

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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More On "Rue De La Sardine"

The roving reporter from Paris, who flew from that city to actually get the feel of John Steinbeck's settings for his several novels in order to publish a special edition of a Paris newspaper honoring Steinbeck, seems to have accomplished his purpose.

In addition to his article on Cannery Row, "Rue de la Sardine," there are articles on Salinas, illustrating "The Long Valley," with pictures; a story and pictures for "Tortilla Flat" in Monterey, and another concerning the "Pastures of Heaven," with pictures of Corral de Tierra.

His story of the rise and fall of Cannery Row continues in this translation made for me by Mrs. Hugh Turner:

"The sardines spent their last hours in the hands of women who would cut them up one by one, clean them, and carry them to the machines where they would be processed and whence they would return neatly arranged in their little cans. At that time, a certain number of fishermen and as many workers were sufficient to bring prosperity to various canneries of the street. The prospect of pay, the animation which comes from people working together, the exuberance of the Italian sailors who comprised the crew, made gaiety in the air.

"The homeless paisanos would busy themselves scrounging here a loan, there a meal. That is the background of Steinbeck's 'Cannery Row.' What has happened since? With the passage of time the Sicilian fishermen had their families come, wives and children first, then the cousins, who in turn bought boats and prospered. The canneries multiplied. With the war the demand for sardines increased. The Sicilians pooled their resources and started their own canneries.

"In 1948 panic came to The Row. The boats would return to port completely empty. The schools of fish had disappeared. One guessed, one waited, one asks one's self, and above all, one hoped. Perhaps there were reasons for hope. The next two cruises were normal. Then, in 1951 the catches were again insignificant. In 1952 the situation did not improve. In 1953 the first cannery was liquidated. The owners tried to struggle by. But there were not enough fish for the wheels of machinery to turn, machinery acquired in large amounts. One after the other the canneries closed

their doors. The fishermen went off to more profitable seas. The workers, by lucky chance, had the prospect of being employed in large numbers at military installations.

"But Cannery Row became a phantom quarter. The canneries were sold one after another for paltry sums. Sold? Was there anyone so mad as to buy an empty building? That "mad" person exists.

"His name is Leutzinger. He is the former director of one of the canneries. He has two ideas in mind. The first consists of selling the material of the canneries to other canneries. The second idea is to bring intellectual tourists to Cannery Row, attracted by the success of Steinbeck's book.

"One more detail, the house belonging to Doc, the famous doctor loved by all, the house where accumulated the strangest specimens of local fauna and where he received those who admired his Gregorian chants, has been purchased by a group made up of journalists, lawyers and other professional men of Monterey. Behind the facade is hidden a little club furnished in the modern and luxurious manner. There the club of "Doc" is perpetuated. And Lee Chong? His store is closed, but Leutzinger has not succeeded in selling it. In another part of the USA, behind another counter the descendants of Lee Chong proudly hope with the eternally confident smile of the celebrated founder of the dynasty, that the price may go up."