

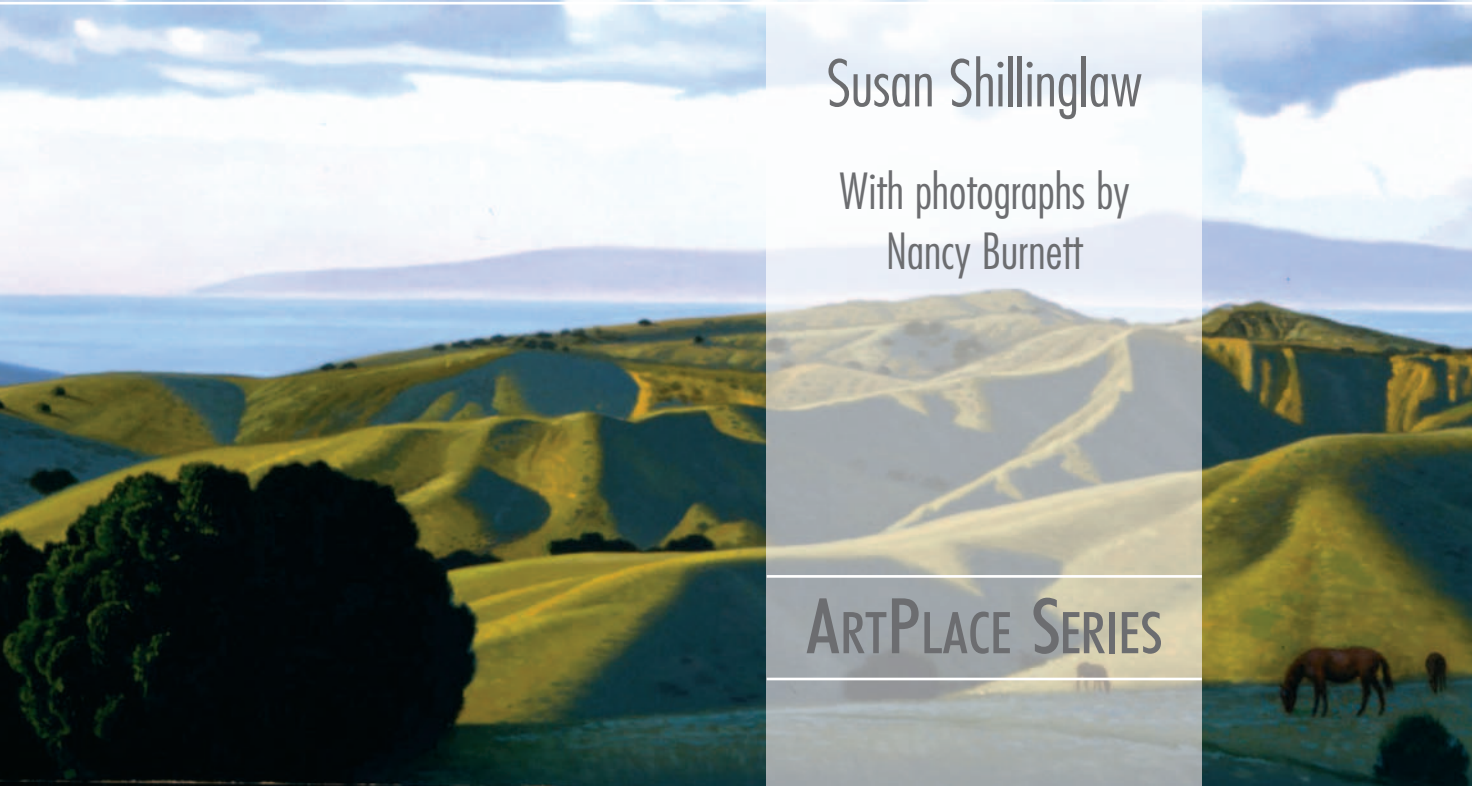
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# A Journey into Steinbeck's California

Susan Shillinglaw

With photographs by  
Nancy Burnett

ARTPLACE SERIES



## Chapter 3

The Monterey Peninsula  
Circle of Enchantment

Mr. Pat Hathaway photo collection, Monterey.

*“They walked side by side along the dark beach toward Monterey, where the lights hung, necklace above necklace against the hill. The sand dunes crouched along the back of the beach like tired hounds, resting; and the waves gently practiced at striking and hissed a little.” —Tortilla Flat*

John Steinbeck is associated almost as closely with the Monterey Peninsula as he is with his hometown of Salinas. Indeed, a gentle rivalry between Salinas and the Peninsula erupts at times. Is he a valley man or a coast man? After all, in Monterey a street was renamed Cannery Row in 1957 because of Steinbeck’s book. On that same street, his best friend, Ed Ricketts, worked out of a lab in a weathered, beloved building that still stands. In Pacific Grove, a little red house was his family’s summer home, a place he visited every summer as a child and returned to live as an adult. And in Carmel, John Steinbeck’s politics were forged. Each community shaped a part of this writer’s psyche. But more broadly, the Peninsula itself, a place that subsumes its three fiercely independent towns, affected Steinbeck’s sensibilities. The Monterey Peninsula exudes a more free-wheeling aura than inland Salinas, a town that is surely a part of the west with its rodeo and land barons and crop rotation.

During Steinbeck’s formative years, there were few radical changes in the Salinas status quo. Not true on the Monterey Peninsula. From 1907, when he first came here with his family, to 1949, when he left for the last time, he witnessed waves of change—Chinese were displaced, canneries were built, sardines were



Cannery Row, as depicted by Smith O'Brien in 1931.



Cannery Row, circa 1945

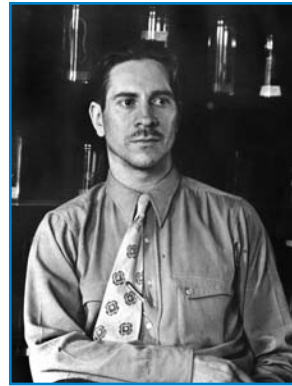
## Cannery Row

In 1945, John Steinbeck put this in-between land on the map, so that the fame of Cannery Row would eclipse all other Peninsula locales.

*Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream. Cannery Row is the gathered and scattered, tin and iron and rust and splintered wood, chipped pavement and weedy lots and junk heaps, sardine canneries of corrugated iron, honky tonks, restaurants and whore houses, and little crowded groceries, and laboratories and flophouses.*

Cannery Row made a hero of “Doc,” the central character who was, in life, Edward Flanders Ricketts, a marine biologist who operated a small marine biological lab in New Monterey. He was John Steinbeck’s closest friend for eighteen years, and

their friendship was essential to John Steinbeck’s thinking and his art. Beginning in 1930 when they met—either in a dentist’s office (Steinbeck’s playful version) or at a Carmel party (more likely)—Ricketts was a touchstone for Steinbeck. He writes, “everyone found himself in Ed,” and that everyone is largely Steinbeck himself. It was arguably the most vital connection of Steinbeck’s life—fulfilling some deep need more completely than his three wives, more than his many friendships with other men and women, more than his close ties with his New York editor, Pascal Covici, and his agents, Elizabeth Otis and Annie Laurie Williams. Ricketts and Steinbeck were intellectual sparring partners, soul mates, collaborators. They discussed the mathematics of music, animal behavior, modern art, and Carl Jung. If Pacific Grove was Steinbeck’s home and writerly retreat, the Lab in New Monterey was where ideas were forged. In the little laboratory by the sea, John Steinbeck’s mind moved outward.



Edward Ricketts

Monterey’s Cannery Row sold sardines and supported baseline living for thousands of fishermen and cannery workers. For more than 40 years, the six-inch Monterey Bay sardine, packed eight to an oval can in oil or tomato sauce, gave life to Cannery Row. Each night during the season, mid-August to mid-February, fishermen went out in ever-larger boats—lamparas, then purse seiners—to scoop up tons of sardines. Sicilian, Italian, and Portuguese men fished while their wives and daughters packed, making about 33 cents an hour at cannery work until unions came in 1936 and wages rose. Conditions in the canneries were rugged—smelly and cold—but far from oppressive. One of the biggest problems women reported was daycare. They

had to report for work whenever full boats came in after a night’s fishing—each cannery had its own boats, crews and whistle code to announce the work day—at 3:00 AM, 4:00 AM, 5:00 AM. What do to with sleeping children if you were a cutter, called to work first, or a packer, allowed to arrive a little later, perhaps at eight in the morning?

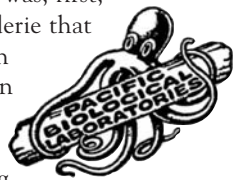
In *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck devotes about a page to the canning industry. His terrain is not commercial Cannery Row but after-hours Cannery Row, when the habitat “became itself again,” quiet and magical. In the half-light of sunset or dawn and during the long nights, the enclave was like a tide pool, he suggests, and writes about it as such, selecting specimen to study, noting the interconnectedness of characters, building to human “aggregation”—parties, and crystallizing in lyrical vignettes moments of “breaking through.” This tough little novel captures Ricketts’s charm and holistic embrace while mapping Steinbeck’s memories. Stand in front of Ricketts’s lab, book in hand, and read the beginning of chapters 3 and 5. You’re looking at the Row through Ed Ricketts’s eyes, sharing his vista—just as Steinbeck did, just as he wants his readers to do.



The interior of the store owned by the Lee family—they also owned Ricketts’s lab—and the setting for Chong’s Market in Cannery Row.

## At the Lab

In the early 1930s, Ed Ricketts moved the Pacific Biological Laboratories—and gradually his homelife—to Ocean View Avenue (now renamed Cannery Row), an ideal location for both his scientific work and the bohemian group he gathered around him. If in the daytime scientific work got done at the lab (800 Cannery Row), at night the space was given over to conversation and drinking. Ricketts’s lab was Monterey’s salon, a tiny bohemian enclave of artists, writers, musicians such as John Cage, a Jungian therapist, and various scientists and friends. The group was committed to rollicking good times, companionship, intellectual sparring, and the *New Yorker*, in 1930 a magazine that brought New York sophistication to the shores of the Pacific. What happened at the lab was, first, the kind of relaxation and camaraderie that Steinbeck assigns to the paisanos in *Tortilla Flat* or Mack and the boys in *Cannery Row*. In Ed’s presence, people became the best of selves, if tales told are true. And leavening



it all was always the commitment to a good time: "People who are concerned with 'the eternal verities'" he wrote in 1942, "would do well to remember that fun is one of them."

The real Ed and the fictional "Doc" of *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday* are conflated in nearly everyone's mind, and what emerges is a near-legendary figure who embraced in life and embodies in fiction acceptance, relaxation, camaraderie, and conversation. He "had more fun than anyone I've ever known," wrote Steinbeck in 1951. Like the "good men" that "most biologists are," as Steinbeck and Ricketts wrote in *Sea of Cortez*, Ricketts himself was "temperamental, moody, lecherous, loud-laughing, and healthy. . . . The true biologist in love with teeming boisterous life, and learns something: that the first rule of life is living." The biologist and the lab group that he nurtured—like Danny's paisano friends and his house—



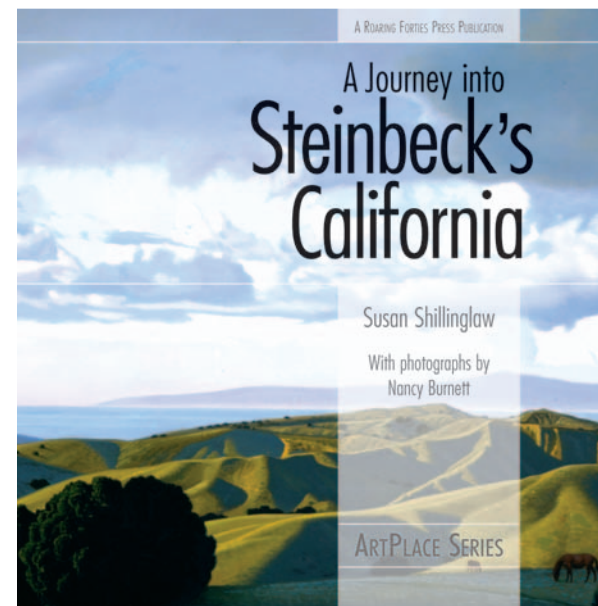
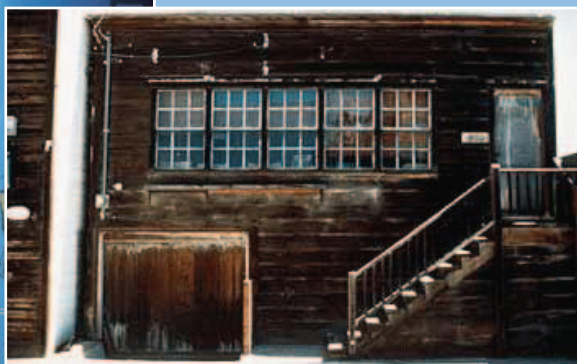
Steinbeck (center right) and Ricketts (center left) with two comrades on an expedition. This is one of the only known photos of the two friends together.

merged into one unit: "There were great parties at the laboratory," Steinbeck recalls in his log, "some of which

### The Lab Group

When Ed Ricketts died on May 7, 1948 (a train on Drake Avenue hit his car), Steinbeck was numbed by loss, as were Ricketts' many friends. But his spirit hardly passed from the Peninsula. In 1956, another group took over the space that had sheltered Ed. Like hermit crabs, they occupied his home, making it their own with gusto and loyalty. For fifty years, the "lab group," businessmen and artists, came to the lab

they had purchased for Wednesday night parties (men only) and weekend celebrations whenever needed. It was there that the Monterey Jazz Festival had its roots. And in 1993 the men of the lab ensured the small building's future when they deeded it to the City of Monterey for \$170,000—It has hardly changed in look and soul since 1936.



### About the Author

Susan Shillinglaw is the director of the Center for Steinbeck Studies at San Jose State University and has consulted on Steinbeck for *Good Morning America*, the Discovery Channel, and A&E. She is an author or editor of several books on Steinbeck, including *Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck* and *Steinbeck and the Environment*. She lives in Los Gatos, California.

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### Contents

1. John Steinbeck and California
  2. The Salinas Valley
  3. Stanford, Tahoe, Los Angeles: Restless Apprenticeship
  4. The Monterey Peninsula: Circle of Enchantment
  5. Pacific Grove: The Writer's Retreat
  6. New Monterey: Watergazers
  7. Bohemian Carmel: Modernism in the West
  8. Los Gatos: Partisan Artist
  9. Beyond California: Mexico and the East
- Timeline  
For Further Reading  
Index

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A Journey into  
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California**



*A Journey into Steinbeck's California* examines the relationship between this iconic American writer and the area he loved and that features so prominently in his work. This original and beautifully illustrated volume explores the landscapes and townscapes of Monterey, Carmel, and Salinas, examining not only how they influenced Steinbeck's creative process but also how Steinbeck's legacy shapes our view of contemporary California.

Susan Shillinglaw is the director of the Center for Steinbeck Studies at San Jose State University and the author of several books on Steinbeck.

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