

Meeting With Steinbeck Recalled by Publisher Covici

By RALPH H. CUSHAM
United Press International

New York—UPI—Browsing through the crowded shelves of a secondhand bookshop in Chicago in search of something to read on the train back to New York, Publisher Pascal Covici came across a volume of short stories by a young, unknown author. Originally priced at \$2.50, it had been marked down to 10 cents—so he bought it.

Covici liked the book so much that as soon as he reached New York, he telephoned the author's agent. The agent was unable to tell him very much about the young man, except that he lived in California and that his latest work had already been rejected by seven publishers. Covici read the manuscript, liked it, and published it.

The novel was "Tortilla Flat," the author, John Steinbeck.

Covici recalled this incident at a party in New York to celebrate the award to John Steinbeck of the 1962 Nobel Prize for literature in recognition of his "realistic and imaginative" writings. And particularly for his 1961 best seller "The Winter of Our Discontent"—a story of the temptations which beset the honest man.

Steinbeck is a true artist; an author who writes because something inside tells him that he must. He is a man who shuns the limelight and dislikes the false fripperies which hang from the mantle of fame. He once lost an order for 500 books because he refused to attend a literary tea and sign copies for the socialites of San Francisco.

And at the press conference which followed the announcement of his Nobel laureate, the tall, thickset author was obviously ill at ease. He wore a neat, double-breasted, dark grey suit with the air of a man who hates to be dressed up. He dislikes publicity and hates to be photographed. The combination of both, multiplied by the number of newsmen and photographers present, was almost too much.

John Ernst Steinbeck was born Feb. 27, 1902, in Salinas, Calif., of mixed German and Irish ancestry. His father, John Ernst Sr., was born in Florida, but spent most of his life in Salinas where he held the post of county treasurer for many years. His mother, Olive (Hamilton) Steinbeck, taught in the little red schoolhouse of the Big Sur—the ranges which surround Salinas and which provided Steinbeck with a locale for some of his later works.

Schooling Noted

He graduated from Salinas High school in 1918 and studied sporadically at Stanford University from 1919 to 1925. He was unhappy there at first, but he finally managed to persuade the authorities that he was not interested in a degree. He merely wanted to study things which interested him. He was interested in science, marine biology, traveling—and changing jobs. He worked on a cattle ranch, in a laboratory and in a sugar refinery.

In 1925, John Steinbeck boarded a freighter bound for New York via the Panama Canal. He got a job as a reporter on a New York newspaper but was fired because he would report only the poetry and the philosophy he saw in the news. So he tried freelancing, subsidizing his meager income by carrying bricks for the building of Madison Square Garden.

Young Steinbeck did not take New York by storm so he decided to return to California. He worked for a while as winter caretaker of an estate (losing the job when a pine tree fell onto the owners' house) and then in a trout hatchery. In his spare time he wrote "Cup of Gold," a semi-historical novel of the life and times of the Caribbean Pirate Henry Morgan. It was his fourth novel, but the first one to be published.

That was in 1929. During the next four years, two more were published: "Pastures of Heaven," and "To a God Unknown". The total sales of all three did not exceed 3,000 copies.

With the rejection of his new novel, "Tortilla Flat" by seven publishers, John Steinbeck had almost given up the thought of writing for a living.

But the picture changed. "Tortilla Flat" went to eight editions.

It was not until "Of Mice and Men", in 1937, however, that he began to make a living as a writer. This, one of his most successful novels, became a bestseller, a Broadway play and a movie.

Then, of course, came "The Grapes of Wrath", the story of the struggles of an Oklahoma family forced out of their home by drought. This book, which won him the Pulitzer prize in 1940, has become the yardstick by which all his work is measured.

Special Assignments
During World War II, Steinbeck did special assignments for the United States Army Air forces and for a time was a war correspondent in Europe. Since then, he has traveled extensively—most notably in 1948 to Russia, with Photographer Robert Capa, and in 1961 through the United States with Charley, his poodle.

Steinbeck learned of the Nobel award while watching an early morning television newscast seeking the latest on Cuba.

"My first reaction was one of disbelief," he said. "Then I had a cup of coffee, and now I feel numb. I feel very unreal."

Social Injustice
Commenting that much of his work was concerned with social injustice we asked Steinbeck whether he himself had ever been a victim of such injustice.

"No," he said, "I really haven't had time."

He agreed that the sting of "Grapes of Wrath" was gone from some of his later work. "I guess I'm not annoyed at anything these days," he grinned. "Or maybe it's just because of my age. In any case, it's not so easy to find the underdog any more. Years ago you could recognize the underdog because he was broke and hungry. Nowadays they are all spread out—they might even find them at the top of an office block."



AMERICAN NOVELIST—John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, Calif., in 1902, a section of the country which provided the background for many of his novels and stories. This year he was awarded the 1962 Nobel Prize for literature. (UPI)

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