
Oklahomans' Attitudes Toward John Steinbeck Since 1939

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In the autumn of 1937 John Steinbeck, on his way from Chicago to California, decided to go through Oklahoma. There he joined a band of migrant workers with whom he traveled to his home state. Out of that experience came *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel which had a tremendous impact on the nation. It evoked from Oklahoma a particularly hostile and vocal response—one not always based upon a knowledge of what Steinbeck really said. This attitude of resentment against the novelist has been persistent among Oklahomans, and is not yet completely dead. It is my purpose to examine its development as it has been reflected in the treatment of Steinbeck in the Oklahoma press and the handling of his works in the state's libraries.

The press has reflected, and perhaps influenced, Oklahomans' attitudes toward Steinbeck. This study has concentrated upon the Oklahoma City and Tulsa dailies and, to a lesser extent, employed newspapers from Stillwater and Lawton. The treatment of John Steinbeck's works in Oklahoma libraries might indicate to some degree the attitudes of the so-called "reading public." To examine this segment of Oklahomans' behavior, a questionnaire was sent to 149 libraries in the state. Replies from 86 libraries, 57.7% of the sample, were usable; and conclusions were based on data from a group representing never less than 23% and never more than 34% of all the libraries in the state in any given year from 1939 through 1965.

The period from the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* in March, 1939, through 1941, saw the most violent and widespread reactions by Oklahomans to the work of the California-born novelist. The Great Depression set the stage; and by 1939 a heated exchange between Californians and Oklahomans had arisen over the problem of migrant workers. Steinbeck's book spurred the controversy, for Oklahomans not only regarded it as unjustly critical of their state but were eager to point out that the author was a "wicked Californian."

Initial reactions to *The Grapes of Wrath* were not all negative. W. M. Harrison, editor of the *Oklahoma City Times*, reviewed the book in his front page column on 8 May, 1939. He referred to the book's "vulgar" language and the author's acceptance of anti-capitalism propaganda," but pronounced the work "powerful." Harrison had read the book; but others, who had not, disagreed with him. When Twentieth Century-Fox announced that the story would be filmed, the Oklahoma City and Oklahoma State Chambers of Commerce asked the governor to protest. Governor Leon C. Phillips evidently ignored their request, but he was not left out of the squabble. On 2 October, 1939, the *Times* reported the governor had "confessed ruefully to a name-calling row" with a Detroit physician who had written him out of concern over the conditions depicted by Steinbeck. The same article contained a partial text of their highly colorful exchange.

Considerations of the accuracy of Steinbeck's depiction of southeastern Oklahoma found space in Oklahoma newspapers. One of the most violent attacks on the author was entered in the *Congressional Record*.¹ On 24 January, 1940, the *Daily Oklahoman* reported that Congressman Lyle Boren of Seminole had called the novel "a damnable lie, a black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind." Into the late summer of 1940 the cries against Steinbeck continued to overshadow the case presented by his few supporters. In August of that year, those Oklahomans who resented the "Okie image" found new reason to protest. They learned that a Congressional investigating committee was coming to Oklahoma City to seek information about "the interstate migration of destitute citizens." As if to add insult to injury, the chairman of the committee was Representative John H. Tolan of California. Governor Phillips renewed his attacks on Steinbeck and appointed a fact-finding committee to assist the Congressional body. State newspaper editors quickly arrived at solutions to the migrant problem. One, perhaps an unreconstructed Populist, blamed freight rate discriminations for the woes of Oklahoma's displaced farmers and workers.² Another pointed an accusing finger at the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and the Works Progress Administration.³ Everyone hoped that the committee's findings would remove the image of the shiftless "Okie" from the mind of the nation.

The effect of the Tolan committee's reports outside of Oklahoma is of no concern here; but the Oklahoma press, at least, was gratified. The conduct of Representative Tolan may have done much to soothe Oklahomans' feelings. He made it clear that the committee had been formed before the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* and that the use of the term "Okie" was taboo among its members. He saw the hearings as Oklahoma's opportunity to offset some of the unfavorable publicity it had received. The committee's findings tended to remove blame from Oklahoma's farm workers and fix it on national conditions.⁴ The *Daily Oklahoman* reported that former tenants testified that they had been driven off their farms by landlords who changed to hired labor in order to get maximum payments from the federal government. A committee member said that the load family could be matched by any state in the union.⁵ Oklahoma seemed pacified,

for there was scarcely a reference in the press to Steinbeck until September, 1941. Then appeared a cartoon in the *Daily Oklahoman* depicting an Oklahoma farmer atop a huge pile of agricultural products labelled "state fair exhibits." He towered over an intimidated John Steinbeck who held a copy of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The caption—"Now Eat Every Gol-Durn Word of It."⁴ Evidently in the minds of Oklahomans Steinbeck had been rebuffed. His name passed from the front pages and editorial columns and was found only in the book review section until 1957, when he again became the subject of debate.

Holdings of *The Grapes of Wrath* by Oklahoma libraries have increased steadily since 1939. This trend has been more marked in public and college and university than in high school libraries, and has been reflected both in the number of libraries which purchased the book and in the number of copies purchased by each library. Only a few school librarians objected to the book, and some said that it was available in English classes, but not in the library.

Circulation of *The Grapes of Wrath* has risen steadily since 1939. This may merely be a reflection of the increased number of copies available. The rise in circulation has been similar in all three kinds of libraries. Twenty-three reported that they had waiting lists for the book at some time since 1939. Martin Staples Shockley⁵ found that the circulation of *The Grapes of Wrath* before 1944 was high compared to that of other fiction; but over the entire 1939-1965 period, its circulation has been average.

No other work by Steinbeck has enjoyed wider popularity than *The Grapes of Wrath*, but some have exceeded it during specific periods at certain libraries. Notable among these works are *The Pearl* and *The Red Pony*. Their wide circulation can be attributed to the fact that they were on many high school reading lists. *The Winter of Our Discontent* and *Travels With Charley* have also circulated as widely as or more widely than *The Grapes of Wrath* during given periods, probably because they were "new books" when Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962.

As might be expected, the holdings of Steinbeck's books by Oklahoma libraries have been related to their popularity. Most widely owned were his best known works such as the four already mentioned and *Cannery Row*, *East of Eden*, *The Moon is Down*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Wayward Bus*. Ranking below these were lesser known novels—*Cup of Gold*, *In Dubious Battle*, *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*, *Sweet Thursday*, and *Tortilla Flat*. His little-known works were seldom found, and then almost exclusively in college and university libraries. The University of Tulsa Library has owned, since 1963, a large special collection of books by and about Steinbeck, many of which are autographed or first editions.

Restrictions on or complaints about Steinbeck's works were few. Indeed, only six such occurrences were reported. Three concerned works other than *The Grapes of Wrath*. None involved suggestions that Steinbeck had been unfair to Oklahoma. All seem to have arisen from doubts about the propriety of language used by characters in the books. Two requests to remove books by Steinbeck from circulation involved lists of supposedly "dirty books" which included many works by other authors. Only one librarian expressed a personal distaste for *The Grapes of Wrath*. Many others revealed a high regard for it and for Steinbeck's other novels as well.

The librarians' response revealed that reactions of Oklahoma readers to *The Grapes of Wrath* have been neither as negative nor as widespread as might be suspected from an examination of the work's treatment in the Oklahoma press. Isolated protests have not been lacking, but there seems to have been a general curiosity about the novel and subsequent acceptance of it. It is safe to say that *The Grapes of Wrath*, as well as Steinbeck's other works, has been available to almost any Oklahoman curious enough to read it.

During the 1950's and 1960's the Oklahoma press reflected increasingly temperate feelings toward Steinbeck. After 1941 few references to him were found until 1957, when for a few days it seemed that the controversy might reach the intensity it had gained before the Tolan committee hearings. On 21 March of

that year James Burge, director of the Oklahoma Semi-centennial Exposition, announced that Steinbeck had been invited to attend the celebration in Oklahoma City. The director stated that the author's appearance would "tend to dismiss the indictments he made of Oklahoma in his book." Burge's real motive was to stir up publicity for the state. To some degree he succeeded.

The first and most violent reaction to the invitation occurred in the Oklahoma legislature. Strong protests came from house members George Nigh of McAlester and J. H. Belvin of Durant. State Senators George Miskovsky of Oklahoma City, Everett Collins of Sapulpa, Lou Allard of Drumright, and Gene Stipe of McAlester approved of the invitation and the reason for which it was offered. It seems that some Oklahomans wanted Steinbeck to witness their state's progress and "Eat Every Gol-Durn Word of It." Practically no voice was raised to deny the validity of Steinbeck's picture of Oklahoma of the 1930's. The main concern seemed to be to make it clear to the rest of the nation that *The Grapes of Wrath* did not apply to the Oklahoma of the 1950's.

Opponents of Steinbeck's visit had little to fear. On 25 March, the exposition commission received a letter from the author conveying his regrets that he would be abroad during the celebration. He assured Oklahomans that he was aware that their state had progressed "splendidly" since the depression. On 9 April, the Oklahoma House of Representatives viewed a filmed interview with Steinbeck. The author expressed his appreciation for the invitation and a warm regard for the people of Oklahoma. He denied that he had ever made derogatory comments about the state. In early May, 1957, Governor Raymond Gary named Steinbeck an "Oklahoma Booster." The author thus became the only "alien" on a list which included Mickey Mantle, Maria Tallchief, Perle Mesta, and Patti Page. Not one protest was registered in the press.

In 1958 *Oklahoma Today* published the Gary-Steinbeck letters. The governor captured the situation when he wrote:

There has been much misunderstanding . . . about the "Grapes of Wrath." As you [Steinbeck] suggest, much of this . . . has been among people who were told by someone else that their pride had been injured. They accepted someone else's judgment, rather than reading your book.

Perhaps this little flurry of publicity will cause more of them to go to the source for their information.³

Accompanying the correspondence was a quotation from *The Grapes of Wrath*. The excerpt, according to *Oklahoma Today*, was "one of the finest tributes to motherhood in modern literature." Steinbeck seemed truly to be on the side of the angels. It appeared that the rift between the novelist and Oklahoma had healed.

Evidence that the change in attitudes was to be lasting came in the early 1960's. The Oklahoma press reacted positively to Steinbeck's Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. On 6 September, 1965, *The Tulsa Tribune* carried an editorial entitled "The Okies Again," in which the author told of a recent conversation with Steinbeck. The exchange had inspired the editor to look at the "Okie" as far superior to the "relief-hounds" of the 1950's and 1960's. The Okies, he said:

. . . understand the anatomy of dignity, that no man has dignity who has made no effort to support himself, and that the most futile business in the world is to demand respect and admiration while you are shaking a tin cup.

Thus with the passage of time, the "Okie" had become no longer a stereotype to deny, but one of which to be proud—perhaps this was Steinbeck's first intention. In July, 1966, he received added favorable publicity from his strong reply to Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko in support of the American commitment in Viet Nam.

Thus we see, over a 27-year period, a change in Oklahomans' attitudes toward John Steinbeck. The change has been reflected both in the press and in the treatment of the author's works in Oklahoma libraries. There are still Oklahomans who have strong feelings against Steinbeck; but their outcries are faint and are expressions of personal feelings. John Steinbeck has truly been forgiven—or forgotten—by a great majority of Oklahomans.

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- ⁵*Daily Oklahoman*, September 20, 1940, p. 1.
- ⁶*Ibid.*, September 25, 1941, p. 10.
- ⁷Martin Staples Shockley, "The Reception of 'The Grapes of Wrath' in Oklahoma," *American Literature*, XV(1944), pp. 351-361. Re-examination of the period which Professor Shockley considered revealed that only minor revisions of his work are necessary.
- ⁸*Oklahoma Today*, VIII (Winter, 1957-1958), p. 6.
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