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Travels Unraveled

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John Steinbeck set out on a journey of discovery in 1960 in search of America. The result was *Travels With Charley*, a classic of American literature. Fifty years later Bill Steigerwald set out to recreate Steinbeck's trip. His motives were "totally innocent." He simply "wanted to go exactly where Steinbeck went in 1960, to see what he saw on the Steinbeck Highway, and then to write a book about the way America has and has not changed in the last fifty years" ("Sorry, Charley"). The results of his journey turned out to be a bit different from those intended.

For instance, based on his findings and conclusions, we learn that *Travels* is a "fraud," and "a dishonest book." Steigerwald also found that Steinbeck "was almost never alone on his trip, . . . didn't rough it," and "rarely camped under the stars in the American outback" ("Sorry, Charley"). In addition, Steinbeck was guilty of scrambling dates and being not too concerned with accuracy ([Cutting the First Draft of 'Charley'](#)). In other words, Steinbeck lied.

Steigerwald was piqued by the lack of reaction to his assertions among Steinbeck scholars, admitting he "was a little surprised that his findings hadn't made more of a ripple" ("A Reality Check"). This is understandable after the time and expense of an 11,276 mile trip, the sole result of which seems to be the discrediting of a widely read and beloved book.

Steigerwald's comments were mild compared to those of journalist Nick Gillespie of *Reason Magazine*, who categorized Steinbeck as "totally full of shit." Like Steigerwald, he was irritated by Steinbeck scholars, a group he describes as a depressingly jaded bunch, for seemingly not caring about Steigerwald's revelations ("*New York Times* Groks The Trouble With Charley").

I happen to agree with Steigerwald's premise that *Travels* should not be taken literally as a travelogue across the United States of 1960. If a person picks up the book expecting a "Roadside Guide to the U.S. of A." the shortcoming is on the part of the reader and not the author. Of course, I disagree with the conclusions reached by Steigerwald and others about the quality of Steinbeck's character and the worth of *Travels*. A tad more knowledge of Steinbeck and/or

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his literature may have saved Steigerwald, Gillespie, and *Reason* from going out on this limb. The purpose of this article is to shed some further light on Steinbeck—although most of it is already obvious to jaded scholars—and perhaps stave off some of the iconoclastic rush-to-judgment in the media regarding *Travels*.

Was Steinbeck a liar? Steinbeck knew that the truth “could be a very dangerous mistress,” especially if it got in the way of telling a good story (*Cannery Row* 79). He made no secret of this. *Travels* itself has plenty of clues about Steinbeck’s attitude. He lies to the “whiskey of breath” man, who offers him directions (82). He and the guardian of the lake tell each other “a few lies” (111). He and his Texas host tell stories and “some lies” about previous quail hunts (241). Like the private history of Texas described in the book, Steinbeck has his own style of relating his trip “based on, but not limited by, facts” (229).

Mack tells the boys (and Steinbeck tells us) in *Cannery Row* “I hate a liar Oh, I don’t mind a guy that tells a little one to get along or to hop up a conversation, but I hate a guy that lies to himself” (61). Steinbeck may have been getting along with, and/or hopping up his writings in *Travels*, but it would be a real leap to call it lying, as if some sinister intent was involved.

It would come as a shock to those who expect *Travels* to read like the disembodied voice of a GPS. Thom Steinbeck remembers his father as saying, “I don’t lie, I just remember big” (*John Steinbeck: An American Author*). *Travels* is Steinbeck remembering big.

Was Steinbeck unconcerned with accuracy, and did he scramble dates? Maybe, but that is hardly a great revelation. Steinbeck had little interest in time and place in his writings or in his correspondence. He dates one letter to Elaine “September 24, 1960 Sunday evening,” but September 24, 1960, was a Saturday (*A Life in Letters* 677). Anyone can make a mistake in dating a letter, but Steinbeck was less than precise about more important things. His greatest friend Ed Ricketts died on May 11, 1948, after his tragic accident of a few days earlier. However, Steinbeck, writing about it in “About Ed Ricketts,” states that the accident happened “about dusk one day in April 1948” (*Log from the Sea of Cortez* vii).

Steigerwald takes Steinbeck to task for misrepresenting the time of Khrushchev’s shoe-banging incident at the United Nations. He dates Steinbeck’s conversation with the farmer regarding this scene as either September 23 or 24, but points out the shoe banging did not occur until October 11 (“A John Steinbeck Timeline”). However, Steinbeck wrote to Elaine on September 30, “I hear the news on the car radio. Khrushchev’s pounding and chanting seem incredible to me. I guess I was crazy to leave New York just at this time. I might even have seen the table pounding” (*A Life in Letters* 681).

Was there some other outburst by Khrushchev? If not, why does Steinbeck cite one earlier than September 30, while Steigerwald dates it October 11? Could Steinbeck have been that far off in dating another letter? There may have been some other incident involving Khrushchev, and Steinbeck merely blended the two in his book.

It is likely that Steinbeck stopped and camped at the places he said he did in *Travels*, but not necessarily in the order or at times represented. He spent approximately seventy-five days and nights on the road. Thankfully he did not record every one of them in real time. It would have made for a very long book. If he did manipulate times, places and occurrences, it was for the sake of telling his story and making the points he wanted to make.

As he once wrote to Peter Benchley:

Of course a writer rearranges life, shortens time intervals, sharpens events, and devises beginnings, middles and ends and this is arbitrary because there are no beginnings nor any ends. (JS/PB 1958 *A Life in Letters* 523)

In other words, it is a writer's prerogative to arrange things in an aesthetically pleasing manner, as he does in *Charley*.

Did Steinbeck fail to "rough it," and not "camp under the stars?" Steinbeck loved and was almost obsessed with self-contained travel as well as gadgetry from his earliest bakery wagon, harvest gypsy research days. His interest in his camper/truck, Rocinante, was more in planning and outfitting than it was in actually using it as a home.

He drove his camper all over the United States. If he chose to avail himself of comfortable hotel rooms along his trip, that was his business. He made no secret of it and described doing so a number of times in *Travels*. He never claimed to have curled up in a sleeping bag out on the prairies. I am not sure that spending nights in Rocinante could be accurately described as "roughing it." His description of how he equipped it and a view of that snug little cabin in the Steinbeck Center in Salinas makes it seem a good deal more comfortable than many hotel rooms. If he outraged anyone's sensibilities by staying in hotels, it was because of his need for human contact—not an attempt to pull the wool over readers' eyes.

Was Steinbeck almost never alone? Anyone reading *Travels* has to be aware that it is not exactly the record of a leisurely, introspective jaunt of travel and discovery. Right from the beginning Steinbeck is reluctant to go. Once he gets on the road he is not so much enjoying the country and savoring his experiences than he is "bucketing" along to the finish line. He is on his quest to discover what America has become, but he is racing through and wishing

the miles away. Steinbeck was a lonely man away from home, and this factor pushed him along on his American dash.

Elaine was with Steinbeck on his journey other than in Chicago and Texas. Once again, this is not much of a discovery. It is documented in both Jackson Benson's and Jay Parini's excellent biographies of the author (Benson 885–888 and Parini 427). Carol Steinbeck accompanied him on the Sea of Cortez expedition, but there is no mention of her being along in his books on the subject. She did not fit in with the fabric of the story. He mentioned Elaine in *Travels* when she did fit the fabric and omitted her when she did not. Her company is a small concession to the author when we understand his chronic loneliness. It is also a tribute to Steinbeck's love for his wife. Elaine's presence on the ride down the west coast is hardly some sordid secret—nor does it alter Steinbeck's view of America.

Did Steinbeck make people up? Now this would be a surprise, since he rarely made up characters even in his fiction. It is well known that many of Steinbeck's most memorable characters derive wholly, partly, or as composites of people from life. He had a lifetime of experiences by the time he wrote *Travels*. He was a storyteller, not a bean counter. A person would have to be totally naive to think that he would restrict himself to relating only those things or people he experienced on his ten-week race around the country in 1960. Whether or not he made them up or if he recycled those from earlier experiences, he certainly made them come to life in *Travels*, if in a somewhat cornball way at times. Obviously this was not a big area of concern for him, as evidenced in a letter written to Carlton Sheffield two years later:

I have thought about writing an autobiography but a real one. Since after a passage of time I don't know what happened and what I made up, it would be nearer the truth to set both down. I'm sure this would include persons who never existed. (JS/CS March 2, 1964 *A Life in Letters* 798)

That is, he wrote about life—how it was, how it should be, how it might have been—but still true to humanity.

Is it fiction or non-fiction? *Travels* was written at a time in which many books fell under the category of “popular history,” dramatized works of non-fiction with an absence of footnotes, such as those by Tom Wolfe or Walter Lord. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is an example of what has been called a “non-fiction novel.” *Travels* may fit comfortably in either category for those who feel the need to cubby-hole it.

The thirtieth anniversary edition of Alex Haley's *Roots* includes an addendum describing the 1978 law suit by Harold Courlander, which claimed

that Haley plagiarized certain scenes from Courlander's novel *The African* for his book. Haley settled out of court to the tune of \$650,000 after admitting that several passages of *Roots* were copied from *The African*. Haley explained that the plagiarism was unintentional because he had received the material from researchers who had been helping him and had failed to cite the source of the information. Later on, in the addendum he stated:

Since I wasn't around when most of the story occurred, by far most of the dialogue and most of the incidents are of necessity a novelized amalgam of what I know took place together with what my researching let me to plausibly feel took place. (Haley 891)

I have found this book is shelved in the biography section of a local bookstore, and in the history section of the local library.

Regarding *Travels*, it usually occupies a place on bookstore shelves along with Steinbeck's works of fiction and non-fiction, under the appropriate heading of "Classics."

So what about those Steinbeck scholars? Steigerwald asked, "If scholars aren't concerned about [his findings], what are they scholaring about?" ("A Reality Check"). Well, mostly they are "scholaring" about John Steinbeck's literature and his life. Steigerwald goes on to describe the homework he did before setting out on his trip. Of course, he re-read *Travels*, and used "clues from the book, biographies of Steinbeck, letters Steinbeck wrote from the road, newspaper articles, and the first draft of the *Charley* manuscript" ("Sorry, Charley"). Had he immersed himself in the whole Steinbeck catalogue, he may have realized why his findings did not set scholars bouncing off walls.

It is well known that Steinbeck based the characters and scenes in his fictions on real people and incidents. Besides being a harvester of stories, he was also an unapologetic collector of junk. He admits in *Travels* that he is "over-interested in junk," explaining that he has "half a garage full of bits and broken pieces," and that he uses "these things for repairing other things" (44). He was not one to let things go to waste when he could reuse them for some other purpose. *Travels* is filled with opinions and generalities on a wide variety of subjects that do not really fit into an anticipated "roadside guide."

Some of Steinbeck's opinions and generalities are quite curmudgeonly. Only six months before he left on his trip, he had queried James S. Pope, editor of the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, asking him if he would be interested in some "old curmudgeon pieces" (*A Life in Letters* 663). It is quite likely that these ended up as part of *Travels*.

So Steinbeck took memories of actual people and events, adjusted and reworked them a bit to fit into his stories. He did so again in 1960. Many

scenes, actions, and people described in *Travels* are fairly close to those in his previous works. In a few cases he seems to be giving a happier ending to some of his fictional characters of the past or perhaps even apologizing for things he had written of others. In either case he was recycling, as well as adapting experiences and encounters on the road to better fit the flow of his narrative. For example, a thirteen-year-old boy shyly approaches Rocinante during its outfitting at Sag Harbor. It takes him a week before he is able to verbalize his longing to share the adventure of the road with Steinbeck (10–11). He reminds one of Frankie from *Cannery Row* who takes three weeks in visiting Doc's lab before he makes it as far as the workbench (42).

Steinbeck outfits Rocinante with everything he might need on the road, admitting he carried “about four times too much of everything” (11–12). Compare this to the intensity with which he and Ed Ricketts packed the *Western Flyer* for their Sea of Cortez expedition (*Log From the Sea of Cortez* 12–15).

Steinbeck devises a unique way of washing clothes after he observes the most “thoroughly mixed and kneaded garbage” in a plastic pail tethered in the cabin of Rocinante. He simply replaces garbage with dirty clothes, water and laundry detergent, and has an instant washing machine (45). Ingenious, but this is not the first time an idea like this came to him. For reasons of his own, he wrote a letter to Dorothy Rogers (Mrs. Richard Rogers) in 1954, describing how women can launder their underwear by putting them in a fruit jar with water and detergent and shaking it like a cocktail shaker (*A Life in Letters* 489–490).

Steinbeck is lucky enough to see the Aurora Borealis and admits he has only seen it a few times in his life (48). Joseph Wayne also sees it and states that it is “rarely seen so far south” (*To a God Unknown* 257).

There are twelve adults, not counting the children in the “Canuck” family Steinbeck meets and invites to Rocinante. There are twelve members of the Joad family, not counting Casey. The Joads are scorned and treated as intruders in their trek west. Steinbeck makes up for this by treating the Canucks to refreshments with almost fawning obsequiousness, finally sharing his vintage cognac with them (65–70).

Did this warm party scene actually happen as described, or could it have been drawn from a similar one during Steinbeck's stop at Eaglebook School at Deerfield, Massachusetts? He described in a letter to Elaine how all the teachers and Mrs. [Thurston] Chase came to visit and he made coffee. “John [IV] acted as master of ceremonies, passed cups and canned milk. At one time there were twelve people—three on each side of table and six standing” (*Life in Letters* 677–678). He mentions this gathering in his letter to Elaine, but not in *Travels*.

Conversely, his entertaining of the Canadian family plays an important part in *Travels*; yet there is no mention of it in the letters provided by Elaine for *A Life in Letters*. This is not proof that the gathering as described did not take place or, that if it did, Steinbeck could not have communicated it to Elaine in some other way. I have never seen the original manuscript in the Morgan Library so I do not know if the gathering at Eaglebrook School is described therein.

The guardian of the lake, in *Travels*, angrily challenges Steinbeck:

Don't you know this land is posted? This is private property
The owner don't want campers. They leave papers around and build
fires See that sign on that tree? No trespassing, hunting, fishing,
camping. (109–110)

Compare this to the challenge issued to Mack and the boys by the Captain in *Cannery Row*:

What the hell are you doing here? The land's posted. No fishing,
hunting, fires, camping. Now you just pack up and put that fire out
and get off this land There's signs all over. (62)

The cook and waitress between Minneapolis and Sauk Centre in *Travels* are reminiscent of Mae and Al of *Grapes of Wrath*. Whereas Mae and Al are savvy and cynical because of their exposure to travelers on the road, the German restaurant pair in *Travels* are a bit slow and obtuse, stuck in their own world, serving but not really absorbing things from Steinbeck and others who pass through (130–132; and *Grapes of Wrath* 197–209).

Steinbeck never meets the guardian of the lake's wife while stopping in northern Michigan. He finds out that she is blonde and "prettyish" and that she is longing to be some place other than "out in what she calls the Sticks" (112). Robbie, the ascot-wearing young man in Idaho also longs to be elsewhere to "see for one's self" (172). How much are these characters like Curley's wife in *Of Mice and Men* who dreams of being "in the movies" rather than trapped on a grain ranch with her thuggish husband (84–85)?

The soliloquy of Joe the mechanic on the efficacy of trailers may be a combination of information Steinbeck gleaned from a National Guard officer who also ran a trailer park, and/or from residents of another park outside of Bozeman, Montana. He describes both encounters to Elaine in letters dated, "October 1, 1960" and "Columbus Day [1960]" (*A Life in Letters* 683–684 and 689). Joe and his wife could have been the National Guard officer and his wife, or composites from among the people he met and spoke to in the trailer park near Bozeman. He does not mention Joe by name to Elaine in his letters, nor does he mention the square-jawed National Guard officer in *Travels*. It is just

as likely that Joe's opinions stem from Steinbeck's own fascination with self-contained travel.

It is interesting that Steinbeck shows nothing but admiration for Joe and his views on mobility and the lack of roots in American society in *Travels*. He has somewhat less admiration for the guard officer and wife. "These are Martians," he writes to Elaine. "I wanted to ask them to take me to their leader. They have no humor, no past, and their future is new models [of trailers]." However, in the same letter he writes, "If I ever am looking for a theme—this restless mobility is a good one" (*A Life in Letters* 683–684). Steinbeck may not have known it at the time, but he had found his theme.

Robbie and his ogreish father were a find for Steinbeck. Not only does he discover a lonely aspiring hairdresser with a burly father in the wilds of Idaho, but he is able to mediate, Solomon-like, in an argument between the two (170–175). The author obviously was addressing homosexuality in a sort of clumsy 1960s manner ("hairdressing—for women," get it? *wink!*). Robbie's longing for New York City, the theater, music and someone "to talk to" is a cry for a life style other than the one he is living. Steinbeck weighs in on Robbie's side both sympathetically and diplomatically. Once again, did this unlikely encounter really happen? Could something similar have happened at some other time? Could Steinbeck have been trying to apologize for his portrayal of Joe Elegant in *Sweet Thursday*?

One of Steinbeck's more miserable characters is the junkyard worker in *Grapes of Wrath*. He is small, wiry, and filthy. He has one eye and is filled with whining self-loathing and self-pity. He is generous and helpful to Tom and Al Joad partly because it helps him get back at his hated employer. He longs to head west and begs a ride with the Joads. Steinbeck leaves him stretched out in his bed crying, with "the cars slipping by on the highway only [strengthening] his loneliness" (228–234).

Steinbeck gives this character a happy ending in *Travels* in the form of the service-station man who helps the stranded author find tires for Rocinante on a rainy Sunday in Oregon. This man has an "evil white eye," instead of missing an eye. He has aged and grown in the ensuing twenty-four years to a giant with a scarred face, and now he is calm, soft-spoken, and saintly. He goes out of his way to help Steinbeck for no other reason than to be helpful. The junkyard man and the service-station man are essentially the same character, but one who has found peace by getting on the road and finding his place out west (185–87).

The author is thrown by his return to Monterey and by the emotionally charged reunion in Johnny Garcia's bar. He writes:

When I went away I had died, and so became fixed and unchangeable. My return caused only confusion and uneasiness. Although they could not say it, my old friends wanted me gone so that I could take my proper place in the pattern of remembrance. (2006)

Similarly, he writes in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*:

I think those young men were glad to see us go; because once we were gone, they could begin to build us up, but present, we inhibited their imaginations. (77)

And in “About Ed Ricketts:” [Ed] was dead and had to be got rid of. People wanted to get rid of him quickly and with dignity so they could think about him and restore him (*Log from the Sea of Cortez* x).

Steinbeck takes out a rifle to shoot two coyotes during a stop in the southwestern desert, but rationalizes himself out of this senseless act (213–214). Compare this scene to one in which Joseph Wayne prepares to kill a boar with a rifle and similarly talks himself out of it (*To a God Unknown* 8–9).

Steinbeck throws a sad little birthday party for Charley to raise their sinking spirits while crossing the American southwest (223). This scene is reminiscent of the poor little engagement party for Al Joad and Aggie Wainwright in *Grapes of Wrath* (543). In both cases, pancakes substitute for a real celebratory cake.

A good portion of *Travels* is dedicated to Texas. It is as much a tribute to wife Elaine, a proud native of Texas, as it is to the Lone Star State itself. No mention of Texas is complete without a reference to the battle of the Alamo, which Steinbeck includes along with the ironic observation that Mexico abolished slavery long before the United States (229). This is not something that Steinbeck discovered while traveling through or musing on Texas. He had this idea some years earlier while considering writing a screenplay about the battle. The project never got beyond the idea stage (Benson 653). Unused, it was recycled for *Travels*.

Steinbeck is amused during the Texas “Thanksgiving orgy” by his host’s daughter, who tells “a sophisticated and ribald story” about her horse, Speckle-bottom, visiting a mare in another county. She felt that she had property rights to the foal of this union (236). This type of “animal husbandry” humor is of a type that the author had used before. *Grapes of Wrath* alone has four: Wink Manly joking about breeding a “litter of crap houses,” Elsie Graves telling Willy Feely “Why not, Willy? It’s your heifer,” the businessman’s story of the haltered heifer being “serviced,” and the truck driver’s “Couldn’t your ol’ man do it?” joke (36, 90, 155 and 202).

The little school girl in *Travels* makes a “curious hop” because, Steinbeck believes, “in her whole life she had not gone ten steps without skipping” (257). Jody in *The Red Pony* “was forced to take a serious stiff-legged hop now and then in spite of his maturity” (57).

Finally, Steinbeck ejects the racist hitchhiker from Rocinante only after reaching for nothing between the door and seat (272). Similarly, Doc ejects the blue-nosed hitchhiker in *Cannery Row* by reaching for a monkey wrench from the box on the dashboard (81).

This list probably could be much longer. If many of the scenes in *Travels* were not drawn from earlier experiences, then there are certainly a large number of coincidences going on in the book. But as former FBI profiler Ed Sulzbach has pointed out, “There really aren’t many coincidences in life. And to call coincidence after coincidence after coincidence a coincidence is just plain stupid” (Cornwell 355).

So, did Steinbeck pull the wool over his publishers’ and readers’ eyes by writing a dishonest book? *Travels* has been in print for fifty years, to the delight of millions of readers and to the profit of many publishers, editors, agents, and booksellers. I should be so dishonest in my writing.

His book told the truth about America as he saw it and about Steinbeck himself. Anyone reading *Travels* and enjoying it has to come away with an appreciation of the rights of human beings, the rights of individuals to pursue alternate lifestyles, an impatience for mindless bureaucracy, respect for animal and plant life, the love of one’s country, not to mention the companionship of a good dog. These qualities already were an essential part of Steinbeck. He used the trip as a frame upon which to present these feelings.

It is time to seriously consider all the discrepancies of time, place and fact in *Travels*, say “So what?” and then sit back to enjoy the book once again.

John Steinbeck himself has the final word regarding the current controversy surrounding *Travels With Charley*:

There are people who will say that this whole account is a lie, but a thing isn’t necessarily a lie even if it didn’t necessarily happen. (*Sweet Thursday* 57)

So we’ll leave Steinbeck himself with the final word.

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