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*Library Journal*

DOWN  
TO A  
SOUNDLESS SEA



Thomas Steinbeck

*a&b*

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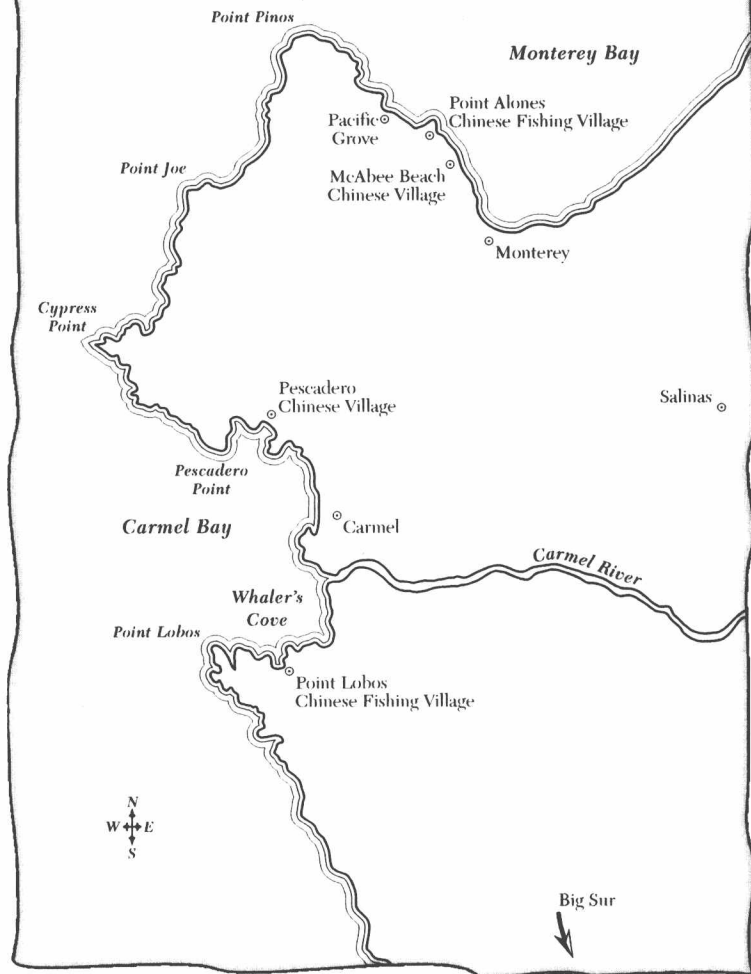
DOWN  
TO A  
SOUNDLESS SEA



This modest volume is dedicated  
to  
Bill and Luci Post  
In memory of  
William Brainard and Anselma Post



# MONTEREY PENINSULA - turn of the century -



The deepest roots sustain the greatest trees.

—J. E. S.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



FIRST I WOULD LIKE TO CREDIT MICHAEL FREED, creator of the Post Ranch Inn on the coast of Big Sur, whose love of that country encouraged him to commission this volume of stories. His respect and admiration for the stalwart souls who settled those broken mountains and rugged shores inspired the author to resurrect and reexamine stories he had heard so often from elders or those who knew something of the anecdotes firsthand.

I would also like to lovingly acknowledge the invaluable contributions of my talented partner and wife, Gail. By the time this volume will have gone to press, she will have read and reread these stories a score of times in aid of correction and clarification. Her inspiration, patient good humor, and fine literary sense has kept this project on an even keel throughout adversities and setbacks that often threatened to halt its completion.

For me the most indispensable assistance comes from a



forbearing and focused story editor. My guide, in that regard, is Professor Leonard Tourney, a marvelous author of historical mystery tales in his own right. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that I am one of his greatest devotees. It has been a rare privilege to work with someone whose own qualifications create such an inspirational benchmark.

I would also like to express my deepest appreciation to Peter and Patricia Benesh for their efforts in polishing the text. As editors they are true guardians of sentence structure and rational punctuation. I owe them gallons of red ink and a week in Tahiti to recover from the ordeal.

PERTINENT RESEARCH FOR THIS VOLUME CAME from family and local resources, since it was necessary to verify minor details that had been lost in the myriad renditions of stories retold over the years.

There was one particular source that I found most insightful and timely since it edified my lifelong interest in the laboring minorities who first populated California.

Sandy Lydon's exceptional book *Chinese Gold* was an indispensable wellspring of history, maps, names, and topical insights that would have been impossible to compile in the time available. I found Mr. Lydon's history not only meticulously researched, but also illuminating, entertaining, and well written. I look forward to all his future books.

Finally, I would like to thank Elizabeth Winick, my agent at McIntosh & Otis, and Dan Smetanka, my editor at Ballantine Books, for their unwavering faith, support, and hard work.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE



WHEN I WAS YOUNG I DISCOVERED, as all children must, that certain venerable traditions connected to family life required total participation. Most families maintain these fabled customs one way or another and, for the most part, they are obscure in origin. If one is fortunate, these rituals have, at their core, a modicum of wit and entertainment.

My brother and I were particularly blessed with a family convention that involved storytelling. We sprang like noisy chicks from a gaggle of writers, composers, and entertaining raconteurs. My father, the ancient gander of our flock, was particularly fond of a ripping good yarn cleverly and deftly told. Even his taste in friends and acquaintances ran to the tall-tale-spinners and those whose recollections included great and elusive fish.

In our particular rite anyone could play, family or not, but

it was understood that the participants had to share in my father's passion for skill. For it wasn't just the story itself that would come under close scrutiny, but also the ability of the storyteller, which often commanded the critical balance in the final reckoning.

Storytelling efforts were usually called forward at the dinner table, though almost any impromptu gathering might inspire an eruption of, "Did your Mom ever tell you the one about cousin Fanny and the King of Tonga?" Family and guests would be cajoled into imparting "that yarn about Grandma Olive and the mountain lion" or "the one about Ernie Pyle and the North African bedbug that won the Purple Heart." It made little difference what the story entailed or whether we had heard it before. The joy of the game always revolved about the mastery of the teller, and of that we never tired.

Like most youngsters, my brother and I always called for stories of far-off ranches, rugged shores, and the inspired exploits of our ancestors. Of course, we loved the funny stories, but there were others that would send us to our beds with chills of foreboding. Like most children, we secretly relished the mysterious, eerie, and hair-raising chronicles best.

I was drawn to stories of my father's youth and the history of the period, anything that depicted the backdrop of his narratives. It became an effortless practice to immerse myself in the details of life in Monterey County from the turn of the century through the 1930s. It appeared to me as a singular time to have lived, and I envied every kaleidoscopic recollection of my father's youthful adventures.

As children we had often visited relatives in Salinas, Monterey, and Watsonville, and in my youth, these places held great charm.

Every craggy mountain, rolling pasture, and rock-bound

cove came alive because of the stories I had heard from native relatives. I discovered in later years that I had accidentally assimilated more knowledge about the Monterey coast and its history than 90 percent of the people who actually lived there. The bulk of this incidental information was metabolized in the form of oral histories that were, for me, pure entertainment.

In this short volume I have attempted to carry on the tradition of telling the old stories, informally of course, as family custom dictates. As in the past, the entertainment is best served with a home-cooked meal and in the company of like-minded listeners. But stories transmitted in an oral tradition have an aura of performance, a flavor of language, and a sense of period that is difficult to reproduce on the printed page. The vernacular of an anecdote being told by a person old enough to remember its origins is quite different from the language employed by those of later generations who retell it. Yet it is the mode and color of the original narration that contributes authenticity, historical bias, and tonality to such annals.

It is, therefore, always a painstaking maneuver to attempt duplication of language used by the original participants and make it ring true for the modern ear. Despite the improbability of success in this arena, I have nonetheless jumped into this linguistic pit armed only with a well-tutored ear and the knowledge that my critics are no better equipped to render judgment than I. There was also the matter of background particulars to be considered. When a story has been told and retold numberless times, the thorny problem of accuracy arises. The tangible *who*, *where*, *what*, and *when* of any specific account has a habit of getting mislaid in the excitement of the telling. This problem is often amplified by the number of different versions of the story in circulation.

Any competent police investigator will attest to the persistence of this problem. If there are ten witnesses to an incident, that investigator is more likely than not to be saddled with ten different accounts of that same event. Being a writer of historical fiction and not an officer of the law, I have invariably shown a shameless propensity for the most entertaining and morally illustrative narratives. But I also respect the underlying accuracy of detailed facts, and for those I have always gratefully depended upon the dedicated research of qualified regional historians.

I encourage my readers to pass along these stories in the spirit with which they came to me, for they belong to anyone who finds some small merit in the lessons they impart.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Thomas Steinbeck began his career in the 1960s as a motion picture cinematographer and photojournalist in Vietnam. Along with his writing, speaking, and producing obligations, Mr. Steinbeck has taught college-level courses in American literature, creative writing, and communication arts. He serves on the board of directors of the Stella Adler Theatre Los Angeles and the National Steinbeck Center. He has written numerous original screenplays and documentaries, as well as adaptations of his father's work. Thomas Steinbeck lives on the central coast of California with his wife. He is currently at work on his first novel.

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# THE NIGHT GUIDE



EIGHTEEN FIFTY-NINE WAS THE DEVIL'S OWN YEAR for gales along the Sur coast, but their raucous zenith was registered near the end of April. Crashing up from the south-southwest with piratical ferocity, the cycle of gales unburdened enough water to send the Little and Big Sur Rivers four to six feet over their banks. The runoff from Pico Blanco alone kept the Little Sur at near flood for two weeks.

Sadly, every mortal creature that made the rugged coast a refuge suffered from the shattering blows of an outraged sea. Cresting rollers twenty feet high and two miles long mined into the impenetrable cliffs and rocks for days on end. Inevitably, every rookery, bower, haul-out, and nesting sight on the Monterey coast was swept away. The corpses of every known species of coastal life littered what shore there was left. The sharks enjoyed abundance for days after each gale.



The evidence of destruction was to be had from all quarters. Salmon Creek to Santa Cruz reported roads, byways, and trails strangled in mazes of uprooted and shattered trees. The prodigious rains, sometimes so heavy and horizontal that simple breathing became hazardous, drilled the soil so incessantly that broad landslides were abruptly carved from the mountainsides. Several large rockslides unalterably isolated the more remote mining claims.

It was during a blessed lull between the repetitive coastal tempests that Boy Bill Post moved his wife from Monterey to a newly purchased piece of land bordering Soberanes Creek. His land formed a part of the old San Jose y Sur Chiquito land grant, and he had fixed it in his mind that his acres would be prime for cattle. There appeared to be abundant grazing in the hills and pastures, and the splendid ocean views gave him constant pleasure.

Serious anxiety regarding the recent inclination of weather set Boy Bill Post to hurriedly construct a cabin to shelter his new family. This urgency was magnified by the impending birth of the Posts' first child.

Boy Bill Post had married a handsome Rumsen Indian girl. Her name was Anselma Onesimo and her people had lived along Carmel Valley and its bountiful river for centuries. According to Anselma, her tribe had sprung from beneath the earth on the day of creation. The Rumsen people considered the Sur Mountains as spiritual ground and spoke of Mount Pico Blanco as the navel of the world.

The constraints of time were suddenly made more pertinent by the return of the southern gales. Bill's plans for their cabin were instantly altered to accommodate present needs and it quickly became a slant-roofed, one-room hut near