

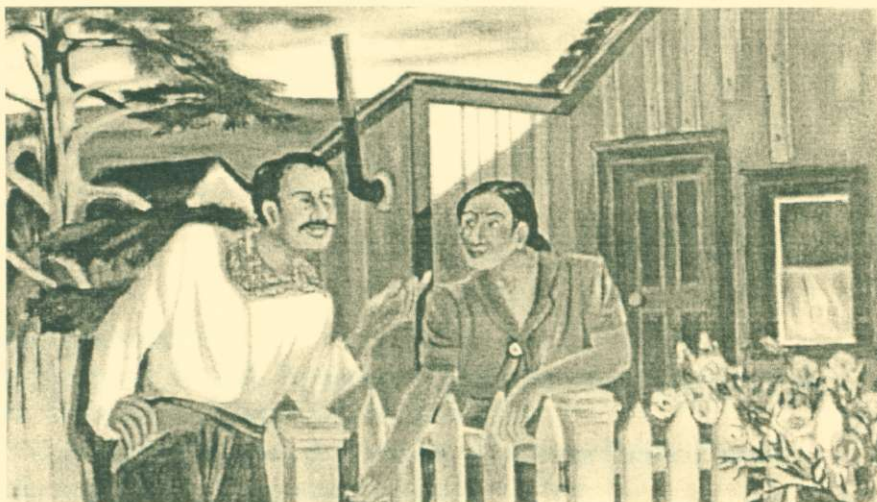
NOTICIAS del PUERTO de MONTEREY

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Fall 2002



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"Danny and Sweets Ramirez in a scene from *Tortilla Flat*, 1947.

Illustration by Peggy Worthington

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Noticias del Puerto de Monterey, a quarterly journal devoted to the history of Monterey and the Monterey region, has been published by the Monterey History and Art Association since 1957. *Noticias* welcomes submissions on any aspect of the history, art, and architecture of the Monterey area from prehistory to the recent past. Writers are invited to send manuscripts or queries to the attention of the Editorial Committee, c/o Shelley McCabe, Monterey History and Art Association, 5 Custom House Plaza, Monterey, CA 93940. shelley@mnmth.org (831) 372-2608 ext. 13.

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Susan Gregory's "Tortilla Flat"

By

Dennis Copeland and Edna E. Kimbro

What is a paisano? He is mixture of Spanish, Indian, Mexican and assorted Caucasian bloods. His ancestors have lived in California for a hundred or two years. He speaks English with a paisano accent and Spanish with a paisano accent . . . He is a paisano, and he lives in that uphill district above the town of Monterey called Tortilla Flat, although it isn't flat at all.¹

John Steinbeck

Danny and the paisanos of *Tortilla Flat* are not necessarily the historic paisanos of Monterey, nor is the fictional town of Monterey the Monterey of the years between the world wars. Still, something actual lingers between the lines—tales told, occasions and personalities observed. The sense of a place and of a people remains embedded in the fiction. In part this is due to John Steinbeck's considerable talent for painting such vivid characters and stories. In part it is due to that magical sense of

place which he conveys. He learned a great deal about both a people and a place-- and their rapidly vanishing way of life-- from his remarkable friend Susan Myra Gregory of Monterey.

In this centennial of John Steinbeck's birth, we celebrate the Monterey setting of one of his most popular and best-loved books, *Tortilla Flat*. Where was Tortilla Flat? Who were its people? Did the paisanos really exist? Or, was Tortilla Flat entirely fictional? The answers to many of these questions may be Susan Gregory. Gregory was the Monterey schoolteacher and published writer and poet to whom Steinbeck dedicated his novel. She-- along with others-- told Steinbeck stories of Monterey's paisanos and their neighborhoods.

Tortilla Flat was Steinbeck's first commercial success, and won the gold medal given by the Commonwealth Club of California for a novel by a California writer. The film rights were sold and eventually a film version, starring Spencer Tracy, was produced in 1942. Much of it was filmed in Pebble Beach and in Monterey.

¹ *Tortilla Flat*, Preface. One possible translation of *paisano* may be "fellow countryman."

As Steinbeck noted, "I wanted to take the stories of my town of Monterey and cast them into a kind of folklore. The result was *Tortilla Flat*." Published by Pascal Covici in 1935 during the Great Depression, the story of impoverished but ennobled paisanos offered immediate appeal to many without jobs, money, or a secure future. To quote Steinbeck, the paisanos of Monterey, a "good people of laughter and kindness," lived by a different vision of life. They "are clean of commercialism, free of the complicated system of America business, and having nothing that can be stolen, exploited or mortgaged that system has not attacked them very vigorously."²

Steinbeck used fables, myths and folktales often in his novels. As a boy, he often read Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, the book given to him by his Aunt Molly. *Tortilla Flat* clearly grew out of his fascination with tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table in ancient Britain.³ He cast Danny and his

² John Steinbeck, "My Short Novels, *English Journal* 43 (1954): 147; reprinted in Jackson J. Benson, ed., *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck* (Durham University Press, 1990): 16; *Tortilla Flat*, 11

³ On Steinbeck's devotion to the Arthurian tales, see his version with letters in *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights . . .*, Chase Horton, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976). Joseph Fontenrose traces the close parallels between *Tortilla Flat* and the Arthurian tales in "Tortilla Flat and the Creation of a Legend," in Benson, ed., *The Short Novels of John Steinbeck*: 19-30.

friends as knights of a paisano Round Table based in Danny's house. In a series of tales, Danny and his friends often engage in ironic and comic mock-heroic acts. Danny returns from World War One, inherits two houses, gets drunk, goes to jail, escapes, meets his old friend Pilon, and invites Pilon, Jose Maria and Pablo to share one of his unpainted houses and pay rent, which they never do pay. The paisanos set out on a number of escapades, give parties, and seek by stealth and skill for food and wine. One of King Arthur's battles becomes in *Tortilla Flat* a raid on Mrs. Morales' chickens. The knightly quest in the forest for the Holy Grail becomes Pilon's discovery of a buried U.S. Geodetic marker. Chapter titles, such as "How Pilon was lured by greed of position to forsake Danny's hospitality" unify the novel.

Although Steinbeck was born in Salinas, many of the settings for his novels and short stories are set in the Monterey area. The Steinbeck family owned a summer cottage in Pacific Grove. John Steinbeck and his wife Carol Henning Steinbeck lived in this house from 1930 to 1936, and John returned to it periodically in the 1940s. It was there that he wrote some of his early novels, including much of *Tortilla Flat* in 1933. In the

following decade, Steinbeck lived in two other Monterey Peninsula homes.⁴ For much of his early career Steinbeck's physical and literary home was the Monterey Peninsula. Monterey was the setting of three of his novels, *Tortilla Flat*, *Cannery Row* and its sequel, *Sweet Thursday*. Steinbeck loved no other town as much as he loved Monterey.

Monterey sits on the slope of a hill, with a blue bay below it and with a forest of tall dark pine trees at its back. The lower parts of the town are inhabited by Americans, Italians, catchers and canners of fish. But on the hill where the forest and the town intermingle, where the streets are innocent of asphalt and the corners free of street lights, the old inhabitants of Monterey are embattled as the Ancient Britons are embattled in Wales. These are the paisanos.⁵

Whether an empty rubbish lot on Cannery Row, a valley ranch at Corral de Tierra (the fictional Pastures of Heaven) or in the hills and woods above old town Monterey, places closely define and anchor the world of Steinbeck's people. Their stories are shaped, in part, on where they are located geographically and physically as well as morally and

⁴ In 1941, Steinbeck lived on Eardley Street, Pacific Grove, and, in 1944, in the Lara-Soto Adobe in Monterey.

⁵ John Steinbeck, *Tortilla Flat* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1935): 10-11.

spiritually. Steinbeck describes Tortilla Flat with realistic detail-- from the roses of Castile blooming in the yards to the strings of peppers and garlic hung in the houses. Actual sites and familiar landmarks dot the literary landscape. Steinbeck identifies real places in Monterey, including San Carlos Chapel and the Woolworth store on Alvarado Street.⁶

Steinbeck also used the raw materials of stories-- some true, some not so true-- told by and about residents of the community. Many of these tales he imaginatively recast to reappear, reinvented, in his fiction. "The good story," he wrote, "lay in half-told things which must be filled in out of the hearer's own experiences."⁷

Steinbeck found the basis for most of his characters and settings in stories he had gleaned in Monterey. "In Monterey, that old city on the coast of California, these things are well known, and they are repeated and sometimes elaborated." The tales and anecdotes he heard from many sources: including Mexican co-workers at the Spreckels sugar plant where he had

⁶ *Tortilla Flat* contains at least fifteen named references to actual places in Monterey, including the San Carlos Hotel, Hotel del Monte and Palace Drug.

⁷ *Tortilla Flat* (1935), 74 (quote).

been a bench chemist, Monterey police judge Monty Hellam, and Harriet "Hattie" Gragg, a descendant of a pioneer California family. Most of all, he heard stories of paisanos collected by Susan Gregory, herself a descendant of the Californios, the Spanish-speaking settlers and natives of California.⁸

Susan Gregory

Las Mañanitas

(The Dawn Song that ended all the old California dances)

For the last time the "Dawn Song" has been sung,
The last "adios" been whispered. Down the night
The Dancers have all scattered, and the hall
Stands empty of delight.

No more "Las Mañanitas" wistfully
Signs its low notes of love entwined with pain
Of parting. Other songs in turn will rise;
The little "Dawn Song" will not sound again.

Handfuls of confetti heap the floor,
After an hour of dancing and delight
Forgotten by the silenced singers gone
Into the night.

--Susan Myra Gregory⁹

⁸ *Tortilla Flat*, 10.

⁹ Printed by Beth Ingels in *Monterey Peninsula Legends, History, Business Directory* (Monterey: W. T. Lee Co., printers, 1931).

Susan Myra Gregory was a teacher, poet and writer whose work was published in several major national periodicals beginning in 1917 (See Appendix). Charming, dignified and devoted to her students, she was known not only for her large brown eyes but also her sensitive advocacy of Latino-Californio cultural values.

Gregory was born in 1887, at El Poso, in San Luis Obispo County, into a family with a long tradition of blended Latino and Anglo customs as well as a high regard for the benefits of education and cultural diversity. She was the daughter of Durrell S. Gregory, a well-known Salinas lawyer and San Luis Obispo County judge, and Amelia Hartnell, an early progressive champion of bilingual and bicultural education. She had two brothers, Macafee Gregory, a high school and college teacher in Auburn, California, and Jackson Gregory, a well-known author of Western novels.

Gregory's maternal grandparents were two Monterey area pioneers: teacher, merchant, and rancher William E. P. Hartnell and Teresa de la Guerra y Noriega, a member of a prominent Californio family. Her grandfather Hartnell founded an early school in Monterey in 1834, later established as a "college"-- the "Seminario de Patrocino de San José"-- on the Rancho Alisal near Salinas. Hartnell was one of thirteen registered foreigners in Mexican California when he arrived in 1822.

He served as translator and interpreter at the bilingual California constitutional convention of 1849.¹⁰

Gregory attended high school in Salinas and graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 1906. After graduation she



Susan M. Gregory in 1929.
From *El Susurro*.

taught high school in Monterey. Leaving Monterey, she taught high school in El Centro, California, and then headed the English department of the Sebastopol high school. Returning to Monterey in 1923, she taught advanced English and Latin, and headed the Spanish department at Monterey High School. At various times, she was the journalism teacher and faculty advisor to the school newspaper, the school yearbook,

and the Pickwick (English) Club. As faculty advisor, she enthusiastically supported the Spanish Club (Los Trobadores and Los Compadritos).¹¹

¹⁰ On W.E. P. Hartnell and de la Guerras, see: H.W. Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft*, Vol. 34 (San Francisco: The History Company, 1886-1890): 513-14; Susanna Bryant Dakin, *The Lives of William Hartnell* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1949).

¹¹ *El Susurro* (yearbooks), 1924-1939; Jackson J. Benson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer* (New York: Viking Press): 277-78; John

Susan Gregory voiced a social consciousness and compassionate concern for the impoverished and for community social issues. She encouraged “Latina teenagers to attend high school and to acquire modern job skills.” She sought to inspire “a passion for literature and fine music” and a concern for broader cultural interests in her students.¹²

Several of Gregory’s poems are particularly interesting for their nostalgic images of a vanishing, often resilient, Spanish heritage-- of a way of life desperately needing to be upheld in troubled times: “For the last time the ‘Dawn song’ has been sung, the last ‘adios’ been whispered.” Indeed, “other songs in turn will rise.” In the intriguing prose piece with the curious title, “In Pilon,” she depicts a Latino community – possibly located in the American Southwest—visited by an Anglo university graduate and teacher, a person not unlike the young Susan Gregory. Wistfully enchanted by romance and dance, she is finally reconciled to her departure and loss.¹³

Thompson, “Susan Gregory,” *Coast Weekly*, March 29, 1990: 30; *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, June 29, 1939 (obituary); *California Monthly* (Sept. 1939): 48.

¹² *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, June 29, 1939: 4; *The True Adventures*: 277; Thompson, *Coast Weekly*, March 29, 1990: 30.

¹³ “In Pilon,” *Overland*, New Series, 77 (March 1921): 9-12.

In her later work as poet and teacher, however, she became much more the activist and realist about social and political issues. She became friends with women members of a literary-cultural circle in Carmel and Monterey. In support of their protest against U. S. invasion of Nicaragua in 1927, she recited the poems of Nicaraguan poets to her students and encouraged them to evaluate crucial social and cultural



Monterey High School's Los Trobadores with Faculty Advisor Susan Gregory (3rd row, center), 1935. Note: Gregory's dressed in what appears to be a matador costume. From *El Susurro*, 1935."

issues.¹⁴

The students of Monterey High School's class of 1929 dedicated their yearbook, *El Susurro*, to Gregory "in recognition of . . . that ability to appreciate a work of literary worth obtained from our

association with her." The *El Susurro* staff also announced the yearbook's motif:

¹⁴ *The True Adventures*: 277; Thompson, *Coast Weekly*, March 29, 1990: 30.

If . . . the students of Monterey get a more sympathetic idea . . . a broader and more appreciative view of the carefree Don, a more vivid realization that happiness, not possession, as contrasted by the Spaniard and the Gringo, is the goal of this life--- our work has not been done in vain.¹⁵

Although couched in the language of a romanticized Spanish California (characteristic of the time), the students' 1929 yearbook motif contains the same theme heralded by Steinbeck in *Tortilla Flat*. Susan Gregory's influence is evident in both the yearbook and Steinbeck's novel. Steinbeck's "paisanos" express similar cultural values: a joyous acceptance and tolerance of life, a lack of concern with material things, and the value of friendship, spiritual matters, and honor above money and possessions. They refuse to accept those views of the world and propriety that make them respectable to neighbors or readers who subscribe to more materialistic values. In the paisano culture—albeit a distinct subculture of the Latino community--there remains a more romantic, liberal, even aristocratic, image of an honorable lifestyle.¹⁶

¹⁵ *El Susurro*, 1929: frontispiece and 27.

¹⁶ See Charles Metzger discussion in "Steinbeck's Mexican-Americans," in Richard Astro and Tetsumaro Hayashi, eds., *Steinbeck: The Man and His Work* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1971): 145.

Two of the students whom Susan Gregory encouraged to write were Stanton Delaplane, who won the Pulitzer Prize for journalism in 1942, and Beth Ingels, a Monterey area journalist, for whom Gregory remained a mentor. In the early 1930s, Ingels became friends with another talented woman, Carol Henning Steinbeck, and her husband, John Steinbeck.

Much of Gregory's material came from her close connections with the community of Spanish-speaking people living in the semi-wooded uplands of Monterey. She helped, laughed and sang with them, and understood them. To some degree, she must have identified with them. Carol Steinbeck described her as a kind of "Mother Superior" to this community. Gathering with intelligent, creative and sympathetic friends, such as Beth Ingels and Carol Steinbeck, she discussed the larger issues of the Depression and its impact on Monterey. She was intensely concerned with improving literacy and exploring avenues for poor Latinos to improve their situations. She also read aloud to Carol, John, Beth and others from her collected accounts of the daily lives of the "paisanos" of her Tortilla Flat.¹⁷

¹⁷ Webster Street, *San Jose Studies* 1: 121; Benson, 277 (with references to interviews); Thompson, 30.

Steinbeck saw Susan Gregory frequently when he visited his friend, Hattie Gragg, then in her 70s, living in the Stokes-Escolle Adobe on Hartnell Street.¹⁸ Both Susan Gregory and Hattie Gragg told Steinbeck stories of old Spanish and Mexican California as well as more recent anecdotes about characters and events in Monterey.

Other Tales, Other Sources

Born in 1857, Harriet “Hattie” Sargent Gragg grew up in Monterey and on the Rancho San Carlos in Carmel Valley. Known as the “Belle of Monterey,” she was a civic activist who campaigned to save old Monterey landmarks, was a founder of the Monterey Civic Club, led the campaign to acquire the House of Four Winds, and was an active member of the Monterey History and Art Association. She recalled racing the Del Monte Express train on horseback as a young girl, watching Indian women washing clothes in Washerwoman’s Gulch, attending dances and parties, and meeting Fannie Osbourne, who was then pursued by a young writer named Robert Louis Stevenson. She described going to school in El Cuartel, the former Mexican military building located on Munras Avenue when only Spanish was spoken on

the playground and the streets, and that she learned the language from other children and the vaqueros working on her father's ranch. She regaled both Steinbeck and Gregory with all of these stories and



Harriet "Hattie" Gragg, age 90, at her Hartnell Street home in 1947. Photo by Willa Percival. Harbick Collection, California History Room, Monterey Public Library.

more.¹⁹

From these two great storytellers, Susan Gregory and Hattie Gragg, Steinbeck heard tales and anecdotes about Monterey. Jackson Benson, Steinbeck's biographer, notes that these two "were excellent sources for local color and historical background, as both were closely attuned to speech, customs and values of the paisano community."

Hattie's maid Clarinda became the model for one of the women in *Tortilla Flat*. Hattie's daughter, Julia Breinig,

recalled the occasion when Clarinda invited Susan, Hattie and John to

¹⁸ Elizabeth Ingels was a senior in 1924, journalism, and on the staffs of "Green & Gold," the Monterey High School paper, and the yearbook, *El Susurro*. Stanton Delaplane wrote "Dog-gone!" for the 1925 yearbook.

¹⁹ *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, October 7 and 9, 1947. Historic Clipping File, California History Room, Monterey Public Library; Clipping File, Mayo Hayes O'Donnell Library (Monterey History & Art Association). Washerwoman's Gulch and pond are located across Highway One from the east arm of El Estero (See Map.)

a party at Clarinda's house in Seaside, then an unincorporated settlement north of Monterey. Susan, Hattie and John dressed in their best attire, with the two women in long gowns and John donning a dark serge suit. Julia was anxious that the women might ruin their dresses on the rough floorboards of the house. All three explained, however, that they must wear their finest apparel on such a special occasion.²⁰

Benson remarks that all the major characters in the novel had real-life counterparts—many of them well known to residents, although they were not all part of one group nor they did they all live in Tortilla Flat. Steinbeck himself was personally acquainted with several of the people who formed the basis for Danny and his friends. There are other sources for some of Steinbeck's stories in *Tortilla Flat*. The stories of the ex-corporal and Sweets Ramirez and her sweeping machine derive from tales he heard while working at the Spreckels sugar plant. Others are based on anecdotes told by Monty Hellam, Monterey police chief and police judge from 1933 to 1953, and Judge Ray Baugh, Justice of the Peace, from 1926 to 1953, both of whom were familiar with town characters and their adventures.²¹

²⁰ Benson, *True Adventures*, 277-8.

²¹ Benson, 277-78. Steinbeck's friend, Webster "Toby" Street also points to real-life

Where is Tortilla Flat?

There were perhaps many Tortilla Flats in and around Monterey. Still, it was Susan Gregory who told and collected many of the stories and anecdotes about paisanos and whom Steinbeck acknowledged for her contributions by dedicating the book to her.



Tortilla Flat, 1934. Photo by Julius Phillips. J.B. Phillips Collection, Maritime Museum of Monterey.

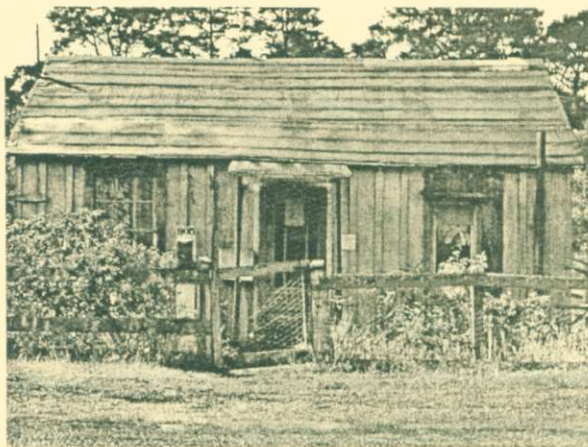
Gregory herself lived in “Tortilla Flat” neighborhoods. In 1926, she lived in the Alvarado Adobe at 506 Dutra Street across from José Torres (de la Torre) and down the street from the Vasquez

Adobe, inhabited by another branch of the de la Torre family. Dutra was a street where a number of people with mixed Californio and Indian ancestry lived. The Machados, Sotos, Marcelinas, Rosales, Escobars, and Marquesas all lived on the 600 block of Dutra above Pacific Street at Madison. She knew many of these residents. Most of

counterparts in "Remembering John Steinbeck," *San Jose Studies* 1 (Feb. 1977): 120-121, and in Astro and Hayashi, *Steinbeck*: 38.

them were laborers, small craftsmen, or fishermen. Some of them, with Native Esselen and Rumsien ancestry, hunted and gathered food on Carmel Valley ranches where they had long-standing family and social connections.²²

By 1930, Gregory had moved to 889 Johnson Avenue, up Madison to Monroe, on the hills above Old Town and near the high school. This



A house on Johnson Avenue, about 1940. Photo by Ruth Speakman. California History Room, Monterey Public Library.

area of ten to fifteen houses, some of them shanties, follows the wooded hill and runs parallel to a ravine, known as Madison Gulch, ending near the American Legion Hall and Veterans Memorial Park. In the 1920s,

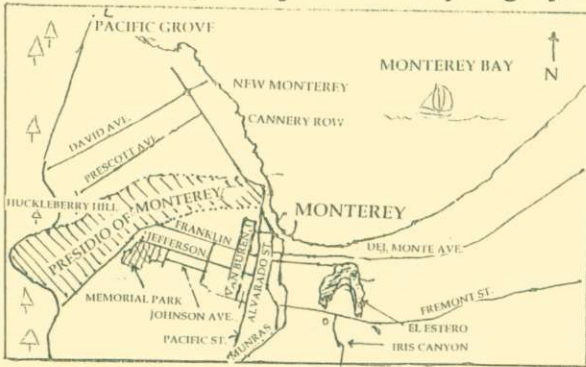
²² *Directory of Monterey, Pacific Grove, Carmel . . . for 1922-1923* (Monterey, CA: Peninsula Directory, 1922); *Polk's Salinas, Monterey, Pacific Grove . . . Directory*, [1926 through 1939], (San Francisco: R. L. Polk); Manuscript Census, Monterey, Monterey County, California U.S. Census of Population, 1920 [Microfilm]. *The Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen Nation Petition for Status Clarification, Exhibit B* [vol. 1]: 27-32, with interview materials from Gloria and Rudy Rosales.

Spanish-surnamed families—Cantua, Castro, Espinosa, Lopez, Margaruez, and Villa—predominated. Most of these residents were washerwomen, cannery workers, woodcutters, and laborers. By 1930, her immediate neighbors were the families of Edward Falez and José Torres. Mrs. Guadalupe Lopez lived a few doors up the hill. Throughout the 1930s, the Falez, Torres, and Lopez families and a mixture of both Spanish and non-Spanish surnamed families continued to live in the Jefferson and Johnson street neighborhood. By 1937, Charles Artellan's family lived on one side of Gregory and José Torres' family still lived on the other.²³

Was this Tortilla Flat? In the 1920s and 30s, it closely resembled the setting Steinbeck described: "a hill where the forest and the town intermingle." Upper Johnson Avenue was "innocent of asphalt." Many residents "lived in old wooden houses set in woody yards, and the pine trees from the forest are about the houses." Monty Hellam identified the neighborhood as "a small section, even in older days, perched overlooking a canyon above the city." Behind the section stands a pine forest. "Only about fifteen shacks bordered the street."

²³ *Directory of Monterey, . . . for 1922-1923; Polk's Salinas, Monterey, . . . Directory [1926 through 1939]; Sanborn Map of Monterey, 1926 (San Francisco: Sanborn Map Co.); Manuscript Census, Monterey, 1920 [Microfilm].* Susan

Johnson Avenue backs up to a gulch and leads up to the Veterans Memorial Park site. [See Map.] Residents worked as domestics, some as laborers and some as seasonal cannery workers. Hellam recalled that “These were pretty good people. They were friendly and helped within their means Some of Tortilla Flat is fiction but a lot is true.” As the economy shifted from fishing to tourism and community patterns changed, people left. Sadly, as Judge Baugh observed, some “died off, and [others] moved away to get jobs in industry.”²⁴



Map of Monterey showing some of the locations mentioned in article.

There are other claims for the location of Tortilla Flat. Local artist Bruce Ariss held that the Flat was an area in Carmel Woods on

First and Second avenues at

Gregory also owned four property lots on Johnson (Probate Records, No. 6541, July 1939, Monterey Courthouse).

²⁴ Jack Fraser, “Montereyans Miss Charm of Old Manana Town: ‘Tortilla Flat’ and Its Paisanos,” *San Jose Mercury-News*, Sept. 4, 1960, 6; Earl Hofeldt, “Monterey Paisano Dies,” *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, Nov. 1, 1957; Street, *San Jose Studies* 1: 121; Benson, 277 (with references to interviews); In Steinbeck’s bittersweet return to Monterey in 1962, he greeted some remaining *paisanos* at “Johnny Garcia’s bar,” and lamented the passing of the Monterey he knew. See *Travels with Charley* (New York: Viking, 1962), 168.

Carpenter Street. Here the Soto and Gomez families lived. At about the time of the 1906 earthquake, several artists and writers, including George Sterling and Mary Austin, took up residence in Carmel. "They built a close knit colony along the seashore and planted Monterey pines around their board-and-batten cabins." Some of these writers could afford domestic help, supplied by "an obliging group of paisanos—half Mexican, half Carmel Valley Indian." "They built squatters' shacks just outside of town, in a wooded area . . . The writers and other wits of early Carmel had dubbed this row of paisano shacks Tortilla Flat." According to Ariss, Steinbeck appropriated the name and applied it to a hilly area above the canneries of New Monterey.²⁵

Ariss' contention that Steinbeck transferred the name to Monterey may be correct. Both the Steinbecks and Gregory, who had friends in Carmel, knew the Carmel environs well. However, Steinbeck's biographer and friend, Nelson Valjean, recounts that at a party in old town Monterey attended by Gregory and others—in the late 1920s or early 1930s—the guests heard sirens speeding up the hill toward

²⁵ Bruce Ariss, *Inside Cannery Row* (Lexikos, 1988): 9. The locations on Huckleberry in New Monterey and Jackrabbit Flat near the Community Hospital have the least to recommend them. However, people such as Pilon (Edward Romero) and Eddie Martin did make the rounds in Monterey, as Hellam suggests.

Johnson Avenue. Attorney Carmel Martin, who had once lived just below the Johnson street area, blurted out, "There must be hell poppin' on Tortilla Flat."²⁶

Among the descendants of the "part Indian, part Spanish" Montereyans, two in particular commented on the location of Tortilla Flat. Alex Torres, son of Gregorio de la Torre, a vaquero on the Doud ranch near Pico Blanco north of Big Sur, recalled that there were two Tortilla Flats. Born in California's First Theater in 1898, Torres remarked in a 1980 interview that the first was in the Jefferson-Johnson streets neighborhood. The second was in Carmel Woods. "You could smell the tortillas mixed with wood smoke. We had good things to eat and cascarone dances in people's houses.... My father played the chromatic guitar. We had waltzes and polkas."²⁷

Edward Martin, born in 1860 in Monterey and a close friend of Eduardo Romero (known as Pilon), had worked at Hovden Cannery on Cannery Row; he then took up residence with Romero in Iris Canyon and other locations about town. He also remembered "big dances in

²⁶ Nelson Valjean, *John Steinbeck, The Errant Knight* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1975): 147. Carmel Martin was also a member of the Board of Education and resided on Madison Street below Johnson Avenue in the 1920s.

Tortilla Flat. We had dances there all the time, and at Carmelito [Carmel] Everyone played guitar and fiddles and accordions. Pilon, he used to play the harmonica. He was a good player.”²⁸

A third Tortilla Flat location was a small settlement near Monterey Peninsula College, where Maria Antonia Soto, Alex Torres’ Esselen grandmother, once lived. A final contender for Tortilla Flat is perhaps the summit area of Huckleberry Hill in New Monterey in the upper Prescott Avenue area, cresting on the Presidio of Monterey. The character for which Steinbeck based some of the activities of the Pirate lived in a shack near the top of Huckleberry Hill. Known for his pack of almost a dozen mongrel dogs, this eccentric individual was English, not paisano.²⁹

Which Paisanos?

Monty Hellam recalled, “The town was full of laughs – full of characters. You met those people all over town and would stop and

²⁷ Betty Patchen Greene, “Part Indian, Part Spanish and All Montereyan,” *Monterey Peninsula Herald Weekend Magazine*, October 19, 1980, 18-19.

²⁸ Dudley Towe, “Pilon and Me,” *Game & Gossip*, January 20, 1958: 15. Martin identified himself as a Pinocha Indian from Carmel.

²⁹ Ariss, 10-11. Ariss and his wife Jean lived on Huckleberry Hill on Lobos Street.

talk and hear the latest news”³⁰ Some of this news revolved around the activities of Edward Romero, known as Pilon, the inspiration for Steinbeck’s character of the same name. Eddie and his brother Tomas were sons of Doud ranch hand, Jesus Romero. Eddie was born at the Pico Blanco Ranch on February 12, 1884. In the 1920s and 1930s, during the summer months, the alcoholic and destitute Eddie lived with Edward Martin in Iris Canyon in a hut, later in a water trough or cave. In winter, he was known to reside in Washerwomans’s Canyon or on the beach. At one time he took care of Judge Baugh’s horses in Iris Canyon [See Map]. He spent a frequent amount of time in jail for drunkenness, vagrancy, or assault. He gathered and sold wood and other items for food and wine. According to Monterey fisherman Sal Colleto, “Pilon” cut down the pine trees in back of the American Legion Hall above Johnson and Jefferson streets for Colleto’s father.

There was always available Pilon, and some of his Mexican and California Indian friends. They were always around because that’s where the center of activity was, and they liked my Dad’s wine, which was used customarily with the meals. The California Indians did not want money for there [sp] services. They wanted food and wine.³¹

³⁰ *San Jose Mercury*—News, Sept. 4, 1960, 6.

³¹ Memoirs of Capt. Sal Colleto, page 14, Maritime Museum of Monterey (Monterey History & Art Association). Courtesy of Tim Thomas.

Steinbeck's story of the missing trousers may go back to Romero and his friends. After selling his tuxedo pants for wine, Romero was found walking down the Monterey-Salinas highway *sans* trousers. Eddie Romero may not have been typical of the blended "Spanish-Indian" community known as "paisanos." The effects of his chronic alcoholism and his relative isolation from family and the larger Monterey community do not figure in Steinbeck's fiction.³²

More important to Steinbeck's theme is the idea of the community, the



Edward Romero, Edward Martin, unidentified. Morgan Collection. California History Room, Monterey Public Library.

group. The individuals-- Danny, Pilon, and the others—become a part of Danny's house (a kind of Round Table), and Tortilla Flat is part of Monterey, and Monterey is part of a larger world, which makes them as a group or community something different than they are as individuals. This sense of community, perhaps less

³² Iris Canyon is located off Fremont between Monterey Peninsula College and the Mesa area. Washerwoman's Canyon is now part of the Monterey Peninsula College. Edward Romero died on Nov. 6, 1957 in Seaside. When he died, he left a nephew and three cousins. *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, Nov. 7, 1957; Feb. 16, 1948; Dec. 7, 1953.

antic and riotous than in the novel, was also a theme for Susan Gregory.

More typical of the people familiar to Gregory would have been Alex Torres and other mestizo Montereyans. His large, widely connected *ranchero* family had Spanish, Esselen Indian and French ancestry: de la Torre, Soto, and Marquette. In 1980, he described to his interviewer an older Monterey with deep Spanish roots, a fishing port at the edge of cattle country, with the beginnings of the tourist industry represented by the Hotel del Monte:

Almost everyone was pretty poor. We went to live in a little house behind the Customs house. My uncle Luis Marquette used to break horses there. My father worked as a *vaquero* and teamster And there was plenty of fish.

Alex Torres rowed a boat for Luis Duarte to spear fish in the bay. As a boy, he picked huckleberries on Huckleberry Hill and sold them to a bakery. He also hunted deer behind the high school. He didn't speak much English when he began school. He noted that Monterey merchants, however, had to know enough Spanish to do business. Torres later worked in Booth's cannery, where he learned to speak

some Italian. His wife Carmelita Garcia worked as a domestic and homemaker.³³

* * *

Soon after the publication of *Tortilla Flat*, Steinbeck learned that some readers did not accept his paisanos in the same kind and generous spirit that he did. Steinbeck's paisanos were criticized as never-dowells, albeit colorful and romanticized never-dowells, and sentimentalized bums. An angered Steinbeck wrote in the Foreword to the 1937 Modern Library edition of the book:

When this book was written, it did not occur to me that the paisanos were curious or quaint, dispossessed or underdogish. They are people whom I know and like, people who merge successfully with their habitat. In men this is called philosophy, and it is a fine thing.³⁴

After his death in 1968, Latino critics charged Steinbeck with reinforcing sentimentalized stereotypes and romanticized caricatures of Latinos. Philip Ortego was the chief advocate of the view that Steinbeck negatively stereotyped Latinos: "Few Mexican-Americans of Monterey today see themselves in *Tortilla Flat* any more than their

³³ *Herald Weekly Magazine*, October 19, 1980, 18; *Polk's Salinas, Monterey . . . Directory*, [1926 through 1939], (San Francisco: R. L. Polk); Federal Census, Monterey, 1920.

³⁴ *Tortilla Flat, with a Foreword by the Author* (New York: Modern Library [Random House]), 1937. Also printed in John Steinbeck, *Novels and Stories, 1932-1937* (New York: Library of America, 1994).

predecessors saw themselves in it." Ortego called Steinbeck's description "an injustice to the people whose ancestors—both Hispanic and Indian—have been on this continent for centuries."³⁵ But *Tortilla Flat* was never intended to depict factually; after all, it is a fiction, not a sociological report. Still, the characters, their outlook and settings, are anchored in a social reality well known to Steinbeck and Gregory. The legendary lives depicted were traceable to the lives of an actual people. Charles Metzger agrees that the paisanos are obviously romantic, but adds

That such romanticism is not sentimental, but rather appropriate—that it actually fits the facts of life as conducted by the kinds of real persons who provided Steinbeck with models for his fictional characters . . . Steinbeck does not specifically tell his Anglo readers what he knows, and what most Mexican-Americans know, about the very real and actively operating conceptions of the "dignidad de la persona."

More recently, some Latino authors have declared Steinbeck's work the model for their own fiction.³⁶

³⁵ Philip D. Ortego, "Fables of Identity: Stereotype and Caricature of Chicanos in Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 1 (1973): 39-43. Also, see: Arthur Pettit, *Images of the Mexican American in Fiction and Film* (College Station, TX: A&M University Press, 1980): 191.

³⁶ Charles Metzger in *Steinbeck: The Man and His Work*: 146. For one recent example, see Victor Viasenor's comments in "Latino Author Influenced by John Steinbeck," *Monterey County Herald*, August 2, 2002, page B2.

Jackson Benson points out that the paisanos were a special variety, a subculture within the larger community:

The characters that he so enjoyed writing about were not meant to be thought of as typical of that community. Yet, they were of it . . . Only someone who truly loved and knew these people could have so successfully exaggerated and stylized their lives.

In his defense of Steinbeck's paisanos, Metzger writes: "It is necessary now . . . to point out that Steinbeck's portrayal of paisanos in *Tortilla Flat* does not purport to do more than present one kind of Mexican-American, the paisano errant, in one place, Monterey, and at one time, just after World War I."³⁷

It is these stories of the *paisano errant* that appeal to readers universally. But Steinbeck was also saying something else about two different outlooks, one paisano and relatively poor and the other middle-class and predominantly Anglo. To some extent, this community on the outskirts exists wherever the blended Spanish-Mexican and Indian culture survives. Steinbeck once took Richard

³⁷ Benson, *John Steinbeck*, 279; Metzger in Astro and Hayashi, eds., *Steinbeck*: 145.

Albee to a poor Latino section of Seaside in the 1930s, where Steinbeck implied that this, too, was a Tortilla Flat.³⁸

What would Susan Gregory say about the paisanos of *Tortilla Flat*? Like Gregory in her writing and teaching, Steinbeck elevates their moral and social codes to a noble status. Humorous as their adventures and rationalizations may be, the characters exemplify a dignified existence with honor, friendship, and spirituality. In this he does not demean them or Susan Gregory's lifelong work. Mock heroics and



Susan Gregory's house at 889 Johnson Avenue, 2002. Photo by Edna E. Kimbro

serious intent, joy with respect for custom, friendship and family along with individual honor and integrity can co-exist. It is an old paisano way of life. Four years after the novel's publication, on June 29, 1939, Susan

Gregory died in a San Francisco hospital after a long battle with cancer. High school principal E. R. Morehead said, "She was a fine

teacher and a remarkably fine character, loved by all . . . [She] gave something from a cultural standpoint that couldn't be given by anyone else. She was a poetess in fact and heart."³⁹ Her house at 889 Johnson Avenue still stands. Over time, the neighborhood gentrifies, modernizes. In this 100th year of Steinbeck's birth, it would be a small measure of gratitude to honor both Steinbeck and Susan Gregory by installing a plaque in front of her home to honor this very gifted woman and mentor of Monterey and the people and place she knew so well.

³⁸ Ariss, 11; "Richard Albee," Richard Albee Interview, [Tape 2], April 4, 1975, National Steinbeck Center, Salinas, California.

³⁹ *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, June 6, 1939 [obituary], 4.

Appendix: Selected List of Published Works by Susan Myra Gregory

- After This Hour, poem. *Current Opinion* 62 (March 1917): 211.
Nocturne, poem. *Literary Digest* 55 (Sept. 15, 1917): 42.
Golden Galleon, poem. *Sunset* 44 (Jan 1920): 58.
Sappho Speaks, poem. *Munsey* 69 (March 1920): 342.
In Exile, poem. *Munsey* 69 (May 1920): 604
Rain Song, poem. *Sunset* 45 (Nov 1920): 54.
In Pilon. *Overland, New Series* 77 (March 1921): 9-12.
I Want a Garden in the Sun, poem. *Sunset* 46 (June 1921): 35.
Is This Immortality, poem. *Sunset* 46 (June 1921): 48.
Waiting, poem. *Sunset* 47 (Sept 1921): 20.
When Spring Comes Back, poem. *Sunset* 48 (June 1922): 34.
Allen, poem. *Sunset* 49 (July 1922): 36.
City Fairs, poem. *Sunset* 49 (Nov 1922): 33.
Escape, poem. *Sunset* 47 (Dec 1922): 88.
Mountain Moon, poem. *Sunset* 51 (Dec 1923): 16.
If I Were Spring, poem. *Sunset* 52 (April 1924): 42.
Manzanitas, poem. *Sunset* 52 (May 1924): 64.
Little Towns, poem. *Munsey* 82 (June 1924): 120.
You Love Me, poem. *Sunset* 52 (Fall 1924): 34.
Butterflies, poem. *Sunset* 55 (Oct. 1925): 37.
Candle-time, poem. *Sunset* 55 (Dec 1925): 20.
I Love You, poem. *Sunset* 56 (March 1926): 12.
Harebells, poem. *Sunset* 56 (June 1926): 20.
Alchemy, poem. *Sunset* 57 (Oct 1926): 12.
"The Return of Esteban," part of a series, "When We Belonged to Spain," *California Monthly* (Sept 1929): 13.
"The Curls of Ana Maria," *California Monthly* (Oct 1929): 19.
"Escape of Chavez," *California Monthly* (Nov 1929): 13.
"The Ride of Don Pablo," *California Monthly* (Dec 1929): 13.
Song at Dusk, poem. *Literary Digest* 119 (March 23, 1935): 27.

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