

**HOMELESS IN PARADISE**

**August 9-15, 2019**

**PENINSULA PULCHRITUDE - Part 32**



**“HAS MONTEREY COUNTY’S CASH COW BEEN MILKED DRY?”**

**By Wanda Sue Parrott**

*would steinbeck still write  
if he'd foreknown he'd become  
monterey's cash cow  
what would he think now  
might he call America  
dust bowl number two  
keepers of his fame  
staged a show in his dog's name  
almost no one came*

**TRAVELING** by John Steinbeck with his French poodle Charley across America in 1960 inspired me to flee Hollywood's fleshpot and work my own way north as an aspiring writer in 1962. If Steinbeck's book "Travels with Charley--In Search of America" hadn't been published, I'd still have left tinsel town, but using the author from Salinas as role model made remaking my life exciting as I retraced his literary footsteps and explored America.

Steinbeck had long lived in New York when I hit the road to do stopovers, work odd jobs, and absorb the spirit of places about which he'd written in Central California.

Decades later I would attend festivals in his honor in and near his hometown of Salinas, California, the most recent being last Saturday.

Back in 1962, “Travels with Charley” helped me build a new life, not copy his.

### **The Grapes Of Wrath Revisited**

My first road-stop was Kern County, where the Joad family settled around thirty years earlier after fleeing the Oklahoma dust bowl in Steinbeck’s novel “The Grapes of Wrath.”

I rented a high-ceilinged room in an old Victorian-style boarding house. Its other tenants were male workers from oil fields near the Kern River north of Bakersfield. We shared a bathroom down the hall, with pull chain toilet and bathtub with lion-claw feet.

The day after my arrival I walked into a job that was waiting for me at the Bakersfield Police Department. As the BPD’s steno-in-training-to-be-a-juvenile-officer, I soon learned I hadn’t the heart to carry a weapon because I just might have to use it. I liked some of the homeless people I interrogated who lived on Cottonwood Road and were often arrested for petty offenses.

So, I left to be a poet in Big Sur, ran out of cash, moved on to Monterey, and found work in the derelict remains of the fish-packing district immortalized by Steinbeck’s novel “Cannery Row.”

In September 1962 I was the first “Untouchable” hired by entrepreneur Dick O’Kane and his business partners who were camping in the barnlike cannery they were converting to a 1930s-style bar.

Dick’s tourist attraction by the railroad tracks was called Al Capone’s Warehouse. It catered to off-duty military who entered through a phone booth. Costumed in a one-sleeved fringed red satin dress and 3-inch heels, I served beer, pizza and music as tambourine and harmonica player in Cannery Row’s first honky-tonk band.

### **How Exploiting An Icon Worked**

I also was privy to meetings held by developers who started transforming old canneries and the Monterey area in general by capitalizing on all things Steinbeckian, including the Steinbeck Theater that later burned down on Cannery Row.

Just before exploitation of Steinbeck as an icon began, the author took his own spiritual journey.

In 1960, in a pickup truck named Rocinante, he camped across America with his French poodle Charley. And wrote about it.

### **Review Of Future Foreshadows**

In “Travels with Charley,” Steinbeck reflects in three parts, first of which foreshadows his realization that fortitude is needed if he is to survive rediscovery of his changing homeland and himself.

Steinbeck finds once hard-working grin-and-bear-it Americans trending toward expectation of instant gratification caused by rapidly expanding technology that created a national popular culture among people from diverse areas, and the power mass media (radio, TV and print) had (and still have) in influencing minds of the masses.

His disappointment in, and distrust and dislike of government emerge.

He stops to eat in the town where famed author Sinclair Lewis was born, and is saddened because nobody there knows who Lewis was or why he was important, which could be a portent of his own fate!

Fast forward to last weekend.

## In Search Of America 2019

On Saturday, August 3, less than one week after news of the Gilroy Garlic Festival mass shootings was broadcast instantly around the world, Salinas playwright Harold E. Grice and I attended the 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Steinbeck Festival “In Search of America” at the National Steinbeck Theater in Salinas.

It was supposed to be a major gala, but while we were there, the festival felt like a magnificently prepared but under-attended event.

Why? Lack of publicity? Change of date from May to August? Fear of being shot like attendees at the nearby Gilroy Garlic Festival a week earlier? Or cultural change, apparent to me as expanding immigration issues and beyond-control homelessness?

The 2019 theme was promoted as revisiting “Travels with Charley” and inviting participants to “reflect on American culture and identity.” This column is my contribution.

### Where Did All The Doggies Go?

Of special interest to us was the 2 p.m. Charley Contest—Pet Show—whose three categories included “Best Costume,” “Best Personality,” and “Best Charley Look-alike.”

As we waited in the bright, airy and very empty rotunda, we were thirsty. Cerveza was plentiful, but no coffee, tea, soda, or water could be found. Two blocks away, a street fiesta was going on, with Mexican mariachi music wafting in, so we strolled through Old Town for soft drinks.

Beyond the street fiesta, tents and trash fanned out like dollops of mashed potatoes under dregs of melted black and blue gravy in nearby Chinatown, replicating in vast numbers the scene Harold sets in his play “The Houseless Hussies” about homeless women camping near a dumpster, scenes Steinbeck never witnessed in his hometown.

At last the dog show started. There were two entries. One was a no show. A white poodle won as a dozen people spectated on the Pet Patio.

Inside the rotunda, a life-sized cardboard cutout of mature John Steinbeck in felt hat and coat welcomed visitors who were notable by their absence.

Steinbeckian fiction sprang to the fore as an imaginary child’s voice asked, “Mama, quién es? (Who’s he?)” and a woman responded, “Yo no se (I don’t know).”

My literary role model’s effigy cleared his dry throat. “He’s just another American dust bowl. . .”

Before the weekend passed, mass shootings happened in Dayton, Ohio and El Paso, Texas.

Yet another voice murmured, “Has Monterey County’s cash cow been milked dry?”

I recognized the thought. It was my muse!

For details about the beautiful National Steinbeck Center, 1 Main St., Salinas, visit <http://www.steinbeck.org>.

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Photo of John Steinbeck, Google Images Fair Use practice.

Triple haiku by Wanda Sue Parrott

This column appears in the weekly Cedar Street Times, hometown NEWSpaper of Pacific Grove, CA at

[www.cedarstreettimes.com](http://www.cedarstreettimes.com) .

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