

Nine

John Steinbeck: The Winters of His Discontent

By his own account, John Steinbeck's four-year odyssey at Lake Tahoe began with a girl, a bed, and a knock at the door. While Steinbeck was still a student at Stanford University in 1924, his best friend, Toby, had fallen in love with a young woman up at Lake Tahoe—and soon proposed marriage. Turns out Toby and his intended had both recently been employed for the summer at the Fallen Leaf Lodge, just five miles from the south shore of Lake Tahoe. This was, of course, the same lodge that was founded in 1896 as a boys' camp by William Wightman Price (the Stanford professor who had played a starring role in John Muir's losing battle to create a Tahoe National Park).

Closed down during World War I, the camp reopened as a family-oriented resort just as soon as the war ended. After Professor "Pop" Price passed away in 1920, his widow assumed management of the lodge. She was a strict, matronly woman whose ideals of female propriety had clearly been formed in the Victorian era, long before the new Prohibition-era craze for gin, jazz, and juke joints. Informed that a certain Mr. Toby Street had proposed marriage to one of "her girls" up at the lodge, a suspicious Mrs. Price boarded the next train to Palo Alto to investigate the groom—and to interrogate his friends about the young man's morals. All of this explains how Mrs. William Wightman Price had come knocking—quite unexpectedly—at the door of young John Steinbeck's off-campus cottage near Stanford University, circa 1925. What exactly did Steinbeck know, she demanded, about his so-called friend Mr. Toby Street?

Typical of Steinbeck's friends at the time, Toby Street was a big, brawny, hard-drinking, tough-talking, bar-brawling kind of man—hardly a candidate for Mrs. Price's finishing school. Having lost one eye and two fingers in the war, he had come to Stanford in his thirties as a "federal student," inching toward the goal of a law degree. A decade older than Steinbeck, who was just twenty-three, Street had quickly become one of his closest confidants—someone with whom the young would-be author would share his deepest fears and longings. For in addition to wine, women, and song, these two friends shared a passion for writing—frequently trading manuscripts and talking deep into the night about the craft of fiction. At least until Mrs. Price of Lake Tahoe came knocking at the door. That knock arguably changed Steinbeck's life forever—and soon spelled the end of his Stanford career.

In Steinbeck's own, rather dubious version of these events, Mrs. Price's unexpected arrival interrupted his amorous adventures with his latest girlfriend—thereby causing a chagrined Steinbeck to hide the scantily clad young maiden underneath his bed. Alas, said bed was also the only place to sit down within the confines of Steinbeck's tiny cottage. So Mrs. Price sat squarely down on the bed and started firing questions at an astonished Steinbeck—while his girlfriend hid below, stifling giggles.

Like any aspiring fiction writer, Steinbeck quickly concocted a charming little fairytale to highlight the lamblike innocence and strict moral probity of his best friend, Mr. Tobias Street, Esquire. Deeply impressed with Street's outstanding moral character—and with Steinbeck's—Mrs. Price offered him a job at Lake Tahoe on the spot. As if on cue, Steinbeck immediately dropped out of Stanford (forever) to follow his friend Toby up to Lake Tahoe for the summer—and to pursue his own dreams of becoming a full-time writer.

Like Mark Twain's impulsive trip to Nevada with his brother Orion more than sixty years before, Steinbeck's Tahoe odyssey not only altered his own life—it arguably altered

the nature of American literature. The sharp political plotlines, lavish natural landscapes, and strong focus on working-class characters that distinguish Steinbeck's best work all crystallized during these early Tahoe years (no doubt shaped by his first real exposure to full-time manual labor, far from the sheltering social bubble of Stanford's palm-lined country-club campus). Similarly, many of the flaws that would mar Steinbeck's mature fiction can be traced to his formative Tahoe years: including a tendency toward heavy-handed moralizing and an adolescent taste for pirates and knights of the Round Table—flaws which made his Nobel Prize in Literature, awarded in 1960, controversial.

Steinbeck's Tahoe transformation did not come easily. Dogged by inexperience, loneliness, and self-doubt, he spent four long, lonely years struggling to finish his first novel and then to find his first publisher—once even begging Toby, in a letter he mailed from the lake, "Do not tell anyone that I am afraid. I do not like to be suspected of being afraid." Yet by the time Steinbeck finally left Lake Tahoe, he had faced those fears, completed his novel, and met his future wife while working in a fish hatchery. All of which makes Tahoe look every bit as much like "Steinbeck Country" as the rugged rural ranchlands of the Salinas Valley, or the windswept Cannery Row coast of Monterey Bay.

Between Steinbeck's arrival in 1925 and John Muir's pivotal visit in 1888, much about Lake Tahoe's landscape had changed radically—including transportation: whereas Twain and Muir had traveled to Tahoe on foot, on horseback, by boat, and by rail, Steinbeck arrived by automobile. And although railroads still carried Bay Area tourists to Tahoe in the 1920s (including a "Snowball Express" for winter sports lovers) the Age of the Automobile at Lake Tahoe had clearly arrived: by 1907, California's first official "state highway" passed right by the south shore. By 1910 the Golden State boasted more than forty-four thousand automobiles—more than all the rest of the nation combined. By 1913,

the south shore's Highway 50 was joined by Highway 40 over Donner Pass, near the north shore. Connecting both, the spectacular Rim of the Lake Road also opened in 1913—one year before World War I broke out. By the 1940s, the last rail lines from Truckee to Tahoe would be torn up and melted down as scrap to aid in the World War II effort.

This flood of cars brought many changes to Tahoe's economy. Rather than finding work as a lumberjack or a sawmill hand, as Twain and Muir had once done, Steinbeck's first job in the Sierra was driving Mrs. Price's big sixteen-seater Pierce-Arrow limousine to town, shuttling mail, guests, and supplies daily from Fallen Leaf Lodge to the steamer docks at Lake Tahoe. Two small lumber mills were still in operation in the Fallen Leaf Lake region in 1925, but these were tiny by comparison to the vast lumbering operations that once ringed Lake Tahoe itself. Meanwhile the vacation real estate market for middle-class homes was booming: no longer was Tahoe the exclusive enclave of the super-rich. By 1925, prime lakefront properties sold for what seemed then the astronomical, but somehow affordable, sum of five thousand dollars per acre. Yet each winter Tahoe's roads still shut down completely, and the lake was nearly deserted. Year-round auto access would not come until after World War II.

On a more personal level, Steinbeck's arrival at Lake Tahoe signaled the end of his failed academic career. Measured in ordinary terms, his Stanford years had been a disaster. Painfully shy, insecure, and lonely, Steinbeck nonetheless sported a trademark bluster and braggadocio as an undergraduate that had done little to quell his own inmost fears. As Steinbeck biographer Michelle Potter admits reluctantly:

Little in Steinbeck's early life seemed to indicate that he would ever win the Pulitzer Prize or Nobel Prize for literature. His parents, teachers, and friends knew he had a modest degree of talent as a writer because they had seen him writing in the margins

of his father's used accounting ledgers or heard stories of his dresser drawers full of manuscripts. Few people, however, associated Steinbeck with success. He was tall, awkward, and gangly. He didn't join social groups or clubs. And he constantly worried about his looks. Lacking social grace, Steinbeck came to embrace his role as the class loudmouth or local prankster. After high school, Steinbeck attended Stanford on and off for six years, but never graduated. He attended classes sporadically and relished his status as a bohemian.

The only son of a failed, frustrated, small-town businessman and bureaucrat, John had entered Stanford with the vague but noble goal of becoming a doctor. Six academically disastrous years later, he had still not finished his general education requirements. Instead, by 1925 he had taken enough writing classes to earn the modern equivalent of a creative writing degree. Trouble was, there was no such thing as a creative writing degree at Stanford (or anywhere else in America) at that time. By dropping out of Stanford and moving up to Tahoe with Toby, Steinbeck had apparently decided to enroll in John Muir's "University of the Wilderness" instead.

Throughout his six years at Stanford, Steinbeck had used his vacations to work in factories, farms, ranches, and fields near his family's home in the Salinas Valley. Out of such experiences came much of his best writing—including his first published short story, featured in a campus literary magazine. A roughhewn portrait of the lives of Filipino farmworkers in the Salinas Valley, this first story proved a clear model for later Steinbeck classics such as *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Hence Steinbeck's sudden decision to drop out was clearly motivated by his goal of becoming a full-time writer—not by a foreboding of failure. Living with Toby at Tahoe, he figured, they could work together all day as manual laborers and then work all night on

their precious manuscripts. So it was that for the next three summers John and Toby worked together on Mrs. Price's summer maintenance crew—repairing railings, replacing cabin decks, laying shingles, and even building a small office for the lodge. Another project involved blasting and cementing a small catchment basin at the top of a rocky little waterfall near the lodge—the goal being to provide more water for the lodge's tiny hydro-powered generator. Today, scattered remnants of John and Toby's handiwork are still clearly visible underneath the rushing waters of Taylor Creek. As Jackson Benson, the author *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer*, reports: "They had to move huge granite boulders and in some cases change the shape of the basin itself, and Toby was surprised to find that John, somewhere, had learned all about blasting and how to handle dynamite, even how to set off a charge under water with a fuse." He probably learned these things, Benson speculates, while helping to dredge the Salinas-Castroville slough several years earlier. It was backbreaking work. "The two of them carried, rolled, and pried large rocks into place, drove steel into the ground and into the crevices in the large granite boulders of the basin lip, and mixed and poured concrete to tie everything together."

Somewhere in between pouring concrete, driving limos, pounding nails, and chasing skirts, Steinbeck and Toby both found time to keep writing. Nocturnal distractions at the lodge included listening to the local dance band, or even late-night romantic trysts in the backseat of Mrs. Price's old limousine—at least until Mrs. Price herself came along with her flashlight to shoo the offenders back to their tents. Somehow Steinbeck managed to begin work on his first novel. Robert Sears, one of the other young Stanford students hired to work at the lodge, recalls watching John's silhouette thrown by gas-lantern light against the canvas walls of his tent as he pecked away at his beloved old typewriter.

For his part, Sears clearly looked up to both Steinbeck and Street as manly role models. And Steinbeck clearly relished playing the older, wiser writer to an audience even more innocent than himself. As Sears later recalled:

John talked to us very seriously about what he was doing. Telling us all about how you write short stories, taking us very seriously, you know, and pontificating to the nth degree. And he read two or three of his unpublished stories to us and told us how wonderful they were....But he was really in his manner an extremely modest man who talked, nevertheless, with a great deal of conviction about what he was doing....I mean the fiction really came through, and I think that was one of the things that impressed us very much. Here was a man who was a real man—I mean, my God, you know, five by five, tremendous physique and tough and had all the macho characteristics, boasting about his conquests in all the whorehouses he knew and so on. And yet, at the same time, he had this great sensitivity and was not afraid to express his emotions openly in stories, and comment on them. It was really quite an experience.

Steinbeck's formal training as a writer had begun as a freshman at Stanford. At first, he tried hard to be a model student. Then illness derailed him. In spring of 1919, during his freshman year, he contracted appendicitis. Falling behind in his studies while in the infirmary, he never truly caught up with his classmates again. But initially, not for lack of effort: years afterward, he still suffered nightmares about studying desperately for exams he was destined to fail.

By his sophomore year, friends rarely found John studying in his room; instead he was over at the dorms playing cards, smoking, joking, and (best of all) swapping stories.

From that point forward, Steinbeck stubbornly refused to finish his required classes—enrolling solely in those courses which he personally deemed directly relevant to his future career as a writer. For when it came to the craft of writing, Steinbeck could be almost obsessive—voluntarily repeating both semesters of his freshman English course (one on “Narration” and the other on “Exposition”) simply because he felt unsatisfied with his performance the first time through. By the time he moved up to Tahoe, he had taken virtually every writing course Stanford had to offer. On his transcript, you’ll find creative writing classes in both poetry and fiction, as well as classes in journalism and advanced composition, and membership in the fledgling Stanford literary club.

Even in English composition, his grades wavered up and down wildly. Predictably, he earned an A in Feature Writing—where the story counted more than facts. By contrast, he earned a D in News Reporting—where accuracy matters even more than imagination.

Surprisingly, despite all his macho posturing, his most influential writing teachers all turned out to be women. For although Steinbeck’s behavior toward women could sometimes be chauvinistic (and his female characters often one-dimensional), he awarded his female teachers a lifetime of respect. Chief among them was Dr. Margery Bailey, sponsor of the English Club—and a formidable writer in her own right. Demanding, quick to criticize, and blunt, she could leave Steinbeck’s best work bleeding red ink. Yet more than once she also paid him the unforgettable compliment of reading his work out loud to her class. Significantly, given his deep association with Cannery Row, at least one of the English classes he took from Professor Bailey was taught at Stanford’s Hopkins Marine Station at Monterey Bay during summer session.

Ever the rebel, Steinbeck would go out of his way to provoke her. According to one campus legend, he once showed up at the English Club dressed only in a ragged t-shirt,

sporting some kind of scar on his shoulder. When the demure Professor Bailey asked him where the scar had come from, he replied, "A Mexican woman with whom I was copulating bit me."

Steinbeck's other favorite teacher at Stanford was Edith Mirrieles, and she was an even more influential mentor. To his chagrin, she never gave him better than a B in any of her classes. Instead she gave him something much more valuable than any A: accurate criticism, crucial encouragement, honesty, friendship, mentorship, and guidance.

Years later, Mirrieles Hall on the Stanford campus was named in her honor: but Steinbeck's lifelong admiration arguably remains the better monument. Another student, Dean Storey, recalled that Edith Mirrieles was "one of these odd, prissy, little old-fashioned women who you couldn't imagine John getting along with, and yet he had the greatest admiration for her, and he would take whatever she told him about what he wrote." As biographer Jackson Benson reports:

Steinbeck wrote Carl Wilhelmson that she was "very kind, she hates to hurt feelings. She says that she thinks my stuff ought to be published but she doesn't know where. Don't get the idea that I am swimming against an incoming tide of approbation. I'm not. For every bit of favorable criticism, I get four knocks in the head." Steinbeck became her star pupil—perhaps her all-time star pupil—and yet he never got more than a B from her. At first this irritated him, and he complained that he knew the reason she walked so stiffly—she kept all her A's stuck up her rear—but she spent so much time with him that he at last accepted her grading as a form of encouragement to do better.

Viewed in this light, Professor Mirrielees' timeless advice to young writers still makes for poignant reading:

Writing can never be other than a lonely business. Only by repeated, unaided struggles to shape his yet unwritten material to his own purpose does a beginner grow into a writer. There are a few helps toward general improvement which it is feasible to offer, there are many specific helps in the work of revision, but help in the initial shaping of a story there is none. That is the writer's own affair.

Writing to a friend about Professor Mirrielees' teaching methods back in 1929, Steinbeck himself concluded humbly that "she does one thing for you. She makes you get over what you want to say. Her only really vicious criticism is directed toward turgidity, and that is a good thing."

Inching forward word by word, sentence by sentence, story by story, Steinbeck struggled for years at Tahoe before finishing his first novel. Based loosely on the life of the Welsh-Jamaican pirate Henry Morgan, Steinbeck's *Cup of Gold* looks almost nothing like his later fiction. So why write a Caribbean pirate novel while living at Lake Tahoe?

To start with, young Steinbeck seems to have dreamed of becoming a pirate of sorts himself. Several years before dropping out of Stanford, he even left a note for his roommate claiming that he was "running away to work on a ship bound for China." Much to his embarrassment, no one on the docks in San Francisco seemed interested in his services as a sailor. Instead, a much-chagrined Steinbeck had to content himself with backbreaking work at the Spreckels sugar factory near Salinas for the summer—the experiential basis for many of his best novels.

More than pirate ships or even slow boats to China, Steinbeck dreamed of hitting it big as a writer in New York City. In 1925, with Fallen Leaf Lodge shuttered up for the winter, he booked passage on a steamer to New York—by way of Panama. Arriving in New York City with little money and fewer connections (his sister Beth had recently married and moved to New Jersey) Steinbeck found his first job working on the construction crews for Madison Square Garden. It was brutal work, pushing hundred-pound wheelbarrows full of liquid concrete along a skinny wooden ramp, then dumping the contents into the cavernous foundations of the arena, ten long hours a day. At night Steinbeck collapsed into bed, too exhausted to even pick up a pen. When a fellow worker fell from a high scaffold to his death directly in front of Steinbeck's eyes, he quit on the spot.

Through another set of family connections, Steinbeck soon landed his dream job as a writer: working as a cub reporter for the New York American. Recalling that D he had earned in News Reporting back at Stanford, he was fired within a few weeks. Seems Steinbeck was still better at inventing stories than reporting them.

Then disaster struck again: his New York girlfriend dumped him, choosing to marry a boring banker with a car and a steady income. With no prospects for a job, no girlfriend, and no money, Steinbeck rented a tiny room and desperately attempted to find a publisher for his collection of fledgling short stories. According to Steinbeck biographer Catherine Reef, an old Stanford friend encouraged him "to submit his stories to a book publisher. Steinbeck followed this advice. He was overjoyed when an editor at Robert M. McBride and Company, a New York publishing firm, expressed interest in his work. If Steinbeck could write a few more stories, the editor said, his company would publish them as a book."

Filled with hope, Steinbeck worked feverishly to polish his stories, delivering the completed manuscript within just a few more weeks. Yet as Reef grimly explains, "There

was just one problem, though. The editor who liked Steinbeck's work had left the company. The new editor would not even look at what he had written. There would be no book, the new editor said." Flying into a rage, a distraught Steinbeck physically threatened the new editor—and then quickly found himself thrown out of the front door, the pages of his rejected manuscript fluttering down the street in the winter wind. In Reef's succinct opinion, "The outburst was an expression more of panic than of anger."

Looking back on these youthful misadventures in Manhattan, Steinbeck later recalled that he'd had a "thin, lonely, hungry time of it there...I was scared thoroughly. I can't forget that scare." Offered work as a merchant seaman on a freighter in exchange for passage back to California, he jumped at the chance to return to Lake Tahoe. As Reef reports, "He arrived in California at the start of summer in 1926 feeling healthy and optimistic once more"—and hungry for another summer at the lake.

The following winter, in lieu of another trip to Manhattan, Steinbeck signed on as a winter caretaker at the Cascade Lake estate of Mrs. Alice Brigham—widow of the prominent San Francisco surgeon who had once played host to Mark Twain and John Muir. As Tahoe historian E. B. Scott explains, "At the time of Dr. Brigham's death in Sept 1904, he owned 1300 acres surrounding Cascade Lake. Today [his heirs] control some 790 acres, the balance of the original holding having passed to the California State Park system." Of course no one in the Brigham family suspected that their winter caretaker would someday go on to win a Nobel Prize.

Putting his Manhattan heartaches behind him, Steinbeck hunkered down for eight long, lonely months of winter isolation to work on the manuscript of *Cup of Gold*. It took several more years to complete—so Steinbeck stayed on at Lake Tahoe. Besides working as a winter caretaker, he served as a summer tutor and frequent companion for Alice

Brigham's two grandsons, Charles and Harold Ebright—both of whom still live at the lake today. In exchange for his efforts, Steinbeck earned year-round use of the caretaker's cabin, free run of the Brighams' impressive library, and enough pocket money to pay for food and necessities. It seemed an ideal setup for a young writer struggling to finish his first novel.

In the summers he was far from lonely. According to Jackson Benson, "When the family was in residence, [the Brigham estate] employed six or seven servants: a cook, two Filipino house boys, and several Indians to maintain the lawn and grounds and to do the laundry." In this way, Steinbeck came into contact with numerous Washoe Indians. At Fallen Leaf Lodge, Mrs. Price had employed a Washoe woman named Suzie who was fond of retelling the old Washoe legends to visitors. Steinbeck must certainly have known her, and perhaps even listened to her stories from time to time. Yet most of his own tales reveal more about Steinbeck's anti-Indian stereotypes than they do about the Washoes themselves.

Recounting one such tall tale, E. B. Scott reports, "Steinbeck was impressed by a young Indian buck's diagnosis of an old Washoe tribesman's reported death. Upon hearing of the man's passing, he inspected the corpse where it lay on willow bark in Tallac Meadows, surrounded by mourning squaws. After this first-hand check-up, the Indian hotfooted it back to Steinbeck and solemnly reported that it was all a mistake. 'Old buck not dead,' was his frowning comment, 'his skin too damn pliable.'"

By contrast to the Brigham's Washoe and Filipino employees, Steinbeck's status as caretaker seemed that of "an associate member of the family." Interviewed in 2005 for Tahoe Quarterly magazine, Charles and Harold Ebright both recalled Steinbeck joining them for family hikes, fishing expeditions, and picnics on the beach. Yet for all the fellowship his caretaker job provided each summer, Steinbeck's reminiscences seem to revolve around the lonely winter season: "I had a job as caretaker on a large estate at Lake Tahoe," he

recalled years later. "I was snowed in eight months of the year." In winter Steinbeck became the Brighams' sole employee, alone at last. There his chief duties were splitting firewood and cutting huge blocks of ice by hand from the frozen surface of Cascade Lake, then hauling them into the Brighams' icehouse to be stored in sawdust for the following summer season.

In addition to these basic icehouse and wood-chopping chores, the one indispensable requirement of Steinbeck's job as a winter caretaker was a tolerance for isolation. As E. B. Scott reports in *The Saga of Lake Tahoe*, "It is said that when a giant pine was uprooted by the wind and crashed through the Brigham home, carrying away two other trees and leveling the house in the process, the budding novelist, who was seated nearby and absorbed in a book, barely looked up."

Tall tales aside, winter in Lake Tahoe in the 1920s certainly offered solitude in abundance. As Tim Hauserman reports in a recent edition of *Tahoe Quarterly*, "Only a few crusty souls dared stay for the snowy winter months." Of course those who lived closer to the railroads in Truckee were not quite so isolated. Besides a booming ice industry—shipping tons of the stuff to Boston and San Francisco in an era long before refrigeration—the town of Truckee sponsored an annual Winter Carnival, complete with towering ice palaces, toboggan runs, and skating rinks.

In addition to the toboggan run, the first ski lift in all of North America had opened for business in Truckee in 1913—a natural outgrowth of the mining and railroad industries, which had used heavy cables to haul bucket-loads up mountainsides for years. Previous to that lift, "Ski Tahoe" meant something closer to skiing toward Lake Tahoe from Truckee—thirteen miles up Truckee Canyon with twelve-foot wooden boards strapped your feet. By

the 1920s, Tahoe's first recreational skiers would descend from Donner Pass to Donner Lake in one long schuss, then ride horse-drawn sleighs back to the top for a second run.

Steinbeck's own ski trips were far shorter, and flatter. From his snowbound little Cascade Lake cabin, he made frequent trips on cross-country skis or snowshoes to pick up mail and supplies at Tallac. As Tim Hauserman reports, "Mail was the only communication with the outside world in winter, and whether by ski, snowshoe, or sled, whenever Steinbeck heard the S.S. Nevada blowing its whistle, he high-tailed it the two miles to Camp Richardson."

Looking back later on his Tahoe winters, Steinbeck himself frequently refers to the crushing sense of loneliness he felt during those long snowbound seasons. Something far deeper, darker, and colder than mere cabin fever seems to have surfaced within his inmost psyche there. In one pivotal letter mailed to Toby Street during his first long winter in 1926, Steinbeck confessed, "Do you know, one of the things that made me come here was, as you guessed, that I am frightfully afraid of being alone. The fear of the dark is only part of it. I wanted to break that fear in the middle, because I am afraid much of my existence is going to be more or less alone, and I might as well go into training for it. It comes on me at night mostly, in little waves of panic, that constricts something in my stomach. But don't you think it is good to fight these things?"

At other times Steinbeck's fears were of the furry sort: "Last night, some quite large animal came and sniffed under the door," he reported gingerly to Toby. "I presume it was a coyote, though I do not know." The whole incident had frightened him deeply: "The moon had not come up, and when I ran outside there was nothing to be seen. But the main thing was that I was frightened, even though I knew it could be nothing but a coyote."

Fear and loneliness were themes Steinbeck returned to time and again in his personal letters. And in his fiction. Those same themes appear memorably, for example, in Steinbeck's affectionate yet haunting portrait of his friend and mentor, the Monterey Bay ecologist Ed Ricketts, in his classic comic novel *Cannery Row*. Much like Ricketts's, Steinbeck's own self-imposed sense of isolation seems to have been as much intellectual as it was physical. In one especially memorable letter he mailed to his friend John Murphy decades later, in 1961, Steinbeck explains that isolation is simply the price of becoming a real writer—a warning still well worth heeding today:

Nine tenths of a writer's life do not admit of any companion nor friend nor associate. And until one makes peace with loneliness and accepts it as a part of the profession, as celibacy is a part of priesthood, until then there are times of dreadful dread. I am just as terrified of my next book as I was of my first. It doesn't get easier. It gets harder and more heartbreaking and finally, it must be that one must accept the failure which is the end of every writer's life no matter what stir he may have made.

Along with a writer's self-imposed sense of isolation, Steinbeck's other great fear was of failure. Even after decades of success, writing for Steinbeck remained a lonely, bitter struggle. His tenth novel, he admitted, came no easier than his first. Yet finishing that first novel at Lake Tahoe seems to have required an inner struggle of serious, perhaps near-suicidal dimensions—at least judging by the tone of Steinbeck's own agonized letters at the time. In one especially desperate letter to Carlton A. Sheffield, mailed from Lake Tahoe on February 25, 1928, Steinbeck writes, "My failure to work for the last three weeks is not far to find. I finished my novel and let it stand for a while, then read it over. And it was no good. The disappointment of that was bound to have some devastating, though probably

momentary effect. You see, I thought it was going to be good. Even to the last page, I thought it was going to be good. And it is not....I have a new novel preparing but preparing very slowly...counting the periods when I walk the streets and try to comb up courage enough to blow out my brains.”

Despite such fears—or perhaps because of them—Steinbeck’s years at Tahoe ended on a happier note. Upon the completion of his novel, he took a job at the nearby state fish hatchery at Tahoe City (remodeled in 2010 to house a new UC Davis Tahoe Environmental Research Center lab facility). In addition to feeding the fingerlings, Steinbeck was expected to lead guided tours of the hatchery all summer—a task which provided plenty of opportunities for meeting pretty young female tourists (and, as he bragged lustily, experimenting with the fish-gut condoms he had crafted).

After three long winters finishing Cup of Gold at Tahoe, Steinbeck now considered his need for isolated winters a thing of the past. And it was this summer that, as the editors of Steinbeck’s Letters report, “he met the girl who was to be his wife. Carol Henning and her sister, tourists on holiday, visited the Tahoe City Hatchery while he was working there.” Although his first date with Carol was a disaster, the marriage that followed (the first of four) lasted thirteen years and produced several children. As Tahoe historian Tim Hauserman explains, “When the captivating Henning sisters from San Francisco came into the hatchery one day for a tour, Steinbeck and Shebley had a double date for the evening. The bachelors were late to pick up the sisters, however, when their car suffered three flat tires on the short trip to the girls’ home in McKinney. Things definitely picked up from there: the future Mr. and Mrs. Steinbeck enjoyed ten wild days together, exploring the best of Tahoe City’s and Truckee’s prohibition-era speakeasies.”

Yet all the old demons that had once haunted him at the Brighams' winter mansion would still come a-haunting him here: when his hatchery boss found the aspiring young author dead drunk in bed one morning, a bottle of gin in one hand, a pistol in the other—and blasting holes in the hatchery's ceiling with a lazy nonchalance—Steinbeck lost his job on the spot. Within days John and his new fiancée had moved to San Francisco, soon to be married, never to return to Lake Tahoe.

Soon Carol found work as a typist in San Francisco—work which was the couple's sole source of steady income for many years. To save money they were married in Steinbeck's parents' home in Salinas. For the next several years the newlyweds settled down in a shared flat in San Francisco while Steinbeck started work on his next novel (another financial failure): *To a God Unknown*.

It's tempting to conclude, with a knowing nod, that Steinbeck made a mistake in trying to write a pirate novel while living up at Lake Tahoe. The blurb for the paperback edition of *Cup of Gold* (still in print) captures much of the overly melodramatic flavor of his potboiler plot: "Henry Morgan ruled the Spanish Main in the 1670s," the dustcover blusters, "ravaging the coasts of Cuba and America and striking terror wherever he went. His lust and his greed knew no bounds, and he was utterly consumed by two passions: to possess the mysterious woman known as La Santa Roja, the Red Saint, and to conquer Panama and wrest the 'cup of gold' from Spanish hands." So much for subtlety.

Literary critics have long ravaged this first novel, just as its pirate-hero Morgan once "ravaged the coasts of Cuba." Most, including myself, consider it pure juvenilia. By contrast, Steinbeck's early short stories, composed during this same period, clearly show flashes of the brilliance that would come to characterize his best work—not to mention the Salinas Valley settings which would later come to be known worldwide as Steinbeck Country. "I think I

would like to write the story of this whole valley,” he wrote to George Albee from Salinas in 1933, “of all the little towns and all the farms and the ranches in the wilder hills. I can see how I would like to do it so that it would be the valley of the world.” And so it has become.

By contrast, *Cup of Gold*'s cartoonish Caribbean characters and mawkish plot seem to represent Steinbeck's writing at its absolute worst. Indeed, one could argue that in writing that first novel Steinbeck made the most fundamental beginner's mistake of them all: writing about worlds he did not understand, instead of the worlds he knew best. Yet for all its flaws, *Cup of Gold* still found a publisher (and helped pay the bills for a few months). Meanwhile, the struggle of actually finishing that novel in the midst of those long, dark Tahoe winters seems to have taught Steinbeck much about his craft. “I don't know one bit more about spelling and punctuation than I ever did,” he admitted wryly in one letter mailed from San Francisco, “but I think I am learning a little bit about writing... The Morgan atrocity pays enough for me to live quietly and with a good deal of comfort. In that way it was worth selling.”

Ironically, salty historical novels about seagoing captains turned out to be among the greatest best-sellers ever penned by Lake Tahoe's shores. They just weren't written by John Steinbeck. I'm referring instead to the celebrated Captain Horatio Hornblower series, written by the British novelist (and longtime Tahoe homeowner) C. S. Forester.

Following the publication of *Cup of Gold*, Steinbeck subsisted for years on his wife's typing and his aging parents' charity. With midlife fast approaching, he was considered by everyone he knew (including Steinbeck himself) to be an abject failure. Yet to his credit, he remained steadfast in his desire to become a true writer—a steadfastness he had honed and polished during those first long, lonely winters by Lake Tahoe's shores.

Finally, in 1935, his Big Break came at last: ten years after he first set eyes on Lake Tahoe, his fifth book, *Tortilla Flat*, was published to unexpected national acclaim. What followed were Steinbeck's greatest years of artistic creativity—culminating in the publication of his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939. Yet much to Steinbeck's sorrow, both his parents passed away shortly before *Tortilla Flat* was published—convinced that their son's life, like their own, would be a failure. As Steinbeck later quipped, "The profession of book writing makes horse racing seem like a solid, stable business."

Success never did come easy for Steinbeck. Even his Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962 was greeted with catcalls by some literary critics, as well as outraged residents of his own hometown of Salinas, California, who considered him a Communist. As Steinbeck's friend the marine ecologist Joel Hedgpeth reminds us, "Publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939 aroused the wrath of the Associated Farmers and all sorts of conservative folk. Most of the publicity, especially in California, was hostile and unfriendly and Steinbeck's native town disowned him. He was accused of being both a Jew and a Communist." Today Steinbeck's standing in most college English departments remains rather low—but for different reasons: his plots, it is argued, are too wooden; his women too one-dimensional; and his political moralizing too didactic and overwrought, by postmodern standards. In this light, the flaws of his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, remained endemic throughout his career; he never outgrew them. But neither did he outgrow the deeper lessons about being a writer that he learned while writing it.

In recent years, in fact, Steinbeck's reputation as a novelist has been partially restored, based on what *The New York Times* has aptly labeled "The Greening of American Literature"—the articulation of a vibrant environmental ethic in literature (with Steinbeck in

its pantheon). Both physically and philosophically, this “greening” leads us straight back to Steinbeck’s youthful roots as a struggling writer at Lake Tahoe. Eventually it led Steinbeck himself back to the Sierra as well. Much like Muir, the aging writer found himself returning to the Sierra late in life, only to confront the stark and surprising contrast between the unspoiled American landscape he remembered from his youth and the increasingly polluted and plundered American landscape of the 1960s.

In Steinbeck’s case the journey came in 1963, at the wheel an old pickup camper he nicknamed Rocinante (and with his poodle Charley as his loyal companion). In *Travels with Charley*, the aging author recounts—among many other adventures—a sentimental return to the California Sierra. Rather than confront the building boom engulfing Lake Tahoe, Steinbeck stopped instead at a nearby grove of giant sequoias—the world’s largest trees, the northernmost stand of which is located just twenty miles due west of the lake, within the Tahoe National Forest. “The vainest, most slap-happy and irreverent of men, in the presence of redwoods, goes under a spell of wonder and respect,” Steinbeck opined.

His tone was not always so gentle. In the last book published before his death in 1966, *America and Americans*, penned forty years after that last lonely winter of his discontent at Lake Tahoe, Steinbeck laments:

Our rivers are poisoned by reckless dumping of sewage and toxic wastes, the air of our cities is filthy and dangerous to breathe from the belching of uncontrolled products from combustion of coal, oil, and gasoline. Our towns are girdled with wreckage and the debris of our toys—our automobiles and our packaged pleasures...All these evils can and must be overcome if America and Americans are to survive; but many of us still conduct ourselves as our ancestors did, stealing from the future for our clear and present profit.

Characteristically, Steinbeck still tinges his outrage with optimism: “We are no longer content to destroy our beloved country,” he concludes bluntly. “We are slow to learn,” he argues, “but we learn....And we no longer believe that a man, by owning a piece of America, is free to outrage it.” Elsewhere he admits, “It is true that we are weak and sick and ugly and quarrelsome but if that is all we ever were, we would millenniums ago have disappeared from the face of the earth.”

In this wider sense, the resilience Steinbeck learned at Lake Tahoe continues to shape his legacy today. As is typical of the authors we've studied, however, there are to date no monuments, museums, or even plaques dedicated to John Steinbeck's presence at the lake. Perhaps the Tahoe City hatchery might be the right location for just such a plaque—but given the author's own lifelong fondness for sarcasm, in place of the usual “Steinbeck slept here” inscription I'd like to suggest something snappier. Given that the hatchery was where, among millions of fish eggs, Steinbeck met his first wife, Carol, why not write “Steinbeck spawned here,” instead? Or given that the hatchery was Steinbeck's last real job before becoming a full-time writer, how about “Steinbeck quit here”? Or perhaps even more accurately, “At this site in 1927 the future Nobel Prize-winning author John Steinbeck got sloppy drunk and shot holes in the ceiling before getting fired from his last honest job”?

Speaking of accuracy, I'd like to suggest, in closing, that Steinbeck's lifelong fascination with marine biology—the basis of much of his “greenest” writing, including the novel *Cannery Row*—was in fact first triggered not just by time spent as a student at Hopkins Marine Station, at Monterey Bay, but also by the time he spent at the Tahoe City fish hatchery, on the shores of America's largest mountain lake. As Steinbeck himself once observed, “We find that after years of struggle we do not take a trip; a trip takes us...Many a trip continues long after movement in time and space have ceased.” Not unlike *Cup of Gold*,

which begins with a mysterious knock at the door, Steinbeck's Tahoe odyssey began with a knock at his Stanford cottage door, but then led on toward horizons unknown.