

## This Day in History... February 27, 1902

### Birth of John Steinbeck

Acclaimed author John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California. From that small farming town would come a writer whose novels captured the struggles of migrant workers, ranch hands, and families uprooted by the Great Depression.

Steinbeck grew up in the fertile Salinas Valley, an area of lettuce fields, orchards, and sugar beet farms. His father, John Ernst Steinbeck Sr., worked as Monterey County treasurer. His mother, Olive Hamilton Steinbeck, was a former schoolteacher who encouraged reading and learning. The landscape around Salinas left a strong mark on him. As a teenager, he spent summers working on nearby ranches and beet farms. There he labored beside migrant workers, many of them immigrants. He listened to their stories. He saw their low wages and harsh living conditions. These early experiences later shaped his fiction.

At age 14, Steinbeck decided he would become a writer. He often locked himself in his bedroom to write poems and short stories. After graduating from Salinas High School in 1919, he enrolled at Stanford University. He studied English literature but did not follow a steady academic path. He attended classes on and off for six years. He never earned a degree. In 1925, he left Stanford for good.

Steinbeck moved to New York City, hoping to build a career as a freelance writer. He worked as a construction laborer and a newspaper reporter while trying to publish fiction. Editors rejected his submissions. After months of struggle, he returned to California. He found work as a caretaker and tour guide at a Lake Tahoe estate. There he met Carol Henning, whom he married in 1930. The couple later moved to Pacific Grove, near Monterey. Steinbeck's parents offered financial help. This support allowed him to focus on writing.

In 1929, he published his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, a historical adventure based loosely on the life of pirate Henry Morgan. The book received little attention. Over the next few years, he wrote short stories and novels that also struggled to sell. His breakthrough came in 1935 with *Tortilla Flat*. The novel told the story of a group of paisanos in Monterey after World War I. It won the California Commonwealth Club's Gold Medal. With the earnings, Steinbeck built a modest home in Los Gatos.

During the Great Depression, Steinbeck focused on the lives of workers and the unemployed. In 1936, he published *In Dubious Battle*, about a labor strike among fruit pickers. In 1937 came *Of Mice and Men*, the story of two ranch workers, George and Lennie. The novella was widely praised. It was adapted for the stage the same year and later made into a film.

In 1939, Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath*. The novel followed the Joad family as they fled the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma and traveled to California in search of work. Steinbeck had drawn on firsthand research. In 1936, he had written newspaper articles about migrant labor camps in California. *The Grapes of Wrath* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1940 and became the best-selling book of 1939. It also sparked controversy. Some Californians argued it exaggerated poor conditions. In Kern County, the book was banned from libraries for nearly two years.

During World War II, Steinbeck worked as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*. In 1943, he reported from Europe and North Africa. He accompanied naval commando units known as the Beach Jumpers, organized under actor Douglas Fairbanks Jr. Steinbeck went on missions in the Mediterranean and helped transport prisoners. His dispatches were later collected in *Once There Was a War*.

After the war, Steinbeck continued to publish novels, screenplays, and travel writing. Works from this period included *Cannery Row*, *The Pearl*, and *East of Eden*. Steinbeck considered *East of Eden* his most ambitious work. A 1955 film adaptation starred James Dean in his first major role. In 1961, Steinbeck published his final novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*.

In 1960, Steinbeck set out on a cross-country journey with his French poodle, Charley, in a custom-built camper truck he named Rocinante. He traveled more than 10,000 miles through 34 states. He wanted to see the country firsthand and talk with ordinary Americans. The trip led to the 1962 book *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*. In it, Steinbeck wrote about small towns, changing cities, racial tensions in the South, and his concerns about modern America. The book combined travel narrative with personal reflection. It became one of his most widely read later works and offered a final look at the nation he had spent his life writing about.

In 1962, Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize in Literature. The committee cited his "realistic and imaginative writings" combined with social insight. Two years later, President Lyndon B. Johnson awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In his final years, Steinbeck traveled to Vietnam as a correspondent for *Newsday*. He died in New York City on December 20, 1968, at age 66.



*Steinbeck was the first honoree in the USPS Literary Arts Series.*



*Henry Fonda starred in the film version of Grapes of Wrath.*



*James Dean had his film debut in East of Eden.*

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