



PROJECT MUSE®

The Steinbeck Centennial Year, 2002 -- Reflections and Highlights

Gerald W. Haslam, Yeng Fong Chiang, Jackson J. Benson, Scot M. Guenter, Mimi Reisel Gladstein, Robert Eustis Morsberger, Don Swaim, Katharine A. Rodger, Tony Newfield

Steinbeck Studies, Volume 15, Number 1, Spring 2004, pp. 122-134 (Article)



Published by The Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/stn.2004.0004>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/172402>



John Steinbeck, mid 1930s.

THE STEINBECK CENTENNIAL YEAR, 2002— REFLECTIONS AND HIGHLIGHTS

**GERALD HASLAM, CALIFORNIA WRITER, COMMENTS
ON “CALIFORNIA READS THE GRAPES OF WRATH,” A FALL
2002 STATE-WIDE READING PROGRAM SPONSORED BY THE
CALIFORNIA COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES:**

My best *Grapes of Wrath* audiences—filled to overflowing with folks who spoke up—were in San Clemente, Santa Rosa, and Petaluma. My worst was at Bakersfield, where turnout was meager and nobody had much to say. The latter may have been because I’m overexposed down there. (By the way, I started the Bakersfield speech by announcing, “In 30 years of talking about this novel, no one has ever asked me about Kern County or criticized it. That pre-occupation is strictly xenophobic.” I don’t know if anyone believed me, since at least one newspaper guy down there seems convinced that *The Grapes of Wrath* celebration was designed to denigrate Bakersfield and environs.) In any case, there were no secret revelations and few if any insights that weren’t already public, but the enthusiasm was great, especially from the high-school kids.

The most perplexing question I can remember came from a high-school boy and girl in San Clemente: “How do Marianne Moore and John Steinbeck compare?” Say what?

I was also tickled by the Steinbeck-trivia experts at nearly every stop (I run into similar types when I talk about Jack London or William Saroyan). In Santa Rosa, for instance, I mispronounced Steinbeck’s middle name, saying “Ernest,” and an older guy threw “Ernst” back at me like a Nolan Ryan fastball. When we got to the deeper meaning of the *GOW*, however, he was silent.

So it was an enjoyable interlude. Now I've got to get to work on my own projects.

MS. YENG-FONG CHIANG LED CHINESE DISCUSSIONS OF *THE GRAPES OF WRATH* IN SUNNYVALE, CALIFORNIA:

"I was everywhere"—wherever there was a Steinbeck centennial event. When Liching Yu led three discussions about *The Grapes of Wrath* in Chinese at the Chinatown branch of the San Francisco Public Library, I was there. When William Wong discussed Asian-American immigrants at the Sunnyvale library, I was there. When Susan Shillinglaw discussed Steinbeck's life at the Sunnyvale library, I was there. When Francisco Jimenez remembered his childhood experiences as a migrant at the Palo Alto Children's library, I was there. When David Laws showed slides of the places in Steinbeck's books in Menlo Park, I was there. When Ross Altman sang "The Ballad of Tom Joad" in Sunnyvale, I was there. When "Word for Word" theater company performed *The Pastures of Heaven* at the Los Altos Public Library, once again, I was there. I'm talking like John Steinbeck. Comes of thinking about him so much. It seems like I can see him sometimes.

Ms. Amy Hsu of the Sunnyvale Library invited me to lead the book discussion of *The Grapes of Wrath* in Chinese along with Spanish and English book discussions. To prepare, I studied many versions of Steinbeck's books in English and in Chinese, movies from Hollywood, as well as movie posters and music CDs.

The Grapes of Wrath is a powerful book. The more reading I do, the more I am attracted to the characters portrayed by Steinbeck. I feel myself getting closer and closer to Steinbeck. I can visualize the Dust Bowl, the migrant mothers, and the struggling farmers when I close the book and relax my eyes. Dorothea Lange's photography with Woody Guthrie's singing became a classic black-and-white Steinbeck movie playing around me during many days and nights. I presented in the same format with slides and music during the book discussions, and the program was well received.

In the early 1900s, many Chinese workers came from far away to the so-called Gold Mountain, San Francisco and Sacramento, to search for a better future. They were poor and

worked very hard to earn a minimum wage to support their families in China. But they had hope, hope for better days. They worked with their hands in the canneries, on railways, and on farms. We can see them in *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Cannery Row*, and *East of Eden*. Steinbeck obviously was sympathetic to the Chinese workers, as much as he was to the migrants from the southwest.

I was pleased to use my native language, Chinese, to do my two presentations/discussions about Steinbeck's life and his work. One was on Oct 12th at Sunnyvale Library, and the other one was on Oct 19th at San Francisco Library, Chinatown branch. I was told that many of my audience became interested in the subject and checked out Steinbeck's books right after my presentation. That made me feel very proud; I felt that I had made my little contribution toward the great occasion.

The majority of Chinese people who attended my sessions were well-educated first-generation immigrants. They have chosen America as their home, and they are eager to learn about this great country from all aspects. The book discussions of *The Grapes of Wrath* provided them with opportunities to better understand an important period of recent American history. The struggle between the farmer and landlord also reminds Chinese people of the various "Land Reforms" that happened in China during the last century. My audiences commented that not only is *The Grapes of Wrath* a great work of art and moving to read but also it reflects the common thread of humanity searching for a better life, which immigrants like us can relate to emotionally.

Indeed, October 2002 was definitely "Steinbeck Month" for me. My small soul wanted to be part of the big soul, and wherever there was a Steinbeck event, I wanted to be there.

JACKSON BENSON, STEINBECK BIOGRAPHER, PARTICIPATED IN LIBRARY DISCUSSIONS SPONSORED THROUGHOUT THE YEAR BY THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES:

After giving a number of talks here and there around the country, my last Steinbeck centennial duty was a pair of seminars at the San Diego Main Library. The librarians had arranged the

chairs in a circle in the rare book room. Some eighteen people arrived for the 6:30 pm event, a discussion of *The Grapes of Wrath*. About ten minutes into our discussion, a woman came in the door in the far corner and sat down in an empty chair at the far side of the circle from where I sat. She was somewhat oddly dressed in tennis shoes and a raincoat (it wasn't raining), and her hair was a bit disheveled. Shortly after she sat down, she began to nod off, which didn't bother me. A few minutes later, however, two female security officers came in the door, apparently notified by the librarians, and asked the woman to leave. Our discussion had been about the Joads and their treatment in California, and as the officers led the woman, protesting, out the door, the irony of the situation suddenly hit all of us. A woman on my left in the circle said, "She wasn't doing anything," and her neighbor agreed, "She wasn't hurting anything." There was a murmuring throughout the room, and another woman on my right muttered, "God damn cops." I felt bad, sitting there in my Land's End slacks and L.L. Bean sweater, knowing that the librarians had only been trying to protect me from a possible disturbance.

SCOT GUENTER, PROFESSOR OF AMERICAN STUDIES, SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY, LECTURED FOR THE "STEINBECK CENTENNIAL SERIES," MONTHLY DISCUSSIONS FROM THE FALL OF 2001 TO THE FALL OF 2002, CO-SPONSORED BY THE NATIONAL STEINBECK CENTER AND THE CENTER FOR STEINBECK STUDIES:

On December 6, 2001, Professor Gail Jardine, who currently teaches in the American Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, joined me in a dialogue and helped lead a discussion on the theme "Travels with Steinbeck: A Perspective of America in the 1960s" as part of the centennial year's ongoing activities at the Center for Steinbeck Studies. Texts being considered were *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962) and *America and Americans* (1966), and the event included a screening of the rarely seen film version of *America and Americans*.

Prior to the screening, Professor Jardine and I reflected on other significant works of literature in which the narrator goes on

a journey to better comprehend and appreciate America. Nineteenth-century contributions in the genre by the likes of Alexis de Tocqueville and Mrs. Trollope can give us interesting perspectives on America from an outsider's perspective, while other twentieth-century pieces, such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and William Least Heat Moon's *Blue Highways*, provide intriguing points of departure for contrasts with *Travels with Charley* as well.

The ruminations on Kerouac provided opportunity for a segue into reflections on the Beat movement's response to post-World War II America, and how these rumblings of discontent and impatience with the United States's Cold War conformity coalesced into counterhegemonic challenges to the dominant culture in the 1960s.

As students of Steinbeck know, he had deep love for his homeland but strong concern about where America was heading in the 1960s; that concern is the propulsion that helps keep *Travels with Charley* moving and is the *raison d'être* for *America and Americans*. We can see how the Civil Rights movement in the South becomes the central focus at the end of *Travels with Charley* (the narrator's getting lost in New York City when he finally made it back home was a wonderful detail that could well resonate symbolically for the entire nation). In *America and Americans*, Steinbeck offers the nation both a love letter and a jeremiad at once. Yes, he pays homage to "genus americanus" as he celebrates a consensus perspective (*e pluribus unum*) that was familiar to those of his generation, but he is unabashedly critical as to what impact a culture of consumption has had upon the American character and spirit.

The group then viewed the 1966 film version of *America and Americans*, a rare artifact obtained by the Center through the kind intercession of filmmaker Lee Mendelson himself. Mendelson is best known to many people as the creator of the successful series of Charlie Brown and Peanuts holiday television specials that became a staple of our cultural experience in the mid-1960s and have remained standard family fare ever since. In the lively discussion that followed the film, four topic areas emerged:

- ◆ Consideration of the film's structure and rhetorical strategies. We noted the choice of Henry Fonda reading the text, sometimes on camera and sometimes as voice-over. We evaluated the selection and

juxtaposition of visual elements, particularly Mendelson's use of cartoon, especially with the more strident passages concerning population explosion and the threat of the bomb that come near the end of the film.

- ◆ Identification of markers of cultural identity. We wanted the audience to assess the film as a cultural artifact. Professor Jardine asked the gathering to reflect on how female African American images were represented, while I asked them to think about the representations of the youth culture of the period.
- ◆ Identification of markers of historical context. As a corollary to the previous topic area, audience participants spoke to messages or stances presented in the film that seemed curiously dated to them.
- ◆ Articulation of positions on current national identity. Perhaps inevitably, Steinbeck's vision of America in the 1960s was critiqued from the varying perspectives of audience members who felt a heightened or modified sense of identification with the nation since the tragedy of 11 September 2001. Less than three months later, the situation in Afghanistan is anything but resolved, it was not at all surprising that the conversation took such a turn on that December evening. Indeed, I was pleased to see Steinbeck's work provide a basis for both literary and cultural analysis, provoking an open discussion not only of what America meant to Steinbeck and others in the past but what it could or should be, and what it is, for us now in the present.

MIMI GLADSTEIN, PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND CHAIR OF THEATER ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, EL PASO, THREW A PARTY FOR HER STUDENTS ON 27 FEBRUARY 2002. "HAPPY BIRTHDAY, JOHN STEINBECK":

The twenty-seventh of February 2002 was a red-letter day for English 4350, a major American author course, offered in that semester as "John Steinbeck." The syllabus did not read "Chapters 2–5" or "finish the first three short stories." No, on that day the assign-

ment was: “Celebrate! Steinbeck’s Centennial Birthday Party.” Some of the students had anticipated our class celebration by decorating Hudspeth Hall, home of the English department, with pictures, posters, and streamers so that the whole department would be cognizant of the momentous occasion. The president of the English Club approached me for help, and so I provided her with some of my old conference posters and memorabilia. For my part, I was brought up short and reminded about how ivory is our tower when I ordered the birthday cake. I called Albertson’s Bakery Department and the young woman who answered the phone was most accommodating and helpful. I told her I wanted a sheet cake, and we talked about how the cake would be decorated. I told her that I wanted it to read “Happy 100th Birthday, John Steinbeck.” In a most earnest tone she explained to me that I did not have to include last names on birthday cakes. When I recovered from my speechlessness, I replied, “Oh no, I think we have to show the old gentleman that kind of respect.”

For the birthday celebration in our class, each student was to create his or her own birthday card for Steinbeck. The card was to wish him happy birthday and then to cite a favorite line and explain why that line was particularly significant, inspiring, or relevant to the individual student. It was unfortunate that Steinbeck’s birthday came so early in the semester and therefore the students had not read anything beyond *Of Mice and Men*. The scope and variety of lines chosen, however, was a revelation. On the birth date



Photo by
Mimi Gladstein

class, we sang our good wishes and then each student brought forward his or her birthday card and read it to the class. The cards were diverse, ranging from an index card to something painted on a manila folder. Some students were very creative. A woman whose favorite line was “Looks like a quick puff of colored smoke” adorned her card with yellow fabric chrysanthemums. Downloading images from the Internet was another favorite decorating tactic.

Some students opted for profundity while others preferred the humor. A creative writing student, for obvious reasons, chose: “The writer must believe that what he is doing is the most important thing in the world. And he must hold to this illusion even when he knows it is not true.” Another student with very poor test scores made me wonder if he was reading anything at all. His choice was apt: Crook’s line, “Books ain’t no good.” The class roared at that one. Several of the young Catholic Chicanas were tickled by the line in the “Tortillas and Beans” chapter of *Tortilla Flat* when the *vieja* switches her allegiance from the Virgin Mary to Santa Clara. The narrational set up is: “She permitted herself a little malicious thought at the Virgin birth,” which is followed by, “‘You know, sometimes Teresina can’t remember either,’ she told Santa Clara viciously.” Some students obviously felt a closeness to the author, allowing them to salute him with a “Happy Birthday, John” or “Best Wishes, Johnny.” One young woman wrote on her card: “Thanks for the stories, the characters, the places, the ideas in your work that I will never forget. You were, and always will be, one of the finest storytellers.” My appreciation for the epigrammatic nature of much of Steinbeck’s writing was awakened by several students who cited such lines as: “What pillow can one have like a good conscience?” and “What good is punishment unless something is learned?”

Bobbi Gonzales, a former student and now associate editor of Texas Western Press, joined us for the festivities. We had co-authored “*The Wayward Bus: Steinbeck’s Misogynistic Manifesto*” over a decade earlier. Her interest in Steinbeck has not waned.

Although we garnered a few quizzical looks from students and professors who passed in the hall, the class had a joyous time. One student, writing on his term-end evaluation, commented: “It was fun, but I learned a lot from listening to the other students explain why they liked certain lines from Steinbeck.”

ROBERT MORSBERGER, PROFESSOR EMERITUS AT CAL POLY, POMONA, REFLECTS ON “OUTSTANDING MEMORIES OF THE STEINBECK CENTENNIAL YEAR”:

My most moving experience during the Steinbeck centennial year was rereading *The Grapes of Wrath*. I had, of course, read it several times, the first when I was in basic training at Fort Knox during the Korean War in 1951. The company’s sergeant barked at us not to waste our time reading anything intellectual—like *The Reader’s Digest*—and to confine our reading to the field manuals. “You men gonna be here fourteen long weeks. Behave yourselves, read the field manuals, you get along OK. Might get to go to Louisville some weekend.” I disregarded his literary advice and always kept a paperback in my pocket to read during the Army’s recurring “Hurry up and wait” hours, and the one that hit me the hardest was *The Grapes of Wrath*. Years later, as a professor, I taught it several times. But I had not read it straight through just as a novel reader for ages, so in the fall of 2002, faced with the prospect of giving innumerable talks to Southern California Libraries on *Grapes*, I sat down and read it as if it were a new book, and I am happy to say that I found it better than ever—a timelessly moving experience that only improves with age. The descriptions, dialogue, narrative, characterizations are all masterful, and the sense of outrage generated by the exploitation and oppression of the working poor remains as intense and timely as ever.

Subsequently, I found it rewarding to give those talks, from Oceanside to Big Bear Lake. The one of two most memorable occasions was a talk I gave at 8:30 in the morning to a Fontana High School class. The students were admirably prepared, asked intelligent questions, gave sensitive responses, and were a pleasure to be with. They had all painted color dust jackets for the novel, all creatively individual, which were in display around the room in the library where I gave the talk. The other most memorable talk was on a four-speaker panel about Steinbeck and censorship at the J. Paul Getty Museum in connection with a display of photographs by Dorothea Lange and Horace Bristol.

Finally, there was a splendid revival of *Oklahoma!* in New York as part of the Hofstra Conference. I had seen the original on a trip to New York when I was a teenager and the revival seemed as fresh as ever and even more dynamic. Thanks to

Elaine Steinbeck's having been stage manager of the original, we had orchestra seats in the second row center. To make the evening really memorable, we had a wayward bus that broke down on the way back, leaving us to fortify ourselves with snacks at a late-night deli while waiting about an hour and a half for a replacement bus to arrive and return us to our motels at Hofstra. It was, of course, always good to meet myriads of fellow Steinbeckians at Hofstra and to hear many of their papers.

DON SWAIM, JOURNALIST, HELPED ORGANIZE "JOHN STEINBECK IN BUCKS COUNTY":

While New York and California would seem to be the most logical locales to celebrate John Steinbeck's 100th birthday, the author had several direct links to Bucks County, Pennsylvania, which noted the centennial with a month-long tribute. In 1937, Steinbeck traveled to the rural farm of playwright George S. Kaufman in Holicong, Pennsylvania, to complete work on the dramatic version of *Of Mice and Men*. Steinbeck, in a letter to a friend that year, described his location as "somewhere in Pennsylvania." Three months after Steinbeck and Kaufman's grueling labor on the play, *Of Mice and Men* opened in New York to stunning reviews.

The Bucks County Free Library, Doylestown, hosted the centennial observance with four programs focusing primarily on *Of Mice and Men* but also on Steinbeck's connection with the Bucks County lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, who co-produced, with Richard Rogers, Steinbeck's play *Burning Bright* in 1950. Hammerstein in 1955 wrote the lyrics for the musical *Pipe Dream*, based on Steinbeck's novel *Sweet Thursday*. In addition, Broadway producer Jack Kirkland, another Bucks County resident, adapted Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* for the stage in 1938, although unsuccessfully.

The Steinbeck centennial series, coordinated by the library's Jan O'Rourke, included Richard Astro, Ph.D., Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at Drexel University, author of *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist* and co-editor of *Steinbeck: The Man and His Work*; Dorothy Herrmann, author of *Anne Morrow Lindbergh: A Gift for Life*, *S.J. Perelman: A Life*, and *Helen Keller*;

Don Swaim, writer and journalist; David Leopold, arts curator and picture editor for the Lincoln Center Theater's *New Theater Review*; and Terry McNealy, local historian and author of *Bucks County: An Illustrated History*.

A group dedicated to historic preservation has begun a drive to place the farm at which Steinbeck and George S. Kaufman polished *Of Mice and Men* on the National Register of Historic Landmarks. The Barley Sheaf Farm, which dates to 1740, was dubbed *Cherchez La Farm* by Kaufman, who purchased it in 1936 for \$45,000. In 1937 LIFE magazine featured a photo essay on the star-studded house parties Kaufman held at his fifty-nine acre spread. On the weekend of LIFE's photo shoot the guests included Harpo and Susan Marx, playwrights Moss Hart and Lillian Hellman, Broadway producer Max Gordon, and lyricist Howard Dietz. Currently a bed and breakfast, the sprawling farm is up for sale with an asking price of \$3,295,000.00.

KATIE RODGER, GRADUATE STUDENT AT UC DAVIS AND RESEARCH ASSISTANT AT THE CENTER FOR STEINBECK STUDIES, REMEMBERS THE SAG HARBOR TOUR FOR HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY'S CENTENNIAL CONFERENCE, JOHN STEINBECK'S AMERICAS:

The 2002 Steinbeck centennial was a whirlwind for us at San José State University's Center for Steinbeck Studies. There are numerous anecdotes and memories that I will carry with me of this truly once-in-a-lifetime event. But there was one moment in which I really felt the spirit of the centennial, though it occurred in a most unlikely setting. During the Hofstra Conference in New York, many of us were fortunate enough to travel out to the tip of Sag Harbor and to tour Steinbeck's home. Jean Boone, Elaine Steinbeck's sister, generously opened up the house that John and Elaine shared and loved dearly. It was wonderful! I was helping Susan Shillinglaw coordinate the tour—keeping people moving along through the house and on the grounds, hoping to allow everyone time to see and explore. We had suggested that out of courtesy, everyone use the restroom on the bus if necessary, not wanting to intrude at the house. So at a point when I felt the need to return to the bus, Jean stopped me and told me to go

ahead into the bathroom in the house. As I finished washing my hands and turned to leave the room, I noticed that around the door frame were pictures of the dogs Steinbeck had owned throughout parts of his life. Snapshots of Charley, Angel, and other dogs I recognized from photos in our archive (but could not name) were each neatly matted, framed, and hung around the door. At that moment I thought, “Now *this* is Steinbeck!”

ON 24 DECEMBER 2002, TONY NEWFIELD, ACTOR, EMAILED THE EDITOR ABOUT THE UNVEILING OF A HISTORICAL PLAQUE PLACED ON STEINBECK’S NEW YORK APARTMENT:

Did Harold [Augenbraum] tell you about the ceremony surrounding the unveiling of the plaque on E. 72nd Street, marking Steinbeck’s last residence in NYC? It was a goofy, sweet little ceremony that I imagine JS would have found amusing and typically New York. The morning was cold and windy, and the woman who organized it could not be heard above the roar of cabs and trucks and buses that roared by. She insisted that the ceremony be outside, and it was as if she were torturing the tiny crowd by perversely whispering everything she said. She spoke about god knows what, George Plimpton told an amusing anecdote that was somewhat intelligible, Jean Boone spoke, Harold said a few words, some boys from a nearby school read “favorite passages from *Of Mice and Men*.” Most of them, though charming in their youthful silliness, could not be heard. Barbara Lee then introduced me: “that CELEBRATED actor, Anthony...Anthony...New...uh...Nim...Num...” “NEW-FIELD,” I bellowed out, laughing.

I stood under the still-veiled plaque and in my best theatrical voice, projected as to be heard down Lexington Avenue, “Listen everybody, we’re cold, nobody can hear a thing, and we’re all ready to go. But you’ve GOT to hear this excerpt from Steinbeck’s essay, ‘The Making of a New Yorker.’” And I read it and people heard it and laughed in the right places and were moved by it. We then removed the paper covering the plaque and people applauded and we went our separate ways to get warm.