

JANUARY 09 - SUMMARY – TRAVELS WITH CHARLEY

BY JOHN STEINBECK

Paula led the group of 20 intrepid readers who braved the cold weather to discuss *Travels with Charley* by John Steinbeck on Monday night. We also welcomed four new members, Dave, Richard, Mimsi and Lisa, and hope to see them again.

Paula started out with some facts about Steinbeck that were not revealed in the book. The book was written in 1960 at a time when he was very ill with heart problems. He admitted that he had not traveled widely in the US and as one of our most controversial writers of the time (10 banned books including *East of Eden* and *Grapes of Wrath*) perhaps he was trying to quiet his critics. Paula also brought a wonderful array of books to assist travelers who want to travel the back roads, brought a helpful map of the US and a handout with all the stops he made during his journey from Wikipedia. BOOKS – *Off the Beaten Path* (by State), *Crossing America*, and *American Heritage Trail*.

Paula had asked us to consider as we read the book – Are Americans the same as they were in the 1960's, is our outlook on travel the same, do we travel the same way?

Steinbeck said his purpose was to get to know the people and to see the real American. Most of our readers felt he really didn't make many connections. He said early on that many people were envious of his trip and longed to go as well. Was it the anonymity you have when you travel alone (Steinbeck did not divulge his name during his trip), or just the breaking free from routine? We felt his book was more about impressions and reminiscences and that while he said he wanted connections, he really preferred to be alone.

We felt he found more of what he was looking for in the Midwest and the West, ie. small town America. He adored Montana, probably for the scarceness of people and that the towns still had viable downtown areas. Overall, we felt he had an optimistic outlook when he found these places.

Rose brought up that he said that Americans were more homogeneous than the French and English, saying that an American was more similar with another American than a Welshman was when compared to an Englishman. Our group did not uniformly agree with this statement, and yet there is some regional pride that occurs among American during introductions both in the US and abroad.

Many of our current “road trip travelers” mentioned that it is harder and harder to find small town America with little cafes and small hotels. Today in the advent of chain stores and McDonalds and Starbucks, it is sometimes impossible to find food or lodgings off the highway.

Two locations that stand out as small towns that have kept their charm are Cold Water Kansas and Overland Kansas. Why these small towns are still vibrant is not known; it could be jobs, leadership, or local commitment to stay unique. These were found during a straight-line trip between Denver the Mobile (taking only back roads whenever possible and traveling in a straight line between points). For people wanting to find the real America, check out the book ROAD FOOD, which highlights little diners and regional restaurants instead of chains.

Traveling with a pet, especially a dog like Charley, was a door opener and conversation starter for him in some locations. The group discussed how much easier it is to travel with pets today. Many hotels and inns make room for them, probably because there is such demand. Funny, you don't seem to make the same connections when you travel with a cat! Rose also mentioned that when you travel totally alone it is easier to strike up conversations.

There was discussion on would a traveler today find the kind of help he received in Oregon when his tires were bad. General consensus was in the Midwest and West, but not as likely in the Northeast.

There was much discussion on why road trips are not as common as they once were. Today, most people fly between destinations whenever possible, probably due to the time involved in driving, especially with children. If you only have two weeks of vacation, depending on your destination, a road trip may not be very feasible.

Some of our group lamented about the decline in the interest in history in the youth today especially US History. This lack of interest could be part of the reason why road trips aren't taken as often. The group felt it now falls more and more on the parents to instill that interest and do what they can to make history come alive for the children.

Bottom line, most of us felt that with his dislike of standardization and his horror of how “fast and crowded” many of the cities and highways were in 1960, Mr. Steinbeck would not appreciate modern America with our increased population, immigration, highways and love the chain stores.

We took a poll and of the 20 in attendance, only 20% had seen all 50 states. Perhaps with the current economy, more of us we take more road trips in the future.

FUTURE MEETINGS

	BOOK	BY	LEAD BY
Feb 9	Embarrassment of Mangoes	Vanderhoof	Barb (Jane)
Mar 9	Take Me With You	Newsham	Phylliss
Apr 13	<i>Jungle Child</i>	<i>Kuegler</i>	<i>Keith</i>
May 11	My Path Leads to Tibet	Tenberken	Willie
Jun 8	Arabian Sands	Thesinger	David
Jul 13	A River's Tale	Gargan	Helen

UPCOMING TRAVEL RELATED EVENTS

Monday, Jan 19 – Denver area PBS Station 6 – Parts 5 and 6 of India. This is a fascinating series about India, history, culture and people. Sorry I didn't find it earlier to let people know.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT AND INTEREST.

I look forward to seeing each of you at our next meeting.

Until then, Travel in Safety!

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