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California Connections

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CALIFORNIA CONNECTIONS

CAROL ROBLES

THE STEINBECKS IN SALINAS

Monterey is essentially and wholly Mexican whose Catholic population speak Spanish and live in adobe houses, with pride of a dignified past.

Salinas, the new county seat, in the bald grain bearing plain under Gablian Peak, is a town of purely American character, mostly of Protestant denomination. The houses are virtually all redwood frame structures.

—Robert Louis Stevenson, 1879 (qtd in Johnson 1)

When Ernst Steinbeck moved his family to Salinas, grains were the dominant crop. In the rich soil of the Salinas Valley, wheat, barley, and dry beans flourished. The family's move was the result of Ernst's promotion from Manager of the flour mill in Paso Robles to Superintendent of the Sperry Flour Company in Salinas. The Sperry Mill was the largest flour producing mill in central and northern California.

Olive Hamilton Steinbeck was delighted to return to Salinas. She had attended high school there and looked forward to being part of a burgeoning community, the Monterey County seat since 1873. The Steinbecks first two children had been born in Paso Robles. Two years after moving to Salinas, John was born, and three years later Mary completed the family. The home we know as the Steinbeck House was deeded from J. J. Conner to

John Adolph and Almira Steinbeck on 28 March 1901. Ernst and Olive paid his parents for the house in 1908.

In 1900, Salinas was growing rapidly. The population had increased from 600 when the railroad came to the town in 1872, to 3,304 in 1900. The previous year, Claus Spreckels had opened the world's largest beet sugar processing plant near the Salinas River, just 4.5 miles south of the city. This new sugar plant would play a major part in the Steinbeck family's future.

Prior to the opening of the Spreckels Sugar plant there were more than 213,000 acres of grain in the Salinas Valley. Claus Spreckels, however, wanted the farmers to grow sugar beets for his plant. He was instrumental in the development of irrigation in the valley, and the combination of irrigation water and a guaranteed market for sugar beets resulted in fewer and fewer acres devoted to grains. By 1910 there was not enough wheat and barley to make the Sperry Flour Mill profitable and it closed that winter. Ernst Steinbeck was out of work.

Ernst then bought the Blakly Feedstore that occupied the ground floor of the Masonic Building at 332–334 Main Street. He was not cut out to be a retailer and progress worked against him. Horses were being replaced by tractors and fewer grains were grown locally. After a few difficult years the feedstore filed for bankruptcy in January of 1918. Ernst Steinbeck was again out of work. In 1938, writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck recalled those terrible teenage years:

I dreamed a confused mess made up of Dad and his failures and me and my failures. Some way connected with the store. Poor Dad couldn't run a store, he didn't know how. And I used to eat pies at noon hour and was ashamed of selling things. No mercantile ability in either of us and the store failed and left a terrible mark on Dad. (DeMott 28)

But his quiet father endured. Ernst's strong affiliation with the Masonic Lodge provided him with an extensive network of business men. He was soon offered a job as office manager at the Spreckels Sugar processing plant.

The Spreckels sugar business began in Hawaii with cane sugar. Following his years in Hawaii, Claus Spreckels changed his operations to beet sugar and opened a plant in Watsonville,

California, in November of 1887. When the plant and the growing area around Watsonville proved to be too small, the operation moved near Salinas, where the company-owned town of Spreckels was founded in 1899. The first building constructed was a sixty-room hotel that provided housing for single men. The famous architect William Weeks designed 40 residents, all with brick foundations—the first houses in the valley to have foundations.

The plant employed about 1,500 workers during the beet campaign, July through September, and between 100–125 workers year around.

During the six years that Ernst worked for Spreckels, the family took an active part in that community's social life, attending Sunday picnics at the Alisal Picnic Grounds as well as traveling theater productions and cultural events at the 375-seat Spreckels Opera House, which opened in 1911. The *Salinas Daily Index* announced confidently in January 1912: the Opera House “promises to exist as long as Salinas and Spreckels are on the map.”

When John was not in school, his father arranged a variety of jobs for him at Spreckels. He worked in the carpenter shop, the maintenance department, and the machine shop; he worked with the process crew; as straw boss on the Spreckels ranches; and as a bench chemist, earning 32 cents per hour.

In the early 1920s, Ernst's network of Masonic members arranged for him to complete the term of the deceased Monterey County Treasurer. While the position did not pay a large salary, it had some measure of prominence and responsibility. He continued in that position until his health failed in 1935.

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CAROL ROBLES is a Steinbeck historian. Knowledgeable both in Steinbeck family history and site locations, she is also an amateur Monterey County historian. Her new column, “California Connections,” will discuss Steinbeck and local history.