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CANNERY ROW



THE HISTORY OF JOHN STEINBECK'S
OLD OCEAN VIEW AVENUE



Featuring a
detailed and indexed
MAPGUIDE
of John Steinbeck's
Cannery Row.

MICHAEL KENNETH HEMP

PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE
PAT HATHAWAY HISTORICAL PHOTO COLLECTION

Cannery Row: The History of John Steinbeck's Old Ocean View Avenue

Michael Kenneth Hemp. Carmel, California:
The History Company, 2009. 127 pp. \$24.95.

REVIEW BY THOMAS E. BARDEN

The California poet Lew Welsh once said that if you drew a circle on the earth and carefully studied everything in that circle you would gain untold knowledge and wisdom. Michael Kenneth Hemp has done something like that by drawing a circle around one small street in one small California town and studying it from every possible angle. Of course, he didn't choose a random street; he chose Old Ocean View Avenue in Monterey—also known as Cannery Row. It is a place so dense with ghosts that anyone could come up good results just by scratching its surface. But Hemp has gone deep, as deep as the courageous bell divers he depicts in one section, and he has come up with an indispensable book.

The book is many things at once. It is a social history of this part of California, starting with the Spanish Mission era and on to whaling, the Chinese immigration, the rise of the abalone market, the development of the fisheries and canneries, through to the post-fishing tourism era. It is an ecological history that chronicles the thoughtless overfishing and subsequent demise of the sardine industry, replete with a graph of the catch by ton from 1916 to 1968. It is a nuanced literary history of the impact this place had on John Steinbeck's life and writing and his impact back on the place. Moreover, it is a fine coffee table-style photo album with over 200 elegant portraits, candid scenes, and landscapes by an excellent local photo-documenter Pat Hathaway. The images, by the way, are all digitally remastered and very well printed. Also, thanks to extensive interviews Hemp conducted with a retired Cannery Row laborer named Charlie Nonella, the portion of the book about the heyday of the canneries has the flavor of an oral history in its telling details and anecdotes.

Hemp's introduction credits Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts as his main inspirations—Steinbeck for clear writing and bringing human stories to life, and Ricketts for focus in observing and accuracy in reporting. I think both muses would approve. He is a clear prose stylist who obviously cares about words at the sentence level, and he has done his historical research with

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a standard of care and attention that would please the biological specimen collector. If there is one muse he might have called on more, it would be Steinbeck's editor at *Viking*, Pat Covici, because at times I wished for more editing from section to section to help me keep the big picture amid the flow of his sections, stories, photos, and captions. But that's a minor qualm. This is a wonderful book. Readers of *Steinbeck Review* will no doubt gravitate toward the sections that chronicle the Steinbeck-Ricketts friendship and their collecting trip to the Baja California, but the whole book will repay a slow and leisurely perusal. There is a solid list of suggested further readings as well.

Warning: If you ever plan to do the Steinbeck literary tour of Cannery Row, do not go without this book in hand. Besides giving you an orientation so you will know what you are seeking when you search and know what you are seeing when you find it, it gives you a detailed and indexed map and tour guide. In fact, if it should go into a fourth edition I would recommend making it more portable so it could fit in a backpack, purse, or back pocket, to emphasize this way to use it.

Even if you are a seasoned traveler in Steinbeck country, you will find new things to learn and new perspectives from Hemp's book—his pointing out of some of the originals of the cast of *Cannery Row* in the photographs, for instance, or his locating a photo of the actual site of the famous frog hunt in that work.

Steinbeck once said that *Cannery Row* was an attempt to recapture a world that had vanished by the time World War II ended, but until I read Hemp's book I didn't realize the extent to which the cause of that demise was man-made. I would like to put this book into the hands of the politicians and fishermen of the Chesapeake Bay area who whined that the National Commission to Save the Bay was ruining their livelihood by limiting their catch. Hemp's book details the collapse of a once vibrant industry through shortsighted practices and lack of ecological common sense. He demonstrates that scientists and planners warned the sardine industry for years that it was committing suicide. The saddest part of the story is that by the late 1940s the fish were not even feeding people but being used for bulk agricultural fertilizer.