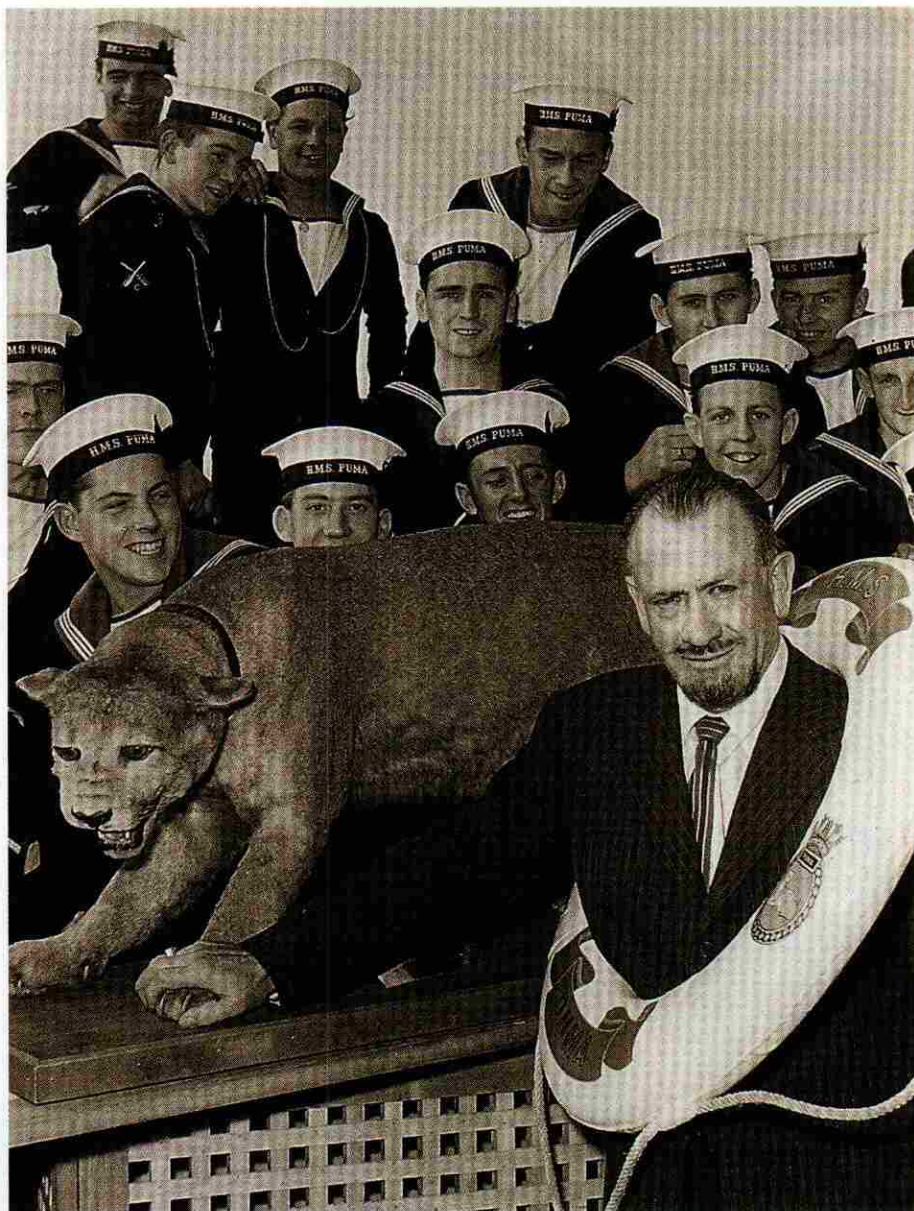
His university career was spotty. He took only courses that interested him—creative writing, elementary Greek, and marine biology (he had learned to love the sea and its inhabitants during childhood summers at the family's cottage in Pacific Grove, an oceanside resort town). He would attend Stanford off and on for six years, not even completing three years' worth of course work, and would never graduate. One of the "offs" occurred after his freshman year, when his roommate returned from class to find a note from Steinbeck asking him to take care of his pets since he had gone to China. In truth, he never made it. Unlike Jack London, he had neither experience on ships nor a passport and so couldn't find a job at sea. Instead, he moved into a hobo camp to gather literary inspiration.

Finally a relative got him a job as a newspaper reporter for the New York *American*. In typical Steinbeck fashion, he did the bare minimum and was soon fired. He also failed to find a market for any of his fiction. He spent the next two years as caretaker of a home on Lake Tahoe, living in almost total isolation during the winter months. Later he earned a living feeding fish at a hatchery there. Two pivotal things happened to him during the Lake Tahoe years. He published his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, the story of Jamaican pirate Henry Morgan, and he met his first wife, Carol. They eventually settled into the Steinbecks' Pacific Grove summer home, which John renovated and winterized.

Carol Henning Steinbeck was forceful, determined, and sure of herself. In short, she was a dead ringer for John's mother Olive, and the union proved successful—at least for a while. The Steinbecks were opposites in complementary ways. She was gregarious while he was painfully shy and stayed so all his life. She was affable while he was often depressed and insular. She also had a great feeling for words and such a profound belief in her husband's talent that she willingly worked so that he would be free to write. She laboriously typed his manuscripts after long days on the job and also edited them, deleting many passages of overwrought prose. It was she who suggested the title *The Grapes of Wrath* for Steinbeck's now-classic novel about the Okie migration to California.

Steinbeck was also inspired by his friendship with an eccentric marine biologist named Ed Ricketts. Ricketts ran a small seaside lab in Monterey, and there Steinbeck found an abundance of third-rate wine and

In 1962, long past his prime, Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. The *New York Times* swiftly questioned the committee's choice, as did others. When asked if he thought he deserved the award, Steinbeck himself replied, "Frankly, no."



As a young man, Steinbeck hoped to explore the world by getting a job at sea—a dream he never achieved. Here, he poses with the mascot and crew of Britain's Royal Navy frigate *Puma* (1959)

first-rate conversation. Ricketts' personality and his observations about life had a powerful impact on the young writer, who praised his friend as "the greatest man I have ever known and the best teacher." He appears as a character in many of Steinbeck's novels, most notably as "Doc" in *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*.

Steinbeck produced his best body of work

during those years. *Tortilla Flat*, the story of tough Mexicans living and working in Monterey, made his name—and his fortune—when it came out, in 1935. The 33-year-old John Steinbeck would never know poverty again. Never mind that the novel was really about King Arthur and his Round Table, an element suggested by Carol to lend it cohesion.



Henry Fonda (second from left) led the migrant Joad family from Oklahoma to California in *The Grapes of Wrath*



Gary Sinise as George and John Malkovich as Lennie in a 1992 production of Steinbeck's classic *Of Mice and Men*

Steinbeck Onscreen

John Steinbeck was a prolific writer, and many of his novels have been made into movies. Following are some of the most memorable.

CANNERY ROW (1982) Based on two Steinbeck novels, *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*, the comedy starred Nick Nolte and Debra Winger. (Winger replaced Raquel Welch after she was fired; Welch sued MGM and won a \$10 million jury award.)

EAST OF EDEN (1955) This was the first starring role for James Dean, who shared the screen with Raymond Massey and Julie Harris. A 1981 TV miniseries starred Jane Seymour, with the Bottoms brothers—Timothy and Sam—playing father (Adam Trask) and son (Cal Trask).

THE GRAPES OF WRATH (1940) This classic about Dust Bowl migrant sharecroppers starred Henry Fonda; John Ford won an Oscar for his direction. It was also a 1991 theater production filmed for TV and starring Gary Sinise.

OF MICE AND MEN (1939) Burgess Meredith and Lon Chaney Jr. starred, respectively, as a migrant worker and the sweet, slow-witted friend he tries to protect. A 1981 TV movie starred Robert Blake and Randy Quaid, and another film in 1992 featured Gary Sinise and John Malkovich.

THE RED PONY (1949) Steinbeck wrote the screenplay; the stars were Robert Mitchum and Myrna Loy. A 1973 TV movie featured Henry Fonda and Maureen O'Hara.

TORTILLA FLAT (1942) Based on the humorous short novel about a group of peasants in Monterey, it starred John Garfield, Spencer Tracy, and Hedy Lamarr.

VIVA ZAPATA! (1952) Steinbeck wrote the screenplay, based on his short story about the Mexican Revolution; the film starred Marlon Brando and Anthony Quinn (who won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor).

THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT (1983) It was made into a TV movie starring Donald Sutherland, Teri Garr, and Tuesday Weld.



The stars of *Tortilla Flat* (1942)



East of Eden's James Dean, Julie Harris



Nick Nolte played Doc, a marine biologist who supplies specimens for laboratories in *Cannery Row* (1982). The character was based on a real-life friend of Steinbeck's

In *Dubious Battle*, the story of a labor strike, was published the following year to glowing reviews. The novel was born of long hours spent interviewing farm workers in the Salinas Valley. The classics *Of Mice and Men* and *The Red Pony* in 1937 and the short story collection *The Long Valley* in 1938 only added to Steinbeck's reputation and his bank account.

Steinbeck became wildly famous during those years, and he hated every minute of it, viewing his newfound notoriety as "a pain in the ass." Extremely private and retiring, he once railed at a journalist for having revealed intimate details about his life. "What did I say that was so personal?" the writer asked in amazement. "You mentioned that I had blue eyes," Steinbeck shouted.

WRITING THE BIG BOOK

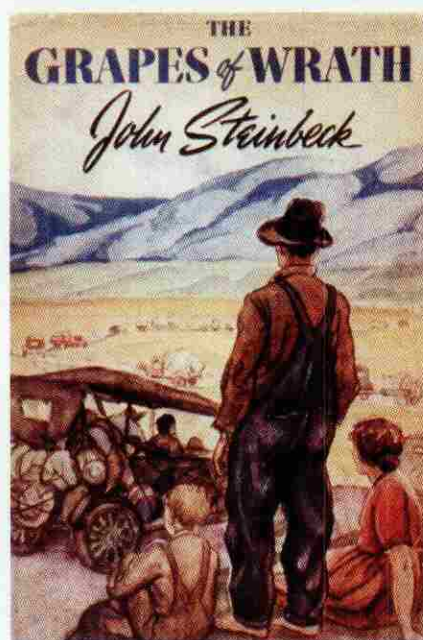
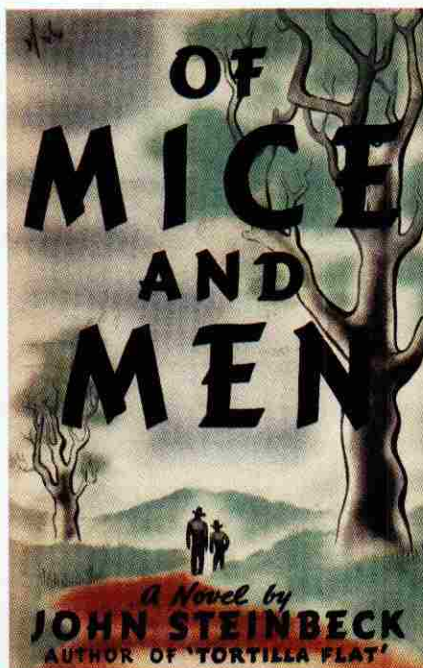
John Steinbeck, who always felt like an outsider, showed a powerful empathy for society's unfortunates and misfits in his writing. In 1935, he tackled the plight of the dirt farmers and sharecroppers who had headed west from the Oklahoma "dust bowl" to become migrant workers in California. The resulting book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, became his great masterpiece, winning him the Pulitzer Prize and sealing his reputation as one of America's preeminent authors. His life was changing in dramatic ways.

His marriage was an early casualty. John and Carol Steinbeck had shared the struggle to get his work noticed, and once they had achieved victory the tie that united them began to fray. On a trip to Hollywood in 1939, a friend from Steinbeck's Salinas boyhood introduced him to a pretty 20-year-old singer named Gwen Conger (she later changed her name to Gwyn probably because it was closer to Guinevere). The pair became constant companions and soon fell in love.

A confrontation was inevitable, but Steinbeck chose not to participate. He simply invited Conger to his home, rose to leave, and told the two women: "I want you two gals to talk this out, and the one who feels she really wants me the most, gets me." Gwyn Conger got him, marrying him just 11 days after he received his divorce from Carol. He confessed to some mixed feelings about the change, writing, "I am sad at the passage of a good big slice of my life."

FAMILY LIFE

The second Steinbeck marriage was a disaster from day one, not helped by the fact that Steinbeck almost immediately received accreditation to cover World War II in Europe



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for the *Herald Tribune*. (His war work also included the anti-Nazi propaganda novel *The Moon Is Down*, a commercial success scorned by fellow writers since Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald had refused similar offers.)

John and Gwyn Steinbeck had two sons—Thom, born August 2, 1944, and John IV, born June 12, 1946. Gwyn, apparently suffering from both depression and alcoholism, took to spending most of her time in bed, while John spent more and more time away from home. Clearly, he needed a strong woman who would push him to make something of himself, not a passive young girl, 18 years his junior. They divorced in 1948. "Well, there goes that experiment," Steinbeck reported.

In some ways, the last years of his life were the best. His final marriage, to a former Broadway stage manager named Elaine Scott, proved happy. She was forceful enough to keep him going, wise enough to give him room. "It is the first peace I have had with a woman," he said.

Elaine and John Steinbeck settled in New York City, and John almost immediately set to work on *East of Eden*, another novel set in his heart's home, California. As time passed, he struggled with his sons, victims of Gwyn's neglect and abuse; with the double-edged sword of celebrity and a slew of bad reviews for his newer works; and with failing health. He found ways to escape, however. He purchased a modest seaside home in Sag Harbor, New York, which bears a remarkable resemblance to his family's Pacific Grove house. He traveled, almost compulsively (his best-known trip was the solitary camper journey detailed in his classic *Travels with Charley*). And he returned to the legend of King Arthur that had inspired him since his earliest days.

In 1962, long past his prime, Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. The *New York Times* swiftly questioned the prize committee's choice, as did other publications. When a reporter asked Steinbeck if he thought he deserved the award, he replied, "Frankly, no." Still he went to Stockholm to accept, agreeing to buy a tuxedo only if he could also be buried in it.

John Steinbeck died of a heart attack on December 20, 1968. He didn't get to be buried in his tuxedo, but he got something even better. Elaine Steinbeck took his ashes back to Salinas, the town where he had learned to love gardens and dogs, trees and flowers—the town that he had never left in spirit. Steinbeck's ashes are buried there, surrounded by friends and family, by the people who inspired him and who gained immortality in the pages of his best-loved novels. ●

MELISSA BURDICK HARMON OFTEN WRITES ABOUT WRITERS FOR THIS MAGAZINE.