

PRESS RELEASES

An Author's Art Wakes Up a Sleepy Town

by John Dorrance

At first glance, the town's no tourist mecca. It boasts no beautiful beaches (it is half an hour's drive to the Pacific coast) or pristine woodlands, Its municipal parks are grassy, flat, and uninspiring; its two or three shopping centers, mundane. Salinas is a dot on the map surrounded by large squares of select agribusiness land. Known by the moniker "Lettuce Capitol of California," the town has been — until recently — known primarily as a destination for long-haul truckers looking to transport tons of vegetables (lettuce, celery, broccoli, cauliflower, carrots) elsewhere across the nation.

The town's reputation is quickly changing, however. These days, Salinas is gaining popularity for much more than its first-class veggies. Recent statistics, tallied by the Salinas Chamber of Commerce, show that many more strangers are taking an interest in this valley farming community. Tourist phone calls as well as walk-in and e-mail inquiries to the chamber's office have radically increased during the past year.

What do all these people want? They're asking for directions to the National Steinbeck Center.

Since its opening in summer 1998, the center has attracted 120,000 visitors to drowsy downtown Salinas. At a cost of about \$11 million, this compelling museum and archive has been designed to promote the life, work, art, and ideas of one man, the town's only world-famous native son — John Steinbeck.

As luck would have it, Steinbeck, the Nobel Prize-winning author, was born in Salinas in 1902. Steinbeck's family (dad served as county treasurer and mom taught literature at school) lived in a Victorian house only two blocks away from the newly constructed Steinbeck Center.

As a boy and young man, Steinbeck grew to love the Salinas Valley. He worked hard as a hired hand on nearby ranches, picked various tree and ground crops, loaded sugar beets into cooking vats at a nearby processing company, and helped to cut and clear farm roads.

These experiences shaped what Steinbeck would later describe in his novels, short stories, newspaper reports, film scripts, and plays. He would spend a good part of his literary talents eloquently portraying the trials and tribulations of this large agricultural community.

"I think I would write the story of this whole valley, of all the little towns and all the farms and the ranches in the wider hills. I can see how I would like to do it so that it would be the valley of the world," Steinbeck once told a friend.

The author succeeded in this dream more than he could have imagined. Today he might be stunned strolling through the National Steinbeck Center, interacting with the hands-on exhibits about his life and knowing that tens of thousands were traveling to Salinas every year to do the same.

A Slow Birth and Dramatic Irony

The prosperity of the Steinbeck Center cannot be completely attributed to the author's immense popularity (his top selling novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, has been translated into nearly every modern tongue). Focusing an entire public museum and archive on one deceased author — no matter how seemingly immortal — is a risky venture at best. The National Steinbeck Center required acute foresight and employed the talents of many fine builders, interpretive planners, exhibit designers, and other experts over a long period. The history of this museum's creation spans almost three decades.

Ironically the idea of anything honoring John Steinbeck, let alone a national museum, would have caused violence in Salinas before the 1960s. In 1939, most local growers and produce shippers deeply despised the novelist for his newly published and widely read book *The Grapes of Wrath*. It detailed the sufferings of migrant pickers exploited by merciless farm bosses. Copies of what would become a Pulitzer Prize-winning story were twice set ablaze in front of the Salinas library.

"I have become a giant kind of half criminal, half ape over there," said the author at the time.

It wasn't until Steinbeck received the 1962 Nobel Prize for literature that his hometown's attitude began to change; after all, the whole world was beginning to notice this upstart old homeboy. The library's director, John Gross, wrote the novelist asking if they could name a reading room after him. "If you don't think it will drive people away," the writer responded. A few years later, after Steinbeck died in 1968, the town graced the whole library with the author's name.

During the next decade, library staffers began to tape-record conversations with residents who personally knew the late novelist. Sometimes a subject refused to commit his or her memories of Steinbeck on tape. Opposition to the novelist in Salinas still lingered. An ad hoc committee of civic leaders was created to develop a plan to honor him. In front of the library, a statue of the author was erected. Manuscripts, letters, and other Steinbeck memorabilia were acquired for the library's archives. For the first time, scholars of Steinbeck's work, who came from far and near, had unique documents and oral histories at their disposal.

With a \$97,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Gross started an annual Steinbeck Festival in 1979. This weekend celebration, which now attracts about a thousand Steinbeck aficionados, includes lectures, workshops, movies, and tours of the writer's haunts.

During the 1980s, more Steinbeck fever hit Salinas. City officials and other community leaders were raising funds to build an additional wing onto the John Steinbeck Library. This wing was planned to house the growing written and audio archives and to make the material available to the public. This idea was set aside the following decade, replaced by a much bigger and more ambitious scheme for the Steinbeck collection.

In 1993, Logic Incorporated, a group of museum planners, was hired to prepare a feasibility study for a new Salinas attraction — what was to become the National Steinbeck Center, a nonprofit museum, education facility, and archive. Results from

the report indicated great potential for a project located on a key site and operated in a professional and economically viable manner.

For the next five years, fund raising shifted into high gear. All tax-deductible donations were accepted, from student membership applications of \$35 to various foundation grants, some totaling \$100,000. The Salinas Redevelopment Agency also bestowed a prime piece of business real estate for the Steinbeck Center, located at the front of Main Street in the heart of historic Salinas. By the end of 1997, fund raising exceeded \$8 million.

The following year, on a sunny day in June, the National Steinbeck Center opened its doors to the public.

The Salinas-based architects who collaborated on the design and construction of the museum, Jerome Kasavan Associates, heaved a sigh of relief. This glass-and-steel structure had been a tremendous undertaking. With its environment-controlled basement archives and first-floor galleries, exhibit halls, meeting facilities, cafe, and store, the center encompasses 37,000 square feet of space — roughly the same area as two football fields.

Why the Place Works So Well

Walking through the National Steinbeck Center, you plunge into the author's art. To bring Steinbeck's books to life, exhibits mix vivid juxtapositions of stage sets, films, scents, sounds, and tactile encounters.

"We've created an atmosphere that entertains and educates people of all ages, with something new to be found on each visit," says Patricia Leach, executive director of the center. Six themed galleries lead you through the main exhibit wing: "Growing Up East of Eden," "An' Live off the Fatta the Lan'," "Grapes of Wrath," "Cannery Row," "Adventures on Land and Sea," and "Steinbeck's America."

Each gallery engages your senses. You whiff the sweet odor of fruit blossoms in the "East of Eden" gallery; you also hear the clicks and clatters of horse-drawn carts and early automobiles. A re-creation of the author's attic-bedroom lures you to see what books the famous writer read as a child and to try and decipher the secret language he shared with his sister Mary.

In another gallery, you smell hay and hear a pony nickering as you saunter into the barn from Steinbeck's tale of "The Red Pony." Kids can climb on a pony mockup, brush its mane with a curry-comb, and learn to braid a rawhide rope.

Most adults enjoy the "Grapes of Wrath" gallery. Interpretive panels tell of Steinbeck's ideas about the perseverance of human dignity and his empathy for ordinary people caught in the tides of history. Excerpts from his writings reveal his deep understanding of human nature: "And the men of the towns and of the soft suburban country gathered to defend themselves: they reassured themselves that they were good and the intruders bad, as a man must do before he fights."

The center is designed for those familiar with the author's work as well as those who are not. "A lot of the visitors won't know Steinbeck and through this museum will have their appetites whetted," says Alice Parman, exhibit planner and writer for

Formations Inc., the Portland, Oregon, company that designed the permanent interpretive exhibits.

"Our efforts were toward creating an experience where visitors come out and race to the bookstore or library to read or reread Steinbeck," Parman says.

Indeed, the center's shop sells more Steinbeck books than Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble combined. That's quite an accomplishment, considering that the megastores are two of the nation's top book retailers.

"We want the visitor to get closer to Steinbeck and his work, as well as the Salinas Valley and beyond," says Parman.

Steinbeck's life outside the Salinas Valley is well covered. His collecting trips with marine biologist and drinker, Edward "Doc" Ricketts, are highlighted in the "Cannery Row" and "Adventures on Land and Sea" galleries. Sensory boxes challenge you to identify biological specimens by touch or smell, then listen to a recorded short-wave conversation between the Western Flyer (the vessel Ricketts and Steinbeck chartered for their journey to the Sea of Cortez) and a fishing boat out of Monterey.

Not far away squats Rocinante, the 1960 GMC truck Steinbeck drove across the United States on a trip recounted in his book *Travels with Charley*. Restored by a local auto-body repairman and his son, the pick-up camper once served Steinbeck well. The author named it after Don Quixote's noble steed.

Excerpts from the 1960s televised versions of *Travels with Charley* and *America and Americans* are also enriched by recollections from the author's wife. In fact, so many of Steinbeck's works made it to the video and silver screens that the museum includes seven theater sections where segments from these movies roll continuously.

"We used clips from seventeen different films based on Steinbeck's work," explains Carolyn Zelle, a film and video producer at Odyssey Productions. This firm, also located in Portland, worked closely with Formations Inc. on the exhibits.

"I think people today are accustomed to the visual image," says Zelle. She notes that the museum-goer gleans information through a variety of media. As an interpretive expert, Zelle knows that "some people learn best by reading, others learn better by seeing and hearing."

In total, Odyssey Productions edited or created three hours of moving images and more than a dozen audio programs for the center. For the average visitor who has only a few hours to spend at the exhibits, "It speeds up the process of moving through the museum," says Zelle, "while still giving them a lot of fascinating information and a reason to come back for more."

Slower moving literature professors will also be enthralled by the center's resources. The well-organized archives in the basement house a collection of more than thirty thousand pieces. Relics, which may be viewed by appointment, include original manuscripts, oral histories, first editions, posters, and photographs.

Yet of all the treasures in this museum, John Steinbeck himself might have smiled most in the Art of Writing Room. Here user-friendly computers ask you in Spanish or

English to pen your responses to various Steinbeck quotes and ideas. The author's works can be perused via CD-ROM, video, or interactive books. You can explore various forms of writing and word play by performing several fun exercises. Magnetic words entice children and parents alike to create poems and limericks.

Certainly the town's prodigal son would have liked this room and this museum. For it salutes and proves an important point that the author expressed in his acceptance speech to the Nobel Prize committee: "Literature is as old as speech. It grew out of human need for it and it has not changed except to become more needed," he declared.