Notes From the Director

Susan Shillinglaw

I’ve been reading the 1963 Progress and Rodeo edition of The Salinas Californian, a special edition to “eulogize John.” On page one, beneath a nearly life-sized portrait, the editors laud “Salinas’ Own John Steinbeck.” Covers of his books line the front page. “Steinbeck’s is a gift that has eulogized Salinas,” crow the editors. Salinas returned the favor with an oversized edition of the hometown paper: “No man should die before he is honored for his works. He should, with swelling, humble, and often homesick heart, be able to relish his hometown’s praise.”

Each of six sections of the Progress and Rodeo edition features a full-page sketch of Steinbeck or his characters, followed by articles about John (a few) and about the annual California Rodeo, energetically and fulsomely covered in this special edition. (Steinbeck himself probably attended 20 or so Rodeos, certainly as a child and teen, as a Stanford student and as a Pacific Grove resident in the 1930s. Nearly everyone in Salinas attended the annual Rodeo.)

Steinbeck did not, in fact, relish the weighty Progress and Rodeo edition, which he received in a New York City hospital, flat on his back after eye surgery. Elaine read each section to him, after which John wrote a long letter back to his hometown, noting that reading Salinas’s praise had made him feel dead before his time. Nonetheless, by the end of his wry response, he forgave his hometown. Salinas had meant well by him, he admitted.

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He was right—true then, true now. One year into my position as Director of the National Steinbeck Center, it seems to me that Salinas means well by John. The town’s great eulogy is, of course, the National Steinbeck Center, which continues to thrive as a physical museum and an intellectual hub, offering programs that reach into the community that Steinbeck always honored, if sometimes grudgingly. One year into my directorship, part of my vision for the NSC is increasingly clear—to bring Steinbeck home, to nurture the gleeful spirit of that Progress and Rodeo edition.

Currently, a draft of the NSC mission, still being refined, is this: “Drawing from the works of John Steinbeck, the National Steinbeck Center is dedicated to Steinbeck’s creative legacy: to participate, to inspire, to educate and to understand one another.” Understanding begins with local energy and radiates outward—nationally, internationally.

Or, as the Progress and Rodeo edition would have it, Steinbeck “has seen much of the world since leaving Salinas…but always into his prose creeps some semblance of Salinas.”

To eulogize John Steinbeck in the twenty-first century is, I think, to heed his empathetic words, a clarion call in troubled times: “In every bit of honest writing in the world,” Steinbeck wrote in 1938, “there is a base theme. Try to understand men...Try to understand each other”—in the community and in the world.
The Steinbeck bookstore is looking great. I am so happy with all the new merchandise that we have been getting and will continue to get. I love how there is a little bit of everything. I enjoy looking at the guests walk from one corner of the store to the next as they explore all the great items. Our pink shirts are doing really great this summer. We also have a new mug that says “I Love Steinbeck.” Deb’s Calming Creations—Steinbeck Soap—sells well; regular customers come in once a month to restock on their favorite scents. My favorites are California Oranges, Wild Oats and California Poppy Seeds, the top sellers.

I also enjoy seeing people come to the store to buy a book. We don’t have many bookstores in Salinas so for us to have lots to choose from is amazing! A sweet lady named Maria comes in every Wednesday to see what new items we have and what new book she would like to read. She tells me she really enjoys the store, and not one day does she leave without buying something. Maria loves the “Collector’s Corner” with second hand books. She is collecting different editions by Steinbeck and walks through the door very eager to see what new book she can buy for herself.

Oh summer is here. I love this time of the year. We get guests coming in from all over. I really enjoy these busy days. It’s great to hear the stories, from “Oh this is my first time here” to “Oh this is our second time here” and “We really love this museum.” Words like these put a big smile to my face. I am really thankful for CSUMB and everyone involved who keeps this museum open.

Please check out the store. New merchandise includes Steinbeck hats, pens, soaps, totes, martini glasses, note pads, journals, mugs and postcards.

Bookstore Inventory
David Butler, Director of Finance and Administration

We are in the process of taking our annual inventory of the bookstore, which is about $40,000. The process is quite simple as we count the items on hand and compare with the count in the bookstore computer. However, we have over 500 items so it is taking a few weeks. Our count includes what is on display plus any inventory in the storeroom.

The bookstore computer maintains a perpetual count and dollar value, which means it is always changing. It goes up when books are received and goes down when books are sold. The final step is adjusting the dollar value of the inventory to the general ledger. The general ledger is then adjusted either up or down and that difference is recorded to cost of sale.

Building Changes with CSUMB
David Butler, Director of Finance and Administration

The building continues to be improved under CSUMB. An ADA compliant door opener has been installed on one of the front doors. The building has been upgraded with Wi-Fi through-out. The Rabobank signage was removed and the CSUMB signage was added. The Salinas Room, Vista Room and Rotunda have remained available for NSC use.

The Gabilan Room is now a small classroom. It has new carpet, power shades and furniture.

The Vista Room is used for receptions, luncheons, and small meetings. It has been extended into the old grill area and shows as one room. It has new carpet and power shades.

The Salinas Room has soundboard which greatly improves the acoustics. 250 new chairs and 30 tables are available for functions in the Salinas and Vista Rooms. The old chairs and tables are being kept for overflow. A dual projector system has been added and a new sound system is on order.

Miscellaneous agriculture and Steinbeck props have been removed from the Rotunda, as this is shared common space.

CSUMB has been ramping up the utilization of the Salinas and Vista Rooms with classes, business and government functions. The John Steinbeck exhibit and the bookstore are unchanged.
March was an exciting month in the NSC Archives with the arrival of fourteen boxes of books, a collection of 351 books from the shelves of the Steinbecks’ 11th Street cottage in Pacific Grove. Many of the books may have been on the shelves for over 100 years. This fascinating archive was purchased for the NSC by a generous donor. This summer, several volumes will be displayed in a rotating exhibit in the NSC bookstore. A collection this size is both daunting and exciting to sort, a window into the Steinbeck family’s life. While some books were owned by John and Carol Steinbeck during their marriage (the couple lived in the house from 1930-36), others were gifts exchanged between John Sr., Olive, and their four children earlier in the century, some given as Christmas presents in the late 19th century. The collection provides insight into the Steinbeck family's intellectual interests and clues about the subjects, ideas, and authors they may have discussed.

A favorite volume of mine is Lillian Eichler’s 1924 Book of Etiquette, a gift to John from his mother, Olive, and inscribed: “Mar 15, 1924 A token from your loving Mother.” What might 22 year old John have thought of Lillian’s suggestion that “There are certain little courteous observances, certain social formalities that bespeak the true lady, the true gentleman. Some of us call it good form. Some of us call it culture. Some of us call it etiquette”? The book covers the accepted norms of introduction, wording of wedding invitations, and funeral dress. Whether Steinbeck fully absorbed these rules of etiquette is debatable, but the volume certainly suggests Olive’s ideals for her son.

For Christmas of 1897, the author’s father, John Ernest Steinbeck, received a copy of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, probably from Olive: “To Ernest. Xmas ’97.” The publication suggests an interesting history. The Dodge Book and Stationery Company was founded in New York in 1895, but opened its first office in San Francisco in 1897—in time for Christmas. The book’s pages are thick and rough cut, and the cover is textured and rustic. The last pages advertise Swinnerton’s 1898 California Bear Calendar, published in color and called “The most unique Calendar published in or out of the English language.” This small volume of translated Persian poetry is part of the Dodge Company’s line of gift books. This text was both product and advertisement, as the last pages describe other items in the Dodge Company line of products.

A 1904 Christmas present to Ernest, perhaps from Olive Steinbeck, was a copy of Twain’s A Dog’s Tale, told from the perspective of a loyal family dog: “My father was a St. Bernard, my mother was a collie, but I am a Presbyterian.” The Steinbeck family’s love of dogs may have made this wry story especially moving and poignant; it ends in tragedy for the heroic, selfless dog who rescues her master’s child from a fire in the nursery. The inscription alludes to this tragic end: “May ‘A Dog’s Tale’ cast no shadow over your Christmas of 1904.” In December 1904, this volume had recently been published as an expansion of the short story that was published in Harper’s Magazine the year before. As a gift, it was both current literature and appropriate for a dog-loving family like the Steinbecks.

Each volume in this collection tells a story, starting with its writing and publication and moving through its acquisition by the Steinbeck family. They were clearly an intellectually curious and engaged family.
Cup of Gold: Australian Company Makes Tea Blends Inspired by Famous Writers

Eric Mora, Marketing and Membership Coordinator

As part of my upkeep of the National Steinbeck Center’s social media accounts, I regularly search Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to see what people are posting about John Steinbeck. I always appreciate seeing what people value in Steinbeck’s writing and how his books have influenced their lives. Last week, I came across a picture of tea named after John Steinbeck on Instagram. I decided to reach out to business owner Lauren Nolan about her Literary Tea Company to learn more about her story. The following article is the result of our email exchange.

Lauren Nolan didn’t set out to create a tea empire; her business developed organically out of a need to explore creative outlets following the birth to her son. She had always enjoyed drinking tea but had never ventured into making her own blends. At first, she faced a steep learning curb. “I knew nothing about tea blending,” she readily admits. “In the beginning it was just a hobby so I bought small amounts of tea and botanical ingredients, then started having a bit of a play around. I made a few awful concoctions but after some research and practice, I eventually got the hang of it.”

Things didn’t take off in earnest until she found a way of combining tea-making with her other major interest: literature. Lauren, who studied English literature in college and works as a freelance writer, decided to use famous literary figures as inspiration for her tea blends, infusing the teas with qualities that make each writer unique. “I wanted to create blends that were inspired by the people that have taught me everything I know and who inspire me everyday. I wanted to create teas inspired by literary geniuses.”

And that is precisely what Lauren did. Literary Tea Company offers teas inspired by and named after writers ranging from Jane Austen (earl grey, lavender and rose petals) to William Shakespeare (black tea, orange peel and rose petals). She insists that coming up with the blends is the best part of the process, researching each writer extensively beforehand. “I always start with the author first, not the tea. I write mind maps and dot points on things that I know about them, their works and how I personally feel about their writing. I make links to sometimes abstract things and could be inspired by a sentence, a paragraph or sometimes just a feeling.”

Literary Tea Company offers a John Steinbeck blend, a black chai with elderberries and apple. Lauren hoped to recreate the feeling of reading Steinbeck’s works in his namesake tea’s flavor. “For me, reading Steinbeck is the ultimate comfort; he makes me feel like I’m coming home. I wanted the tea to first evoke comfort. And next I wanted to translate how layered his writing is. It is never just a story that you’re reading; it’s truth; it’s humanity at its core, and he has the ability to speak to you no matter your life experiences.”

The company’s efforts have been well received: “I have been amazed at the response from our customers who love our teas and am proud to say we have even converted a few coffee drinkers,” quips Lauren.

To purchase teas from Literary Tea Company, visit their Etsy Shop.

www.etsy.com/shop/literaryteaco
In May, the U.S. State Department invited me to the Republic of Georgia, in part to attend the 2nd Tbilisi International Festival of Literature, and in part to give talks on John Steinbeck around the city—at the American Corners, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi State University, and at a nearby settlement camp, Tserovani, where 8000 Georgians were displaced after the 2008 Russian invasion.

This was, in fact, my second invitation to Georgia, and although I am flattered, I suspect that it’s Steinbeck himself the Georgians want—Steinbeck, the American writer who published this sentence: “It is a magical place, Georgia.” And the writer who, in 1947, found them to be “terrific Georgians” who could “out-eat us, out-drink us, out-dance us, out-sing us…. They were quite different from the Russians we had met, and it is easy to see why they are so admired by the citizens of the other Soviet republics… nothing can break their individuality or their spirit.” He loved the Georgians.

Steinbeck visited the country twice, once in 1947, again in 1963—the 1947 trip with photographer Robert Capa is described in A Russian Journal. As is true of his other two travel narratives, Sea of Cortez and Travels with Charley, A Russian Journal best captures Steinbeck’s own voice, his quick humor and sharp impressions. True of all three trips, (each undertaken with a companion—Ed Ricketts, Charley, Capa) Steinbeck set for himself a Herculean task. In A Russian Journal he and Capa wished to peer behind the “iron curtain” and discover the “soul and guts” of the Soviet citizens, to satisfy his and Capa’s curiosity not about Stalin’s intentions but about ordinary people: “What do the people wear there? What do they serve at dinner? Do they have parties? What food is there? How do they make love, and how do they die?”

Such an outsized quest was vintage Steinbeck.

My own modest journey was shadowed by his large steps, delightfully so. A Georgian filmmaker who is working on a film of Steinbeck’s Russia took me to all the places where he stood, where he ate, where he listened. At the pre-Revolutionary Writers’ House of Georgia—once the Writers’ Union where Steinbeck sat through “Mr. So-and-so” reading “a short summary of Georgian literature”—I listened to poets at the Festival read in Swedish and Polish, in Georgian and English, sometimes translated, sometimes not. The music of words flooded into the Festival nights, and I sat in the Writers’ House garden and knew, with Steinbeck, that “Georgians take their literature very seriously.”

“Do Americans like poetry?” Steinbeck was asked in the Writers’ Union in 1947. Do we?

I couldn’t help retracing thoughts he had, seeking shared impressions, yearning to follow his path through Tbilisi, “truly an ancient city” with a river running through it and cliffs on one side and a funicular railroad that “goes straight up the hill.” I took the funicular to the “great restaurant” high over the city where, at Steinbeck and Capa’s farewell banquet, “singing broke out… And dancing broke out.” My Georgian companions broke out into folk songs on a bus ride through Kakheti, the wine-growing region of Georgia (Georgians claim to be the first winemakers).

Olga filmed me in the Sioni Cathedral, standing close to the grave of the man who performed the service Steinbeck attended in 1947, an 81-year-old called Catholicus, “with white hair and a golden crown, so beautiful that he looked unreal.” And “the music of the large choir was incomparable. Incense rose to the high ceiling of the church, and the sun shone through and lighted it.”

The cathedral, the incense, the priest, the choir—all unchanged, all incomparable.

After Tbilisi, I hired a driver to take me into the “terrific mountains” that Steinbeck and Capa flew over, that I climbed up into, breathless. I had to see for myself the “high peaks and sharp ridges, and in between there were streams where we could see ancient villages.”
In these remote mountains I re-examined my own journey. Why do travelers make literary pilgrimages, visit the National Steinbeck Center, eat at the Steinbeck house, gaze at the Gabilan mountains, climb the steep slopes of the Caucasus? Why do readers and adventurers retrace—or yearn to—Steinbeck's steps around America, his and Ricketts's collecting sites in the Sea of Cortez? Why do I want Steinbeck's Georgia to be my own? The answers are varied, I suspect. To feel closer to what we most value. To momentarily erase the decades and see what he saw, feel the same emotions, transcend the finite (I think of Whitman's “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”). Maybe, as my husband insists, literary wanderers capture the true spirit of a Steinbeck journey only when we put down the map and set out on our own using fresh eyes and an open mind. Or maybe we want to be struck by words from 1947 that apply to life in 2016.

I think of all this as I reread my favorite passage from the Georgia section of A Russian Journal, Steinbeck and Capa’s response to a table-master or tamada, the traditional toast-maker, during a banquet near the Black Sea. A tamada’s toasts often bring together past, present and future. Steinbeck and Capa raised their glasses to the future:

“And we proposed a toast to the abolishment of curtains of all kinds—of iron curtains, and nylon curtains, and political curtains, and curtains of falsehood, and curtains of superstition. We suggested that curtains were a prelude to war…”

Bring the tamada to our tables. Imagine Steinbeck today, standing in his own shadow, proposing a toast to the abolishment of walls of all kinds.

Literary quests send us back to the texts that inspired our journeys—and understanding is deepened, renewed.

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**National Steinbeck Center Continues to Make Great Strides on Social Media**

**Eric Mora, Marketing and Membership Coordinator**

Whether showcasing items from our museum store or posting topical quotes from Steinbeck’s works, the National Steinbeck Center’s social media accounts continue to flourish. Over the course of a year, the Center’s Instagram page has grown in following by nearly 625%, from 632 followers in June 2015 to 3956 followers as of June 2016. The posts below represent some of the best performing posts on the National Steinbeck Centers’s Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter account.
In May, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded the National Steinbeck Center a Big Read grant, one of 77 communities in the United States to receive funding for 2016-17. From September 16, Mexico’s Independence Day, to November 1, the Day of the Dead, Monterey County will read *Sun, Stone, Shadows: Twenty Great Mexican Short Stories*. Copies are available in English and Spanish at the NSC bookstore.

**SCHEDULE TO DATE:**

**September 17, 1 pm, at the Monterey Public Library.** Susan Shillinglaw will discuss the BIG READ selection, “Reading Sun, Stone, and Shadows.”

**September 22, 4 pm, Sweet Thursday and the BIG READ:** Rafael Gomez, Professor of World Languages and Cultures at CSU Monterey Bay, “Who Are We? Shaping of American Identity in the Salinas Valley.”

**October 1 & 2, 11-5 pm, “From Pen to Brush”** As part of Salinas Open Studios, Hijos del Sol will show 20 original paintings by Salinas artists, each inspired by the 20 stories in *Sun, Stone, and Shadows*, the BIG READ selection. Come to the NSC to create a cempasuchil (marigold) for a loved one and experience the work in progress for the upcoming exhibit, “Days for the Dead.”

AND MUCH, MUCH MORE! Full calendar of BIG READ events posted in August on www.steinbeck.org

Josué David Rubio, Hartnell student and Hijos del Sol illustrator and graphic designer, designing BIG READ posters.

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