Steinbeck's America, Twenty Years After


By ERIC F. GOLDMAN

THERE are some men, John Steinbeck says, who are born wanderers; when the winds of restlessness seize them, there is nothing for them to do but go. They find reasons for everything, including the need for the trip. In Steinbeck's case, the justification, was easy enough. Here he was an American writer, writing about America, but for some twenty years he had known little of the country at first-hand. Shortly after Labor Day, 1960, Steinbeck left his Long Island home for a swing around the United States.

Three months and 10,000 miles later the 69-year-old novelist was back, physically and emotionally exhausted. But it was all decidedly worth the effort. The resulting book is pure delight, a pungent potpourri of places and people interspersed with bittersweet essays on everything from the emotional difficulties of growing old to the reasons why giant Sequoia arouse such awe.

For Steinbeck to get into easy conversation with ordinary people took a bit of doing. His name is hardly unknown. Taking along a friend or family

Mr. Goldman, an authority on modern American culture, is Professor of History at Princeton and author of "Rendezvous With Destiny," "The Crucial Decade" and other books.

would have meant another impediment. To avoid hotel stays and certain recognition, he had a manufacturer build for him a three-quarter-ton truck with a cabin body equipped for day-and-night living. He traveled accompanied only by his aged French poodle, Charley. The poodle is wonderful. Charley takes over a good deal of the book, the ambassadeur extraordinaire between mere human beings, always the companion and judge of the man who indulged himself in the whinny that he was his master.

Steinbeck drove first into New England. He agreed that the towns were still strikingly pretty, but the ubiquitous antiques stores had him wondering whether he should make his grandchildren millionaires by accumulating for them piles of junk. The Maine natives puzzled him in a pleasant way, and then there were the freecutters, native and otherwise. As more than a few bullets barely missed the truck, Steinbeck fastened red Kleenex around Charley's tail and reflected on the pathetic urge to assert masculinity which keeps overweight Americana, stoked with whisky, shooting at anything that moves.

The swing into the Middle West brought out the old agrarian in Steinbeck. He deplored the superhighways and he abhorred the mammoth cities. He noted too that the road signs were shifting in tone. The New York State signs had shouted at him. The New England ones had a kind of laconic precision. In the Middle West, the signs were "more benign. * * * The earth was generous and outgoing here in the heartland, and perhaps the people took a cue from it."

Would Chicago, Steinbeck's prose takes on a new lift. This was his kind of country, and the Pacific, his Pacific, was roaring. By the time he reached Montana, he was enganged in an unabashed love affair with nature. The calm of the mountains and grasslands, he was sure, had seeped into the inhabitants. Out here even the casual conversation, in Steinbeck's glowing reportage, has an earthy sagacity. It was beyond Chicago that he talked with a crossroads storekeeper and raised the question that was beginning to bother him. Why didn't Americans argue violently about public affairs any more?

Well, the storekeeper said, he had to deal with people with lots of different opinions. Why should he lose business?

But wouldn't Americans have to find some outlet for their natural contentiousness?

Oh, sure, sure. "You can raise a wind any time over the Pirates or the Yankees, but I guess the best of all is we've got the Russians. Nobody can find fault with you if you take out after the Russians. Yes, sir, those Russians got quite a load to carry. Man has a fight with his wife, he belts the Russians. Maybe everybody needs Russians. I'll bet even in Russia they need Russians. Maybe they call it Americans."

On to Seattle and then down into northern California. Naturally the clash between old and new produced the sharpest twinges in the area of Steinbeck's boyhood and of his novels. In Monterey, Johnny Garcia stood behind his bar and went on and on about what a homecoming this was and Steinbeck sat on the stool thinking about the Carmel Valley when he could shoot his rifle where he pleased without disturbing anything but frogs. Suddenly he was on his feet, bolting for the door. "I was on Alvarado Street, slashed with neon lights - and around me it was nothing but strangers."

Texas undid Steinbeck. He was determined not to go along with the usually easy denunciation of the state, and in this chapter he leans backward so far that at times he tumbles into saccharinity and even near incoherency. But no one can doubt his meaning as he reached New Orleans and "Cheerleaders" scream at a tiny Negro girl making her Teresa fled way into a desegregated school. Here is the most powerful writing in the book, stinging with the cold lash of outraged decency.

The trip really ended in Louisiana. Tired and homesick, Steinbeck soon had his foot far down on the accelerator, and Charley, who was no dog to fight inevitabilities, settled into soulful snoring. All kinds of thoughts went through Steinbeck's head as he hurried home - yet, apparently, the most obvious one did not. He had traveled thousands of miles to learn what America was really like nowadays, but he had avoided its new heartland. The cities, he raced through; the suburbs, he ignored. This is a book about Steinbeck's America and, for all the fascination of the volume, that America is hardly coincident with the United States of the Sixties. Accepting this limitation, what had Steinbeck learned about his country? Occasional during the trip he would park the truck beside a pleasant meadow or creek and mutter things over with Charley. Charley would listen carefully and usually comment. There was, for example, the comment of disdain for a muddled idea when Charley would rise and remove himself from the confusion.

Of one thing Steinbeck became quite sure. For all the stubborn regionalism of the United States, for all the ethnic range of its people, "we are a nation, a new breed. * * * The American identity is an exact and provable thing." But just what was this exact and provable thing? Steinbeck would try to lay hold of it and more and more he came back to the drive for change in the American character. In a whole series of musings, he speculated on the exact cause and nature of this characteristic.

Increasingly in his travels Steinbeck caught himself when he wanted to lash out at the to the most fundamental result of that drive, the rampant industrialization. "It is the nature of man as he grows older to protest against change. * * * The sad ones are those who waste their energy in trying to hold it back, for they can only feel bitterness in loss and no joy in gain."

For such talk Charley had no comment at all. A wise dog does not try to top wisdom.