CHAPTER 2

A NEW EYE OPENING IN THE WEST

Finding a place to call home was an important part of Steinbeck’s American myth, with immigrants in search of a place to live, coupled with continuous movement West to a land depicted as the new Eden. In 1932, Steinbeck expressed the idea that his writings were to offer a new eye in which to envision the west as he etched following lines in his journal.

“The story has grown since I started it. From a novel about people, it has become a novel about the world. And you must never tell it. Let it be found out. The new eye is being opened here in the west - the new seeing. It is probable no one will know it for two hundred years. It will be confused, analyzed, analogized, criticized, and none of our fine critics will know what is happening.” — John Steinbeck in a 1932 journal

When Steinbeck jotted this paragraph in his journal, it had been two years since he had befriended Ed Ricketts, a former Chicagoan whose favorite poet was Walt Whitman. Recognizing their friendship allows one to consider if Steinbeck wasn’t immersed in Whitman, and his poem, Facing west, from California's shores, when he scribbled those lines in his journal.

Facing west, from California's shores,

Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,

I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of

maternity, the land of migrations, look afar,

Look off the shores of my Western Sea—the circle

almost circled;
For, starting westward from Hindustan, from the vales
of Kashmere,

From Asia—from the north—from the God, the sage,

and the hero,

From the south—from the flowery peninsulas, and the

spice islands;

Long having wander'd since—round the earth having

wander'd,

Now I face home again—very pleas'd and joyous;

(But where is what I started for, so long ago?

And why is it yet unfound?)

And one may wonder what was Whitman implying with the words “seeking what

is yet unfound?” Was he suggesting Anglo-Protestant America’s unending search for the

Garden of Eden, a myth presented to New England Puritans who were the first

immigrants to arrive under the pretense of creating a model society, pure of sin, by a

chosen people, in a promised land?
RE - VISIONING OF THE PROTESTANT AMERICAN MYTH

John Steinbeck found his vocation in re-visioning of the Protestant American myth; a lore that to this day recognizes a monotheistic God who sanctified a specific part of a continent – North America - as a promised land. Remnants of this myth became an underlying theme that resonates through many of Steinbeck’s works. To consider why Steinbeck may have taken up re-visioning the American myth, it is helpful to understand the myth itself and its origin.

A paragraph written by Steinbeck scholar Louis Owens provides an introduction to the American myth: From the first writings of the colonial founders, America was the New Canaan or New Jerusalem, and the colonists, such as William Bradford’s pilgrims of Plymouth, were the chosen people who consciously compared themselves to the Israelites. Their leaders were repeatedly likened to Moses, for they too, had fled from persecution and religious bondage to England and Europe, for the new promise of a place called America...Out of this acutely biblical consciousness arose what has come to be called the American myth, a kind of national consciousness with which Steinbeck was fascinated throughout his life.³

Hence, from the earliest beginning of this nation, before the Declaration of Independence, was presented this idea that America was a special place, and one element that made it special was that its citizens had a unique relationship with God. Prophesied to the early Puritan colonies of New England by John Winthrop, first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in his 1630 sermon A Model of Christian Charity, that as a people, the Protestant immigrants of Northern Europe were to be God’s chosen, and that God has a unique destiny for America and these people.
At the core of this belief was the idea Winthrop proposed in his sermon -- that God had chosen America to be a Christian *City upon a Hill*, to serve as beacon to the world, as a nation whose governing values were guided by Protestant Christianity.

The following pages outline the establishing of the Protestant religion in California as it relates to the small townships of Monterey County. These communities were an integral part of John Steinbeck’s life and played an important role in his introduction to, and familiarity with, the American myth.
PROTESTANT MISSIONARIES SENT
TO CENTRAL CALIFORNIA

The influence of the Anglo-Protestant religion had on shaping the social and moral fabric of central California during the turn of the nineteenth century has seldom been recognized. On the other hand, the influence of the Anglo-Protestant religion had on shaping the novelist John Steinbeck has been studied in great detail. A review of the founding of Protestantism in California, with a primary emphasis on Monterey County, provides an opportunity to consider the making of John Steinbeck as a novelist.

Efforts began in the 1850’s when the ministers of New England’s Protestant churches directed - in great earnest - to the shores of California - large numbers of missionary clergy whose charge was to gather parishioners and build houses of worship. The Protestant clergy recognized this effort as their opportunity to establish among the growing population of California, a second “City upon a Hill” equivalent to that of the New England colonies.

The Puritan missionaries arrived to California filled with aspirations of laying down a Protestant beachhead, as ministers of various denominations organized congregations in the small townships that were gradually settling the central coast of California. The impetus to establish these townships was not a result of the discovery of gold, but the opportunity to harvest food from the land.
CALIFORNIA AGRICULTURE

Long before the extensive irrigation dependent agriculture production of the over four hundred variety of crops grown today, California’s farming involved the ranching of cattle and sheep, and the intensive cultivation of grains, fruits and nuts.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, rancheros established by Spanish and Mexican land grants put into production grazing lands for the rearing of livestock. Through the decades, ranchers experienced the California climate, which vacillates from modest to heavy winters rains punctuated with extended periods of drought. The ranchers quickly learned these periods of limited rainfall often resulted in the starvation of a sizable portion of their herds. Beyond the ranching of livestock, the variable climate presented a challenge to the cultivation of cereal and orchard crops.

Beyond the few fields of cereal planted at the Spanish missions, little grain had ever been grown in California. In 1850, Californians began to recognize the wonderful capabilities of the land for grain production. As a result, the farming of grain intensified in the second half of the nineteenth century. By 1890, fields of wheat and barley stretched through Butte, Monterey, Santa Clara, San Luis Obispo, San Joaquin, San Mateo, Stanislaus and Yolo counties. As with the livestock industry, the success of an annual production was dependent upon the amount of rainfall a particular region received.

Following the planting of grains throughout the much of the state, was the construction of grain mills to process the harvest. During the first decade of the nineteenth century, Sperry flour mills dotted the towns of Chico, Fresno, Hollister, Los Angeles, King City, Paso Robles, Salinas, Stockton and Vallejo.
In addition to the farming of grain crops, settlers planted fruit orchards (apples, apricots, cherries, lemons, olives, oranges, pears, peaches, prunes and plums), grape vineyards and nut trees (almond, pecans, pistachio and walnut). Like the cattle and grain industry, the success of the orchard industry was tied to the amount of precipitation any one particular region received. Irrigation of fruit orchards began as a necessity in Southern California. The practice of irrigating was less so for the orchards of the Northern part of the state, which held a preferable soil and received more rainfall.

John Steinbeck’s paternal ancestors, the Steinbeck family of Hollister were associated with several of these agricultural endeavors. His grandfather, John Adolf Steinbeck, who arrived to this small frontier town in 1872, established a small dairy ranch, and fruit orchards on his seventy-acre property near the San Benito River. Three of his five adult sons became managers of the milling companies associated with the grain agriculture, the dominant crop in California at the time. Herbert E. Steinbeck was manager of Central Milling Company in Hollister; John Ernst Steinbeck was manager of Sperry Flour Mill in King City, Paso Robles and Salinas; and Wilhelm P. Steinbeck was a manager at the Victor Mill of Hollister and the Sperry Mill of Stockton.
THE EARLY SALINAS VALLEY

In 1791, Father Fermin Lasuen reached the Salinas Valley to establish the thirteenth California mission, La Mision de Maria Santisima, Nuestra Senora de la Soledad. Initially dry and barren, the site selected to build the Soledad mission was later irrigated via a series of channels bringing water from the nearby rivers. In the fields, crops of wheat, barley, beans, corn, and peas were grown. A twenty-acre vineyard provided grapes allowing for brandy and wine production. At the peak of prosperity some 6,400 sheep and 6,000 head of cattle grazed on mission lands. Three large floods from the Salinas River in 1824, 1828, and 1832 left the structures damaged beyond repair, after which the Mission Soledad was deserted.

Sherlock Bristol, a pioneer preacher from the East, reached the Salinas Valley in the winter of 1868, after his arrival to California via the Isthmus of Panama, wrote the following description of the land.

Monday morning at break of day we left the [Soledad] Mission, and wending our way through the fog, across the Salinas River, we proceeded down the valley on the north side. As the fog lifted, an immense valley spread out before us, perhaps twenty miles wide and fifty long. It was covered with grass and flowers and occasional trees. Vast herds of semi-wild cattle and horses were gathered in clusters on the plains. Not being accustomed to see men in our costume and with such packs on their backs as we prospective miners carried, they set up a wild looing, and soon they came running toward us till not less than 5,000 horned bullocks and cows, on either side, gathered in solid phalanx and pawed the ground and tore it up with their horns.5
Steinbeck in *East of Eden* provided a similar description of the Valley: *The floor of the Salinas Valley was wide and flat. After a rainy winter, the valley was carpeted with spring flowers of all colors: bright blue and white, burning orange, red, and mustard yellow. In the shade of the oak trees, green plants grew and gave a good smell. In June the grasses on the hills turned gold and yellow and red.*

In a short time, native grasses, wildflowers and free-ranging herds of Spanish cattle, gave way to fields of wheat and barley. These grains, which did not need irrigation, were the first lucrative crops grown from the nutrient rich soil deposit of the Salinas Valley’s ancient riverbed. The burgeoning fields of grain soon attracted the Southern Pacific Railroad and the laying of rail track began.

**LAYING DOWN THE RAILROAD TRACKS**

During the last half of the nineteenth century, the development of the railroads provided rural farm communities throughout America the ability to deliver their agricultural products to the large markets in urban areas. For Monterey County, the laying down of railroad tracks not only advanced the development of agriculture but spurred the construction of towns along the line.

In 1868, the Southern Pacific Railroad, with the help of Chinese immigrant labor, extended tracks south from San Francisco to San Jose, California. By March of 1869, the Railroad was running trains to Gilroy, reaching Pajaro Junction in November of 1871. Rail tracks next reached Salinas City in November 1872, extending south to Soledad by December 1872, the railroad terminus in the Salinas Valley for the thirteen years.6
In 1886, the Southern Pacific Railroad expanded rail lines beyond Soledad into South Monterey County. The resulting extension of tracks to Paso Robles and Templeton allowed for fields of grain to be planted far into Salinas Valley.

As the Southern Pacific Railroad extended tracks into Monterey County, the milling companies established flour-mills along the line, which facilitated the processing of the valley’s grain products for delivery to larger markets outside the region. Along with the grain mill houses, new towns arose and existing towns grew larger as immigrants from around the world arrived to California’s central coast.

Sam Hamilton, an immigrant from Ireland and grandfather to John Steinbeck, homesteaded a family ranch in South Monterey County hoping to participate in the Salinas Valley grain rush. For more than 20 years, Steinbeck’s father John Ernst Steinbeck Sr., managed flour-mills owned by the Sperry Milling Company. The first of these flour mills was located in King City (1888-1892), then Paso Robles (1892-1900) and finally Salinas (1900-1910). The Sperry flour mill that Steinbeck managed in Salinas was a four-story structure that held all the modern machinery necessary to process 25,000 tons of wheat a year.
ARRIVAL OF IMMIGRANTS

Before the railroad, the shores of rural Monterey County received a slow stream of immigrants, seeking the new promise of America. In the early 1850s, a handful of Chinese immigrants found their way to the Monterey Peninsula and established a small fishing village. In 1855, several Portuguese shore whalers from the Azores Islands arrived and built whaling stations on Monterey Bay. During the last quarter of the 1800s, the township of Monterey experienced influx of Portuguese and Sicilian fishermen. In the early 1890s, Japanese immigrants arrived and joined the fishing effort. By the turn of the century, boats owned by immigrants from China, Japan, Portugal, and Sicily were fishing the waters of Southern Monterey Bay.

Also prior to the railroad, the Mexican and Spanish land grants of Monterey County were subdivided and sold to a handful settlers. These early pioneers became prominent landowners having acquired large tracts of prime agricultural fields of Salinas Valley.

By the mid-1860s, Chinese immigrants had become the primary field workers of the grain fields that stretched down the Salinas Valley. The prominence of Chinese fieldworkers during the last quarter of the 1800s, resulted in Salinas City hosting the second largest Chinatown in the California, slightly smaller than San Francisco.

With the Southern Pacific railroad extending tracks further into Monterey County, a steady stream of European immigrants arrived to the region. Beginning in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Danish, Norwegian, Portuguese, Scandinavian, Swiss and Swedish immigrants arrived in Salinas Valley. As tenant farmers leasing tracts of
land from the large landholders, these immigrants established grain farms and dairy operations throughout the valley.

Technological advances in irrigation during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century allowed the Salinas Valley’s extensive agriculture of grains and livestock to transform to the industrial scale “intensive” agriculture of fruits and vegetables (sugar beets, strawberries, lettuce, and artichokes). This transition to intensive agriculture required larger, low-paid exploitable labor force provided by various migrant groups, beginning with the Chinese, followed by the Japanese, Hindus, Mexicans and Filipinos.

Thus, besides those newcomers who had emigrated from Northern Europe to rural Monterey County, were those who traveled from Asia. In the 1890s, Japanese immigrants arrived to work Claus Spreckels’ sugar beet fields, replacing the Chinese labor force that had faded, as a result of the Chinese Immigration Act of 1882. During the World War I, Hindus from India arrived to work the intensive agricultural fields of the Salinas Valley.

In early 1920’s, Mexicans immigrants began to arrive in greater numbers, in response to U. S. Congress having waived immigration requirements for agricultural workers from Mexico in the Immigration Act of 1917. The increased immigration from Mexico continued through the 1920’s. Besides Mexicans, during the late 1920s, Filipinos arrived to work the fields of Salinas Valley, supplementing the Japanese and Hindu labor force that had diminished because of the Immigration Act of 1924.

These immigrants, regardless of race, color, national or ethnic origin, came to this country with hopes of participating in the American dream. Unfortunately, the ease at
which some immigrants were able participate in this dream was limited because of their race, color, nationality and ethnicity.

**POPULATION GROWTH IN SALINAS CITY**

A review of the population growth of Salinas City during the late 1800s and early 1900s allows one to recognize how sparsely inhabited this part of California was during this period. The 1870 federal census recorded 599 residents living in Salinas. A decade later, in 1880, the number of residents in the community had tripled as the census recorded a population of 1,854. The city grew slowly during the last decades of the nineteenth century, in 1900, reaching a total of 3,304 residents. Thirty years passed before the population tripled again, as the federal census recorded a population of 3,736 in 1910. The slow rate of growth continued during the next decade as the federal census recorded a population of 4,308 in 1920. This rate of growth increased significantly during the next decade as the population of Salinas City more than doubled by 1930, as the federal census recorded 10,263 residents of the community.

**POPULATION GROWTH IN MONTERY COUNTY**

The growth in population of Monterey County tracked closely the pace of growth in Salinas City. The 1870 federal census recorded 9,876 resident living in Monterey County. Two decades later, in 1890 the number of residents in the county had doubled as the census recorded a population of 18,637. The county grew slowly during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century. Thirty years passed before the population had gained an additional 10,000 residents, as the
federal census recorded a county wide population of 27,980 in 1920. During the next decade, Monterey County’s population gained significant number as the population almost doubled in the federal census count for 1930 totaled 53,705.

**ESTABLISHMENT OF PROTESTANT CHURCHES**

Starting in the late 1860’s, with the arrival of immigrants, congregations of various Protestant denominations (Baptist, Congregationalist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Unitarian) sprang up in the recently established townships of Salinas Valley. First, the Methodist Episcopal Church of Salinas was established in 1867, followed by the Salinas United Presbyterian Congregation in 1869. Four years later, Reverend George McCormick arrived to assume the ministry of the congregation at Salinas United Presbyterian, a position he held for the next fifty-three years. In 1873, the Baptist Church of Salinas and Methodist Episcopal Church of North Salinas were formed.9

A letter from a resident of Salinas City that appeared in the newspaper, Russian River on December 2, 1875 stated “The United Presbyterian Church is nearly completed and will form one of six places of worship in this city. Surely we ought to be a moral people, yet sin shows itself in an occasional row in those places where ninetenths of the trouble always begins.” At the time of this publication, the community of Salinas boasted a population of approximately one thousand residents.

Shortly after his arrival to Monterey County in 1874, Reverend James Shannon McGowan founded St Paul's Episcopal Church in Salinas in 1875 and the St. James Episcopal Church in Monterey in 1878.10
In 1875, the Union Church of Castroville was constructed and the facility available for use by all Protestant denominations. As there was not a Protestant clergyman to take up residence in the church, Sunday sermons were conducted by one of three ministers from Salinas. Each Sunday, either Reverend George McCormick of the United Presbyterian Church, Reverend J.S. McGowan of the Episcopalian church or Reverend A.S. Gibbons of the Methodist Episcopal church, traveled to Castroville to provide religious services.  

Farther south in the Salinas Valley, Reverend McGowan helped to establish St Luke's Episcopal Church of Jolon in 1885, St John’s Episcopal Church of San Miguel in 1885, and St. Mark's Episcopal Church of King City in 1887. St. Mark's Episcopal Church of Kings City held its first services in June 1888. The church registry, dated March 10, 1889, notes John Ernst Steinbeck Sr. among the parishioners who donated to the construction of St. Mark’s Church.  

In 1883, nineteen miles south of Salinas, the Baptist congregation of Gonzales was organized, with construction of the church completed the following year. In Chualar, thirteen miles south of Salinas City, the first Danish Lutheran church on the Pacific coast was completed in 1890, to serve the Scandinavian population. Besides Lutherans, Methodists of the community held services in the church every other week.  

In 1875, twenty miles southwest of Salinas City, the Pacific Grove Methodist Camp Retreat was established. For the first six years, the community held services at an outdoor podium sheltered under a grove of pine trees. In 1881, a Chautauqua Hall was built for the Methodist congregation with the financial support of the Pacific Improvement Company. Five years later, in 1886, Pacific Grove’s Episcopal Church, St.
Mary’s-by-the-Sea, was founded by a handful of Episcopal women, and a small wooden red church constructed in 1887. Next, Pacific Grove’s Mayflower Congregational Church was established in late November of 1891, with the church building completed by June of 1893. In 1894, construction of Pacific Grove’s Methodist Episcopal Church and Assembly Hall was completed.

In 1898, the Japanese Presbyterian Mission was founded on Sausal Street in Salinas by Reverend Kenkichi Inazawa to meet the cultural and social needs of the immigrants arriving from Japan.

As had been directed by ministers of New England’s Protestant churches in the 1850s, in just three decades a Protestant beachhead had been established along the central coast, with religious congregations scattered among the rural townships of Monterey County.

The Protestant ministers associated with these rural churches led their congregation toward morality and devotion. Members not only attended church services, but respected Sunday as a day set aside for rest and worship. One was expected to pray daily, either alone or with their families. Congregation members were to abstain from vice, especially the sinful acts of gambling and alcohol. Congregations were encouraged to organize to help the poor, support civic efforts, and recruit new members to the church.
ESTABLISHMENT OF PROTESTANT MORALS

Having established a Protestant foothold along the shores of California, church parishioners next went about forming benevolent societies, temperance unions, civic organizations and literary circles. These progressive institutions, remaining loyal to the Christian values of the New England Protestants, further shaped the civic and social ethics along California’s central coast.\(^\text{19}\)

The Protestant ethics introduced during this period resonated throughout the townships of Monterey County well into the twentieth century. Through his own experiences growing up in these religious communities, Steinbeck became familiar with the American myth and the moral philosophy of Protestant Christianity. Steinbeck’s exposure to the ideals of New England Protestantism resulted in a significant amount of religious morality woven into many of his literary works: *To A God Unknown, Pastures of Heaven, Of Mice and Men, In Dubious Battle, Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*.

In addition to intertwining the American myth into the plot of *East of Eden*, Steinbeck weaved a good portion of the family history of his maternal ancestors - the Hamilton’s - into his book. To prepare for his writing of the manuscript, Steinbeck recalled studying the local newspaper in depth:

“I went through old Salinas (Calif.) newspapers. Wonderful things, those papers. Social notes, church notes, births, deaths…. No matter how much checking you do, somebody’s going to squawk about a mistake. And be right, too, likely.” \(^\text{20}\)“Newspapers accurately recorded the lives of the people in the valley,” he said. “I will obtain additional information by reading the editorials which mirrored their thinking.” \(^\text{21}\)
The following pages extend our understanding of Steinbeck’s presentation of the Hamilton’s family history written into *East of Eden*, by connecting bits of the story written by the author with historical accounts supported with primary references.