STEP BY STEP FROM STEM TO STERN

By Frank H. Sloss

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The title of this paper has no meaning whatever, but it does have alliteration. That is what connects it to the paper itself, for I intend to talk about a number of men, unrelated to each other, whose surnames all begin with the letters STE.

"Why with STE?" you may well ask. I could, of course, give you the reply that Alice got when she asked a similar question during the Mad Tea-Party. The passage occurs while the Dormouse is telling a story about three little girls. "'They were learning to draw,' the Dormouse went on, yawning and rubbing its eyes, for it was getting very sleepy; 'and they drew all manner of things -- everything that begins with an M____' 'Why with an M?' said Alice. 'Why not?' said the March Hare. Alice was silent." But I had more reason than that. By the time I have finished, perhaps you will still think it an odd and arbitrary combination. But I shall try to defend it as we go along.

My subjects are four in number. Quite aside from their alphabetical proximity, they have much in common. All were, or are, prose writers of great distinction; one, indeed, won the Nobel Prize, and another became a member of the Chit-Chat Club, no less. All wrote both novels and non-fiction. Each of them spent a significant part of his life in California -- in fact, within the extended San Francisco Bay Area, if you will allow a definition broad enough to include Monterey

County to the south and Napa County to the north. All have written, quite differently but in ways that I find moving, about travel in California and the West. It is that circumstance, primarily, that links them in my mind, though we shall find other points of contact as well.

I have already dropped enough hints to perforate my veil of mystery; it is time to lift it altogether. The mention of Monterey County surely suggests John Steinbeck; the county, though it would once gladly have banned and burned his books if it could, now welcomes the appellation Steinbeck Country as it complacently watches the streams of tourists that the fame of its Nobel-crowned native son has lured to Cannery Row. Bracket Monterey County with Napa County, as I just did, and there emerges the recollection of the Silverado Squatter, Robert Louis Stevenson, now honored by museums in both counties. I said that my group included one of our own Chit-Chatters, and I hope that the clue evoked memories of pleasant evenings with our lamented colleague George R. Stewart, whose numerous and varied writings shed so much luster on Berkeley's Department of English. And from Stewart it is no great leap to his Stanford counterpart Wallace Stegner, who fortunately still lives and writes. There, then, are my four STE's: Stevenson, Stewart, Steinbeck, and Stegner, in order of birth. Four names to conjure with -- or even to juggle with, as I shall now attempt to do.

But first, another word of explanation. Beside these four, any number of others have written about travel in the West. Why do I respond especially to these four? An honest answer, I think, is more a confession of my own idiosyncracies than a critique of the authors. I am moved, I suppose, by descriptions of travel of the kinds that I myself have most

greatly delighted in, particularly in my youth; there is no doubt a strong element of nostalgia. And those come down to two -- travels by train and by automobile. Train, I mean, during the heyday of railroading, when that was the way America travelled; and automobile when motoring was thoroughly pleasurable, before it had become choked by traffic and pollution and dulled by the monotony of freeways and motels. As for other modes of conveyance, for me they do not evoke similar emotions. What the airplane provides is certainly transportation but hardly travel; you go up here and come down there, without the sensation of having legitimately passed through the country that lies between. Inland boating, walking, jogging, running, and bicycling are more sports than journeys. There were once wooden wheels -- on covered wagons and stagecoaches -- but they were before my time. And there is horseback -- the mainstay of those books and films popularly called Westerns -- but not for me; never have I been able to establish rapport with a horse. Back, then, to wheels of steel and of rubber, and to my four chosen authors.

Robert Louis Stevenson first reached California in 1879, arriving by the overland railroad, which was then ten years old. All he could afford was an emigrant train, slow, crowded, hot and dirty. In Across the Plains, he describes these discomforts, and then comes this triumphant passage:

"When I awoke the next morning, I was puzzled for a while to know if it were day or night, for the illumination was unusual. I sat up at last, and found we were grading slowly downward through a long snowshed, and suddenly we shot into an open; and before we were swallowed

into the next length of wooden tunnel, I had one glimpse of a huge pine-forested ravine upon my left, a foaming river, and a sky already coloured with the fires of dawn. I am usually very calm over the displays of nature, but you will scarce believe how my heart leaped at this. It was like meeting one's wife. I had come home again -- home from unsightly deserts to the green and habitable corners of the earth. Every spire of pine along the hill-top, every trouty pool along that mountain river, was more dear to me than a blood-relation. Few people have praised God more happily than I did. And thenceforward, down by Blue Canyon, Alta, Dutch Flat, and all the old mining camps, through a sea of mountain forests, dropping thousands of feet toward the far sea-level as we went, not I only, but all the passengers on board, threw off their sense of dirt and heat and weariness, and bawled like schoolboys, and thronged with shining eyes upon the platform, and became new creatures within and without. The sun no longer oppressed us with heat, it only shone laughingly along the mountain-side, until we were fain to laugh ourselves for glee. At every turn we could see farther into the land and our own happy futures. At every turn the cocks were tossing their clear notes into the golden air, and crowing for the new day and the new country. For this was indeed our destination; this was 'the good country' we had been going to so long."

Of course this is writing of an earlier century than ours -- romantic, exuberant, with the special touch of artificial elegance that marks Stevenson's style. But I think the passage can fittingly be coupled with an equally climactic moment in <u>The Grapes of Wrath</u> -- another first view of California, but expressed by Steinbeck in realistic

colloquial twentieth-century dialogue with descriptions pared down to little more than enumerations of things seen. Let me read some of that too:

"They drove through Tehachapi in the morning glow, and the sun came up behind them, and then -- suddenly they saw the great valley below them. Al jammed on the brake and stopped in the middle of the road, and, 'Jesus Christ! Look!' he said. The vineyards, the orchards, the great flat valley, green and beautiful, the trees set in rows, and the farm houses. And Pa said, 'God Almighty!' The distant cities, the little towns in the orchard land, and the morning sun, golden on the valley. A car honked behind them. Al pulled to the side of the road and parked. 'I want to look at her.' The grain fields golden in the morning, and the willow lines, the eucalyptus trees in rows. Pa sighed, 'I never knowed they was anything like her.' The peach trees and the walnut groves, and the dark green patches of oranges. And red roofs among the trees, and barns -- rich barns. Al got out and stretched his legs. He called, 'Ma -- come look. We're there!' Ruthie and Winfield scrambled down from the car, and then they stood, silent and awestruck, embarrassed before the great valley. The distance was thinned with haze, and the land grew softer and softer in the distance. A windmill flashed in the sun, and its turning blades were like a little heliograph, far away. Ruthie and Winfield looked at it, and Ruthie whispered, 'It's California.'"

These two excerpts, poles apart in style, nevertheless convey the same feeling of exaltation, partly because each of them describes a long-awaited fulfillment, the end of a trying ordeal. But there is more to it

than that, for any crossing of Donner or Tehachapi Pass -- in either direction, for that matter -- can hardly fail to stir the spirit. Wallace Stegner, in the first of the essays in The Sound of Mountain Water, tells us why. "I doubt," he writes, "if there is any American with any of his country's history in his blood who is not excited at the crossing of a range. I had the feeling last night, crossing the Diablo Range by way of low, oak-dotted Pacheco Pass. I have it stronger now, on the spring-green slopes of Tehachapi. From Cumberland Gap to South Pass and Weber Canyon and the snowy passes of the Sierra, we have been a pass-surmounting people, fascinated by that newness on the other side, that land 'vaguely realizing westward.' We have misted our eyes with far-looking and stretched our minds on the high points of the continent. Like the bear who went over the mountain, we have got these crossings in our itchy bones, and perhaps always will have. The other side of the mountain is plenty to see, even if we have seen it before." And this awareness is echoed by Steinbeck, with a slightly different emphasis, in Travels with Charley.

Steinbeck and Stegner are alike, too, in not ignoring the means by which automobile travel is brought about. There is a lot about motor mechanics to be learned from Steinbeck in The Wayward Bus, while Stegner, in his latest novel Recapitulation, warms my nostalgic heart by alluding to the practice of double-clutching at the start of a down-grade -- now, since the invention of syncro-mesh, a lost and useless art, but once the crowning skill that had to be mastered for smooth driving in hilly or mountainous terrain.

It is in George Stewart's writing, however, that motoring rises to a major theme, recurring with variations throughout the body of his output. Of his seven novels, three -- and, to my taste, the three finest -- lean so heavily on automobile episodes that if those were to be excised the books themselves could hardly survive the operation. These are Storm, Earth Abides, and Sheep Rock. Two items among his non-fiction, U.S. 40 and N.A. 1, are devoted entirely to particular highways as they are experienced by drivers, or rather as they would be experienced if ordinary drivers had Stewart's historical and geographical knowledge and his sensory perceptiveness. U.S. 40, indeed, includes in its opening section a chapter on motoring, in which Stewart observes, "Considering the fixation of the American people upon automobiles and their use, there has been surprisingly little of what might be called personal or imaginative writing on the subject." But he cites a few exceptional examples. "There is, outstandingly," he writes, "the journey of the Joads in The Grapes of Wrath. I remember also the flight and pursuit across Montana in Stegner's Big Rock Candy Mountain * * *." And so my little circle of writers continues to close in on itself.

But this discussion of motoring has necessarily excluded Stevenson, who died too soon to have known the automobile. To bring him back into the fold, I must return to trains.

Stevenson has told us how the poor man travelled by rail in his time, but the very same tracks accommodated a different way of life, even pleasanter to read about. Look into Stegner's Angle of Repose, and you will find several delightful glimpses of the world of Pullman porters and plush upholstery, of club cars and observation platforms, and of fine

wining and dining while the scenery glides by. On the overland route, that elegant style of travel finally culminated in the proudly ostentatious streamliner "City of San Francisco," to which Stewart, in Storm, has assigned an important role.

What about Steinbeck in connection with trains? In those of Steinbeck's major works that I have read, there is nothing on the subject, or at all events nothing memorable enough to have stuck in my mind. But there is a minor item that I have stumbled on by a fortunate accident.

This is an early short story, narrating an incident that had been told to Steinbeck by an elderly lady to whom it had actually happened in her youth. He wrote up the story, but the lady did not want it published, so he kept it private for about seven years. Then, learning that the lady was ill and in financial need, he sold it, with her family's consent, to a magazine, and turned over the proceeds to her. Next, it was privately printed for a literary club, but it might never have reached the book-reading public at all if the Viking Press, Steinbeck's publisher, had not found enough charm in it to include it as a disconnected item in the 1946 edition of The Portable Steinbeck.

In the story, a little girl, usually very proper and well-behaved, succumbs to a temptation to play hooky from Sunday School. The irresistible lure is a free ride from Salinas to Monterey on a funeral train. The funeral train, it develops, is a special train consisting of flatcars, with the coffin on the front car and benches for passengers on the others. The treat is open to anyone who will follow the corpse to its final resting-place and thus swell the attendance, to the greater glory of the grieving family. As might be expected, the train ride becomes a

bit riotous; it is described with verve in the story. In Monterey, before the train returns, the little girl gets into a small adventure that brings her face to face with "a long-haired young man with a lean, sick face and eyes shining with fever." He treats her with courtesy and kindness; somehow every detail of the encounter remains indelibly impressed on her memory. At the time she has no idea who the unusual young man might be, but the story is entitled "How Edith McGillcuddy Met R.L.S." And so I find myself drawn back to my starting-point; the circle has closed.

Reluctantly, I must now stop playing with my make-believe trains and automobiles. I promised to point out some other connections among my four authors; here are a few.

Jim Hart of Berkeley, whom many of us claim as a friend, has observed, in his introduction to From Scotland to Silverado, that Stevenson's sketch on Monterey is "the precursor of the Steinbeck manner and mood, a half-century before Tortilla Flat * * *." Now Steinbeck attended Stanford but dropped out without a degree in disgust; he once wrote to a friend, "I don't like Stanford and never did. Prigs they are there and pretenders." But in his mind there was one shining exception: the distinguished Edith Mirrielees, who had instructed him in creative writing and encouraged him to continue with it. For years he used to return to the campus only to see her, and he provided an affectionate preface to the reissue of her book Story Writing. Miss Mirrielees, in turn, was no doubt influential in bringing her friend Wallace Stegner to Stanford to head the Creative Writing Program; at any rate she hailed the event in her history of Stanford, which Stegner

had persuaded her to write in her eightieth year. As for Stegner and Stewart, their lines of activity intersected over and over again. They served on the same editorial boards and contributed to the same literary journals. Each of them supplied an important historical book to McGraw-Hill's American Trails series, and they acknowledged each other's help and friendship there and elsewhere.

This time, the links have run from Stevenson to Steinbeck to Stegner to Stewart. Let me once more connect the ends of the chain by pointing out that the subject of George Stewart's master's thesis was Stevenson in California.

Well, this has been a futile exercise, but it amused me and I hope it has not totally bored you. Perhaps, too, in the process I have invented a new parlor game. It is a variant of the old "What-books-would-you-take-to-a-desert-island?" conversational gambit, but with a new twist; you must limit your selection to a small part of the alphabetical catalogue and include a geographical restriction of some sort too. If you were to be marooned with the complete works of my four authors, I maintain that you would not fare too badly, even through many changing moods.

How about romantic adventure? Surely nobody except perhaps Stevenson himself has surpassed Treasure Island. Serious fiction of social import? I think The Grapes of Wrath will hold its high place. Fantasy? Whatever kind you choose. If it is to be grim and symbolic, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde will be waiting on the shelf; if the flight of fancy is to be light-hearted and charming, there is The Short Reign of Pippin IV; if it is to verge on the domain of science-fiction, Earth

Abides remains among the masterpieces of its kind, and even Stegner impinges on the edge of the genre with the human genetics experiments in The Spectator Bird. Biography? Let Stegner tell you all about John Wesley Powell or Bernard DeVoto, and Stewart about Bret Harte or the six who led Good Lives. History, whether straight or fictionized? The titles are too numerous to mention. Drama? Several of Steinbeck's books were transformed into highly successful plays. Poetry? Well, Stevenson supplies some, both for children and for adults; and if at this late stage I wanted to stretch my list of writers further while still sticking to Californians beginning with STE, I could drag in George Sterling and Gertrude Stein. Science? For metereology, turn to Stewart's Storm, and for marine biology, to Steinbeck's Sea of Cortez. Finally, having the time, would you care to pursue a whole branch of study as it developed in the mind of the man who practically invented it, at least for the United States? Then you can learn about names from the country's leading onomatologist, George Stewart. Begin with Names on the Land, George's own favorite of all his books, and go on till you reach his last, Names on the Globe.

Are you ready to challenge me at my new game? If you pick British dramatists beginning with SHA and trot out Shakespeare and Shaw, I will concede defeat. Short of that, can you surpass my selection?