

the Carmel coast. Indeed, Steinbeck portrayed the Salinas Valley with a thoroughness not given to any other American region in modern fiction, except perhaps William Faulkner's Mississippi.

Steinbeck was born in Salinas in 1902, the year Frank Norris died. He graduated from Salinas High School in 1919 and studied at Stanford University, but, like Norris at Berkeley, he never completed the requirements for a degree.

His first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929), was an allegorical romance about Sir Henry Morgan, the pirate-governor of Jamaica. From this, Steinbeck turned to the California scene, which would provide the locales for most of his best writing. *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) was set in a lovely, secluded, fictional valley somewhere near the Salinas Valley. Its unifying theme was the Munroe family, their thoughtless, vicious mediocrity, and the series of episodes in which they ruined the lives of their neighbors by trying to force them into conformity with their own notions of what was proper and respectable. Steinbeck's satirizing of pretentious middle-class values was also apparent in *Tortilla Flat* (1935), which won him the beginnings of financial success and critical notice. Although several publishers had rejected this droll account of some Mexican American idlers in Monterey on the ground that it was too frivolous for the hard times of the depression, the book sold quite well to readers who enjoyed its supposed praise of a group of irresponsible people who were living on next to nothing.

In Dubious Battle, published early in 1936, took its title from a line in Milton's *Paradise Lost* but dealt with the intensely contemporary and controversial theme of a strike of migratory agricultural laborers organized and led by Communists. The episodes were largely drawn from an actual strike in the cotton fields of the San Joaquin Valley 2 years earlier, though the Torgas Valley of the novel was a composite locale. It resembled the Pajaro Valley, north of Salinas, but there had been no strike there, and the crop in the novel was apples rather than cotton.

The main characters were also composites, partly drawn, like all of Steinbeck's characters, from persons he had known, including in this case two actual Communists. But the widespread charge that *In Dubious Battle* was communistic propaganda ignored the fact that its picture of the leading Communist organizer of the strike is extremely critical. Steinbeck had as deep a dislike for communism as he had for any system that subordinated the spirit and dignity of the individual to a cause. He was equally critical of the radical leadership of the strike and the ruthlessness of the growers and their vigilante supporters. His most extreme contempt, however, was reserved for the vigilantes: "They're the dirtiest guys in any town. . . . They like to hurt people, and they always give it a nice name, patriotism or protecting the constitution."

Steinbeck made an intensive personal investigation of migratory labor conditions in the mid-1930s and summarized his conclusions in a series of articles in the *San Francisco News* in October 1936, later reprinted as a pamphlet under the title *Their Blood Is Strong*. As background he sketched the history of California's importation of foreign labor, which he called "a disgraceful picture of greed and cruelty." Then he described the new agricultural labor supply, the impoverished native American migrants from the Dust Bowl area. For the solution of the desperate and dangerous



The Hollywood version of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* was playing at theaters in towns across the Central Valley by 1940. (Copyright the Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum of California, City of Oakland, Gift of Paul S. Taylor.)

problem, he recommended that a new state agricultural labor board help to allot labor and determine fair wages and that the workers be helped to form union organizations. Finally, he insisted that vigilantism be drastically punished. It was, Steinbeck wrote, “a system of terrorism that would be unusual in the Fascist nations of the world,” and its methods were being “more powerfully and more openly practiced in California than in any other place in the United States.”

Steinbeck's masterpiece was *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), narrating the experiences of the Joad family, who were evicted from their farm in the Oklahoma Dust Bowl, journeyed to California in an ancient automobile, and suffered the miseries of migratory laborers in the San Joaquin Valley. It was “a crime . . . that goes beyond denunciation,” Steinbeck wrote, that children were being allowed to die of starvation in the midst of rotting plenty.

The Kern County Board of Supervisors banned *The Grapes of Wrath* from the public schools and libraries under its jurisdiction, and the Associated Farmers launched an unsuccessful campaign to extend the ban to other counties, but the novel won the Pulitzer Prize and was a runaway best-seller. Darryl Zanuck of Twentieth Century-Fox made it into a film while it was still at the top of the national best-seller list. He had taken the precaution of sending private detectives to determine the accuracy of the novel, and they had reported that actual conditions were even worse than the ones Steinbeck described.

The financial success of *The Grapes of Wrath* enabled Steinbeck to take an extended vacation, which also served as the basis for his next book. He accompanied his friend Edward F. Ricketts, the proprietor of a laboratory of marine biology at Monterey, on an expedition to collect biological specimens in the Gulf of California