

I Rediscover America

By JOHN STEINBECK

Winner of the 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature;
Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "The Grapes of Wrath"



The urge of wanderlust and the beauty of our great country are two things keenly understood by this famous writer

EDITORS' NOTE: It was 25 years since John Steinbeck had toured America, and he thought it was about time he got another firsthand look at the land he writes about. So, accompanied by his poodle Charley, he set out on a "voyage" of rediscovery. His vehicle—a pickup truck with a cabin built on the back for living quarters—was named Rocinante, after Don Quixote's horse. His journey took him through New England, across the heartland, up through the Northwest, down the West Coast, eastward through the Southwest and South—then north again to home in Sag Harbor, N.Y. Steinbeck's incisive impressions of what he saw were published in "Holiday" and later in his best-selling book, "Travels with Charley." The following brief excerpt was selected as being especially appropriate to the theme of this special issue.

UNDER THE BIG oak trees of my place at Sag Harbor sat Rocinante, handsome and self-contained, and neighbors came to visit, some neighbors we didn't even know we had.

I saw in their eyes something I was to see over and over in every part of the nation—a burning desire to go, to move, to get under way, any place, away from any here. They spoke quietly of how they wanted to go someday, to move about, free and unanchored, not toward something but away from something.

I saw this look and heard this yearning everywhere in every state I visited. Nearly every American hungers to move.

One small boy about 13 years old came back every day. He stood apart shyly and

looked at Rocinante; he peered in the door, even lay on the ground and studied the heavy-duty springs. He was a silent, ubiquitous small boy. He even came at night to stare at Rocinante.

After a week, he could stand it no longer. His words wrestled their way hell-bent through his shyness. He said, "If you'll take me with you, why, I'll do anything. I'll cook, I'll wash all the dishes and do all the work, and I'll take care of you."

Unfortunately for me, I knew his longing. "I wish I could," I said. "But the school board and your parents and lots of others say I can't."

"I'll do anything," he said. And I believe he would. I don't think he ever gave up until I drove away without him.

He had the dream I've had all my life, and there is no cure.

* * *

I drove as slowly as custom and the impatient law permitted. That's the only way to see anything. Every few miles the states provided places of rest off the roads,



Steinbeck and Charley with their special vehicle.

sheltered places sometimes near dark streams. There were painted oil drums for garbage, picnic tables, and sometimes fireplaces or barbecue pits.

At intervals I drove Rocinante off the road and let Charley out to smell over the register of previous guests. Then I would heat my coffee and sit comfortably on my back step and contemplate wood and water and the quick-rising mountains with crowns of conifers and the fir trees high up, dusted with snow.

LONG AGO AT EASTER I had a looking-egg. Peering in a porthole at the end, I saw a lovely little farm, a kind of dream farm, and on the farmhouse chimney a stork sitting on a nest. I regarded this as a fairy-tale farm as surely imagined as gnomes sitting under toadstools. And then in Denmark I saw that farm or its brother, and it was true, just as it had been in the looking-egg.

And in Salinas, California, where I grew up, although we had some frost the climate was cool and foggy. When we saw colored pictures of a Vermont autumn forest, it was another fairy thing and we frankly didn't believe it. In school we memorized "Snow-bound" and little poems about Old Jack Frost and his paintbrush, but the only thing Jack Frost did for us was put a thin skin of ice on the watering trough, and that rarely.

To find not only that this bedlam of color was true but that the pictures were pale and inaccurate translations was to me startling. I can't even imagine the forest colors when I am not seeing them. I wondered whether constant association could cause inattention, and asked a native New Hampshire woman about it. She said the autumn never failed to amaze her; to elate. "It is a glory," she said, "and can't be remembered, so that it always comes as a surprise."

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