MAN OF THE WEEK: JOHN STEINBECK

A Salinas, California native, John Steinbeck was born in 1902. Early on in his career he worked for his father as a bookkeeper and accountant. Steinbeck's mother showed an interest in the arts which Steinbeck inherited through his love of literature. As early as High School, Steinbeck decided that he aspired to be a writer.

Steinbeck studied at Stanford University for 6 years only taking classes that interested him and not working towards a particular degree. He supported himself through school by working as a laboratory assistant and farm laborer. After some time in New York working as a reporter and part of a construction crew building Madison Square Garden, he returned back to California to begin work as a serious fiction author.

As a writer and reporter, Steinbeck was asked to cover the migrant situation in California by editorial page editor for the San Francisco News, George West. Steinbeck He traveled and toured Hoovervilles in Kern County and Arvin Camp near Bakersfield. At Arvin, he was able to read weekly reports written by Tom Collins about the happenings of the camp and the fates of the migrants living there. He also spoke with several destitute Okies to better understand their stories. After writing a multi-article expose on the lives of the migrant workers, Steinbeck knew what his next book would be and set out to work on The Grapes of Wrath.

BOOK FACES FIRE: THE GRAPES OF WRATH

Published early in 1939, The Grapes of Wrath soon became the New York Times best-selling book of 1939. Steinbeck received The National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for it in 1940. Although the wildly successful book was met with much praise, it also met much controversy.

Many of the novel's points and implications were condemned across the country, but particularly in California. The Grapes of Wrath brought light to and exposed the many issues facing migrant workers. Among these was the implication that landowners deliberately attracted the poor migrants in order to keep wages down. There was also the suggestion that the police worked with the rich and powerful against the migrants. Steinbeck uses The Grapes of Wrath to expose the power struggles of California - how those who have control take away all that they can from the powerless, the migrants who are at their mercy. Farmers fought these implications by saying that the book was obscene and one-sided in favor of the Okies.

The Grapes of Wrath met its fair share of scorn. It was banned by the San Jose Public Library, the Kansas City Board of Education, and the Kern County Board of Supervisors. Kern County banned it for being "filled with profanity, lewd, foul and obscene language unfit for use in American homes . . . It has offended our citizenry by falsely implying that many of our fine people are a low, ignorant, profane and blasphemous type living in a vicious and filthy manner." Steinbeck's own hometown turned on him as they burned his book on the curb outside the Salinas Public Library. It was also burned on the sidewalk in Bakersfield.
Others condemned the book without directly petitioning for its ban as the Associated Farmers did; "Although the Associated Farmers will not attempt to have the book banned or suppressed, we would not want our women and children to read so vulgar a book. This is a matter for consideration by public bodies. We deny the statements in the book, so consequently if we were to seek for a ban, our motive would be attacked."

Oklahoma City Times wrote "Any reader who has his roots planted in the red soil will boil with indignation over the bedraggled, bestial characters that will give the ignorant east convincing confirmation of their ideas of the people of the southwest. " Oklahoma Congressman Lyle Boren called it "a lie, a black infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind."

Reviews followed the productions about Galati's adaptation. "...majestic...leaves one feeling that the generosity of spirit he saw in a brutal country is not so much lost as waiting once more to be found." —NY Times.

"This is, overall, a thrilling theatrical achievement that gets its power from the still sharp relevance of its human message..." —NY Post.

"THE GRAPES OF WRATH is a lesson in history, stagecraft, and truth that we cannot afford not to learn." —NY Magazine.

"Fire, water, earth and the ferociously resilient human spirit. These are the elemental and combustible ingredients with which John Steinbeck built his great novel of social protest, The Grapes of Wrath." -Chicago Sun Times

1930’s IN AMERICA

Presidents:
1929-1933 Herbert Hoover (Republican)
1933-1945 Franklin D. Roosevelt (Democrat)

Important Singers:
Louis Armstrong
Woody Guthrie
Bing Crosby
The Andrews Sisters
Helen Forrest
Ella Fitzgerald
Jack Leonard
Eddy the Wright
Helen Ward
Bob Eberly
Helen O’Connell
Kathleen Lane
The Ink Spots

UNUSUAL TERMS

Okie: a term used by Californians, abusive in nature and often a fighting word for those proud Okies. To the Okies themselves it was a term which described their heritage: they were proud, courageous, and determined to accept hardship without falling weak. While "Okie" described most migrants out of the plains and into California or other places, it is important to note that "Okie" in the sense that Okies used it, did not describe the Joads. The Joads were actually tenant farmers who worked on the land that others owned. They were forced away and affected by both The Great Depression and The Dust Bowl.
jalopy: sometimes spelled jalope. The most common source of transportation of the Okies and other migrants moving towards California or other places. Most migrants were sold cheap and decrepit automobiles by car dealers looking to make an easy profit. Some crooked dealers would replace original parts for cracked and broken parts, but still jack up the prices. Luckily, Al and Tom had the knowledge of machines to keep theirs working.

Hooverville: any of the encampments of displaced persons especially prevalent during the 1930’s; “Hoover” is a reference to the President of the United States at the time, Herbert Hoover.

McAlester Prison: penitentiary in Oklahoma which held 3,000-4,000 prisoners. (In 1935 it reached its peak with 4,047 prisoners. Most of the prisoners in McAlester were convicted of serious crimes, such as murder.

Vagrant: one who wanders from place to place without a regular job, supporting oneself by begging

Handbill: sent out to advertise jobs that would be awaiting the migrants and Okies in California. While these brought a lot of hope to those out of work; those who had already gone in search of work knew that they did not hold much promise. They would draw in 1000s of workers when they only needed 500 or so in order to keep wages low. If one of the 500 wasn’t willing to work for small wages, there were 100 others willing to.

FSA Camps: Farm Security Administration Camps were built during The Great Depression and Dust Bowl era to house migrants in California and other places. The camps originally consisted of canvas tents on plywood platforms for the residents and permanent buildings to house the community functions such as administration, community hall, post office, library and barber shop

Box Car Homes: Hoovervilles and FSA camps were not the only homes among the slums in which migrants lived in. Boxcars were re purposed into homes for migrants to live in; whether just passing through, temporary, or more permanent shelters, they served a purpose. These homes were not much more of a step up (or down) than some of their homes from the Dust Bowl. They did not have plumbing or electricity. The Okies would cook dinner over open fires just as they had done while moving to California.

HERBERT HOOVER
PRESS STATEMENT
FEBRUARY 3, 1931

The President said:

Certain senators have issued a public statement to the effect that unless the President and the House of Representatives agree to appropriations from the Federal Treasury for charitable purposes they will force an extra session of Congress.

I do not wish to add acrimony to a discussion, but would rather state this case as I see its fundamentals.

This is not an issue as to whether people shall go hungry or cold in the United States. It is solely a question of the best method by which hunger and cold shall be prevented. It is a question as to whether the American people on one hand will maintain the spirit of charity and mutual self-help through voluntary giving and the responsibility of local government as distinguished on the other hand from appropriations out of the Federal Treasury for such purposes. My own conviction is strongly that if we break down this sense of responsibility of individual generosity to individual and mutual self-help in the country in times of national difficulty and if we start appropriations of this character we have not only impaired something infinitely valuable in the life of the American people but have struck at the roots of self-government. Once this has happened it is not the cost of a few score millions but we are faced with the abyss of reliance in future upon Government charity in some form or another. The money involved is indeed the least of the costs to American ideals and American institutions.

President Cleveland, in 1887, confronted with a similar issue stated in part: “A prevalent tendency to disregard the limited mission of this power and duty should, I think, be steadfastly resisted, to the end that the lesson should be constantly enforced that though the people support the Government, the Government should not support the people.

“The friendliness and charity of our countrymen can always be relied upon to relieve their fellow-citizens in misfortune. This has been repeatedly and quite lately demonstrated. Federal aid in such cases encourages the expectation of paternal care on the part of the Government and weakens the sturdiness of our national character, while it prevents the indulgence among our people of that kindly sentiment and conduct which strengthens the bonds of a common brotherhood.”

And there is a practical problem to all this. The help being daily extended by neighbors, by local and national agencies, by municipalities, by industry and a great multitude of
organizations throughout the country today is many times any appropriation yet proposed. The opening of the doors of the Federal Treasury is likely to stifle this giving and thus destroy far more resources than the proposed charity from the Federal Government.

The basis of successful relief in national distress is to mobilize and organize the infinite number of agencies of self-help in the community. That has been the American way of relieving distress among our own people and the country is successfully meeting its problem in the American way today.

We have two entirely separate and distinct situations in the country; the first is the drought area; the second is the unemployment in our large industrial centers—for both of which these appropriations attempt to make charitable contributions. Immediately upon the appearance of the drought last August, I convoked a meeting of the governors, the Red Cross and the railways, the bankers and other agencies in the country and laid the foundations of organization and the resources to stimulate every degree of self-help to meet the situation which it was then obvious would develop. The result of this action was to attack the drought problem in a number of directions. The Red Cross established committees in every drought county, comprising the leading citizens of those counties, with instructions to them that they were to prevent starvation among their neighbors and, if the problem went beyond local resources, the Red Cross would support them.

The organization has stretched through the area of suffering, the people are being cared for today through the hands and with sympathetic understanding and upon the responsibility of their neighbors who are being supported in turn by the fine spirit of mutual assistance of the American people. The Red Cross officials, whose long devoted service and experience are unchallenged, inform me this morning that except for the minor incidents of any emergency organization, no one is going hungry and no one need go hungry or cold.

To reinforce this work at the opening of Congress I recommended large appropriations for loans to rehabilitate agriculture from the drought and provisions of further large sums for public works and construction in the drought territory which would give employment in further relief to the whole situation. These Federal activities provide for an expenditure of upward of $100,000,000 in this area and it is in progress today.

The Red Cross has always met the situations which it has undertaken. After careful survey and after actual experience of several months with their part of the problem they have announced firmly that they can command the resources with which to meet any call for human relief in prevention of hunger and suffering in drought areas and that they accept this responsibility. They have refused to accept Federal appropriations as not being consonant with either the need or the character of their organization. The Government Departments have given them and are giving them every assistance we possibly need to strengthen the public health service in matters of sanitation and to strengthen the credit facilities of that area through the method approved by the Government departments to divert some existing appropriations to strengthen agricultural credit corporations.

In the matter of unemployment outside of the drought area important economic measures of mutual self-help have been developed such as those to maintain wages, to distribute employment equitably, to increase construction work by industry, to increase Federal construction work from a rate of about $275,000,000 a year prior to the depression to a rate now of over $725,000,000 a year; to expand state and municipal construction—all upon a scale never before provided or even attempted in any depression. But beyond this to assure that there shall be no suffering, in every town and county voluntary agencies in relief of distress have been strengthened and created and generous funds have been placed at their disposal. They are carrying on their work efficiently and sympathetically.

But after and coincidently with voluntary relief, our American system requires that municipal, county and state governments shall use their own resources and credit before seeking such assistance from the Federal Treasury.

I have indeed spent much of my life in fighting hardship and starvation both abroad and in the southern states. I do not feel that I should be charged with a lack of human sympathy for those who suffer but I recall that in all the organizations with which I have been connected over these many years, the foundation has been to summon the maximum of self-help. I am proud to have sought the help of Congress in the past for nations who were so disorganized by war and anarchy that self-help was impossible. But even these appropriations were but a tithe of that which was coincidently mobilized from the public charity of the United States and foreign countries. There is no such paralysis in the United States and I am confident that our people have the resources, the initiative, the courage, the stamina and kindliness of spirit to meet this situation in the way they have met their problems over generations.

I will accredit to those who advocate Federal charity a natural anxiety for the people of their states. I am willing to pledge myself
that if the time should ever come
that the voluntary agencies of the
country together with the local and
state governments are unable to
find resources with which to
prevent hunger and suffering in my
country, I will ask the aid of every
resource of the Federal Government
because I would no more see
starvation amongst our countrymen
than would any senator or
congressman. I have the faith in the
American people that such a day
will not come.

The American people are doing
their job today. They should be
given a chance to show whether
they wish to preserve the principles
of individual and local
responsibility and mutual self-help
before they embark on what I
believe is a disastrous system. I feel
sure they will succeed if given the
opportunity.

The whole business situation
would be greatly strengthened by
the prompt completion of necessary
legislation of this session of
Congress and thereby the
unemployment problem would be
lessered, the drought area
indirectly benefitted and the
resources of self-help in the country
strengthened.

FDR’S INAUGURAL
SPEECH
MARCH 4, 1933

President Hoover, Mr. Chief
Justice, my friends:
This is a day of national
consecration. And I am certain that
on this day my fellow Americans
expect that on my induction into
the Presidency I will address them
with a candor and a decision which
the present situation of our people
impels. This is preeminently the
time to speak the truth, the whole
truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need
we shrink from honestly facing
conditions in our country today.
This great Nation will endure as it
has endured, will revive and will
prosper.

So, first of all, let me assert my
firm belief that the only thing we
have to fear is fear itself—nameless,
unreasoning, unjustified terror
which paralyzes needed efforts to
convert retreat into advance. In
every dark hour of our national life
a leadership of frankness and of
vigor has met with that
understanding and support of the
people themselves which is
essential to victory. And I am
convinced that you will again give
that support to leadership in these
critical days.

In such a spirit on my part and on
yours we face our common
difficulties. They concern, thank
God, only material things. Values
have shrunk to fantastic levels;
taxes have risen; our ability to pay
has fallen; government of all kinds
is faced by serious curtailment of
income; the means of exchange are
frozen in the currents of trade; the
withered leaves of industrial
enterprise lie on every side;
farmers find no markets for their
produce; and the savings of many
years in thousands of families are
gone.

More important, a host of
unemployed citizens face the grim
problem of existence, and an
equally great number toil with little
return. Only a foolish optimist can
deny the dark realities of the
moment.

And yet our distress comes from
no failure of substance. We are
stricken by no plague of locusts.
Compared with the perils which our
forefathers conquered because they
believed and were not afraid, we
have still much to be thankful for.
Nature still offers her bounty and
human efforts have multiplied it.
Plenty is at our doorstep, but a
generous use of it languishes in the
very sight of the supply. Primarily
this is because the rulers of the
exchange of mankind's goods have
failed, through their own
stubbornness and their own
incompetence, have admitted their
failure, and abdicated. Practices of
the unscrupulous money changers
stand indicted in the court of public
opinion, rejected by the hearts and
minds of men.

True they have tried, but their
efforts have been cast in the pattern
of an outworn tradition. Faced by
failure of credit they have proposed
only the lending of more money.
Stripped of the lure of profit by
which to induce our people to
follow their false leadership, they
have resorted to exhortations,
pleading tearfully for restored
confidence. They only know the
rules of a generation of self-seekers.
They have no vision, and when
there is no vision the people perish.

Yes, the money changers have
fled from their high seats in the
temple of our civilization. We may
now restore that temple to the
ancient truths. The measure of the
restoration lies in the extent to
which we apply social values more
noble than mere monetary profit.

Happiness lies not in the mere
ownership of money; it lies in the
joy of achievement, in the thrill of
creative effort. The joy and the
moral stimulation of work no
longer must be forgotten in the mad
chase of evanescent profits. These
dark days, my friends, will be worth
all they cost us if they teach us that
our true destiny is not to be
ministered unto but to minister to
ourselves and to our fellow men.

Recognition of the falsity of
material wealth as the standard of
success goes hand in hand with the
abandonment of the false belief that
public office and high political
position are to be valued only by
the standards of pride of place and
personal profit; and there must be
an end to a conduct in banking and
in business which too often has
given to a sacred trust the likeness
of callous and selfish wrongdoing.
Small wonder that confidence
languishes, for it thrives only on
honesty, on honor, on the
sacredness of obligations, on
faithful protection, and on unselfish
performance; without them it
cannot live.
Restoration calls, however, not for changes in ethics alone. This Nation is asking for action, and action now.

Our greatest primary task is to put people to work. This is no unsolvable problem if we face it wisely and courageously. It can be accomplished in part by direct recruiting by the Government itself, treating the task as we would treat the emergency of a war, but at the same time, through this employment, accomplishing greatly needed projects to stimulate and reorganize the use of our great natural resources.

Hand in hand with that we must frankly recognize the overbalance of population in our industrial centers and, by engaging on a national scale in a redistribution, endeavor to provide a better use of the land for those best fitted for the land. Yes, the task can be helped by definite efforts to raise the values of agricultural products and with this the power to purchase the output of our cities. It can be helped by preventing realistically the tragedy of the growing loss through foreclosure of our small homes and our farms. It can be helped by insistence that the Federal, the State, and the local governments act forthwith on the demand that their cost be drastically reduced. It can be helped by the unifying of relief activities which today are often scattered, uneconomical, unequal. It can be helped by national planning for and supervision of all forms of transportation and of communications and other utilities that have a definitely public character. There are many ways in which it can be helped, but it can never be helped by merely talking about it. We must act. We must act quickly.

And finally, in our progress toward a resumption of work we require two safeguards against a return of the evils of the old order; there must be a strict supervision of all banking and credits and investments; there must be an end to speculation with other people’s money, and there must be provision for an adequate but sound currency.

These, my friends, are the lines of attack. I shall presently urge upon a new Congress in special session detailed measures for their fulfillment, and I shall seek the immediate assistance of the 48 States.

Through this program of action we address ourselves to putting our own national house in order and making income balance outgo. Our international trade relations, though vastly important, are in point of time and necessity secondary to the establishment of a sound national economy. I favor as a practical policy the putting of first things first. I shall spare no effort to restore world trade by international economic readjustment, but the emergency at home cannot wait on that accomplishment.

The basic thought that guides these specific means of national recovery is not narrowly nationalistic. It is the insistence, as a first consideration, upon the interdependence of the various elements in all parts of the United States of America--a recognition of the old and permanently important manifestation of the American spirit of the pioneer. It is the way to recovery. It is the immediate way. It is the strongest assurance that recovery will endure.

In the field of world policy I would dedicate this Nation to the policy of the good neighbor--the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others--the neighbor who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors.

If I read the temper of our people correctly, we now realize as we have never realized before our interdependence on each other; that we cannot merely take but we must give as well; that if we are to go forward, we must move as a trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline, because without such discipline no progress can be made, no leadership becomes effective. We are, I know, ready and willing to submit our lives and our property to such discipline, because it makes possible a leadership which aims at the larger good. This I propose to offer, pledging that the larger purposes will bind upon us, bind upon us all as a sacred obligation with a unity of duty hitherto evoked only in times of armed strife.

With this pledge taken, I assume unhesitatingly the leadership of this great army of our people dedicated to a disciplined attack upon our common problems.

Action in this image, action to this end is feasible under the form of government which we have inherited from our ancestors. Our Constitution is so simple, so practical that it is possible always to meet extraordinary needs by changes in emphasis and arrangement without loss of essential form. That is why our constitutional system has proved itself the most superbly enduring political mechanism the modern world has ever seen. It has met every stress of vast expansion of territory, of foreign wars, of bitter internal strife, of world relations.

And it is to be hoped that the normal balance of executive and legislative authority may be wholly adequate to meet the unprecedented task before us. But it may be that an unprecedented demand and need for undelayed action may call for temporary departure from that normal balance of public procedure.

I am prepared under my constitutional duty to recommend the measures that a stricken nation in the midst of a stricken world may require. These measures, or such other measures as the Congress may build out of its experience and wisdom, I shall seek, within my constitutional authority, to bring to speedy adoption.
But in the event that the Congress shall fail to take one of these two courses, in the event that the national emergency is still critical, I shall not evade the clear course of duty that will then confront me. I shall ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis—broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe.

For the trust reposed in me, I will return the courage and the devotion that beset the time. I can do no less.

We face the arduous days that lie before us in the warm courage of national unity; with the clear consciousness of seeking old and precious moral values; with the clean satisfaction that comes from the stern performance of duty by old and young alike. We aim at the assurance of a rounded, a permanent national life.

We do not distrust the future of essential democracy. The people of the United States have not failed. In their need they have registered a mandate that they want direct, vigorous action. They have asked for discipline and direction under leadership. They have made me the present instrument of their wishes. In the spirit of the gift I take it.

In this dedication of a Nation we humbly ask the blessing of God. May He protect each and every one of us. May He guide me in the days to come.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt - March 4, 1933

NOTES FROM THE DRAMATURG

The Grapes of Wrath is praised as a classic and studied in most schools; however, it is often faulted by others for a list of reasons: excessive sentimentalism, melodrama, and most importantly by the people from the era for the way the book portrays the lives of the Okies and farmers. While I would hope that none of us would ever have to endure such a catastrophe, this play and the story it brings to life are still important pieces of both American history and our future. There are lessons to be learned through it.

In the book Ma says “If you're in trouble or hurt or need—go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help—the only ones.” This is one of the important themes throughout the story. It was not a time in which each man stood for themselves; they stood together in hardship.

No one else cared to help the Okies. Some didn't help due to the sentiment Herbert Hoover had set in place. He thought that government handouts would destroy the economy and that if an individual wanted to volunteer to help the poor then they would. This led to a nationwide idea that those who had fallen on misfortune should take care of themselves. Others simply did not help because they thought poorly of the Okies. In the book and the play a gas station owner talks to his attendant about the Okies: “Them goddamn Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain't human. A human being couldn't stand to be so dirty and so miserable. They ain’t a hell of a lot better than gorillas.” As you read in FDR’s Inaugural Speech, he would attempt to bring aid to those in need, but it was a long struggle for what was to come.

If nothing else strikes you during this process, I want you to understand how truly devastating the time was for the Okie and how resilient the people were to withstand such catastrophe. This is not only a story of great tragedy, but a story of survival.

For more information, fun facts, and stories about Dust Bowl survivors and migrants, please visit my website at usithegrapesofwrath.weebly.com. While you’re there feel free to leave a question or comment! Questions will be responded to in the blog section during the show process.